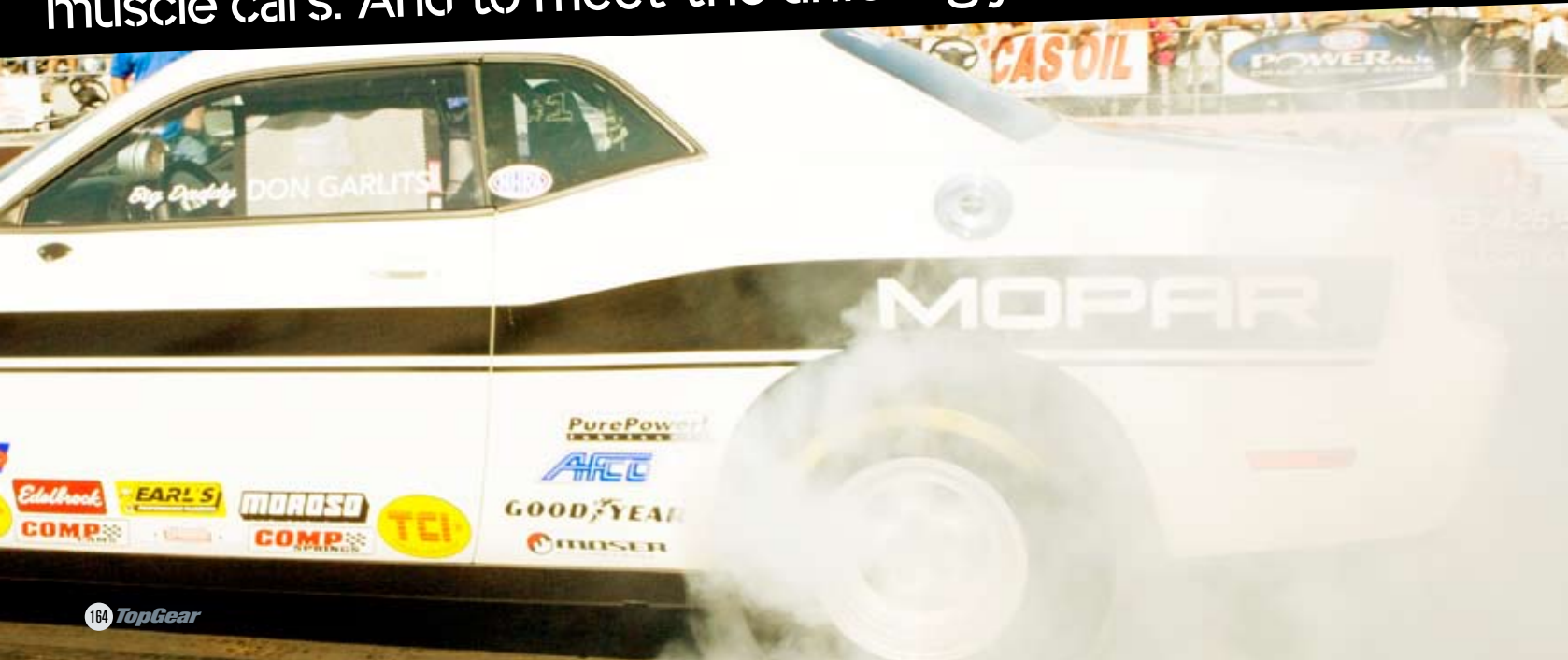




DRAG ACT

James Shovlin is in Colorado to check out dragsters and muscle cars. And to meet the unfailingly enthusiastic locals



PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVE PERRY

A FEW WEEKS AGO, MY KNOWLEDGE OF drag racing was not exactly comprehensive. I knew that dragsters weren't too hot at cornering, and that was about it. I couldn't really see the appeal of them, to be honest.

But when Top Gear asked if I wanted to fly out to the Mopar Mile-High Nationals near the town of Golden, Colorado, it didn't take me very long to say "yes please". Not a bad offer, considering it would be my first ever piece for the magazine. Or, as a friend put it, "what a jammy git". Who knows, I thought, I might even find two cars racing down a straight piece of tarmac entertaining.

Dodge had decided that this event, part of the National Hot Rod Association Powerade Drag

Racing Series (breathe) calendar, was the ideal venue to launch its new Challenger 'Mopar pack'—a stripped-out, mean-looking muscle car that's designed purely to race.

I thought I should probably do some research into what this all actually meant. It turns out that Mopar, a term first used in the Twenties, is a fusion of the words 'motor' and 'parts', and was apparently trademarked for a line of anti-freeze products in 1937. It wasn't until the Sixties that Mopar became known as a supplier of tuning parts, an altogether more glamorous world, relatively speaking, than anti-freeze.

This new Challenger is the first Mopar pack car for 40 years, and to people in the States, this



is quite a big deal. Mopar now has something of a legendary reputation, due to its association with classic souped-up muscle cars, like the '68 Dodge Dart and Plymouth Barracuda.

We arrived in Denver and were shuttled to the WallyPark airport car park – this is in no way affiliated with Wally Parks, the man who founded the NHRA. Surely a missed marketing opportunity. We picked up our 'rental' for the stay – a standard 6.1-litre Hemi Dodge Challenger SRT-8. It's a gloriously unapologetic slice of Americana. Start it up, and you half-expect a quick burst of ZZ Top to automatically blast from the stereo. Even so, I wouldn't go as far as one passer-by who declared that he wanted to "hump it".

We made it to Golden just in time to catch some of the 'Big Block Party', which marked the beginning of the drag-racing long weekend, and ducked into a bar. We ordered a beer called Flying Dog Old Scratch, because it sounded vaguely British, and some Trailside Chicken to go with it, even though that didn't sound British at all.

That night, I lay awake wondering what the drag-racing event would bring the next day. Dungarees, chewing tobacco, people laughing and whooping for no apparent reason, mountains of fast food, men that seemed to have an unhealthy attraction to members of their own family... I felt ashamed that I had reverted to such clichéd stereotypes.

Although, strangely enough, these predictions turned out to be remarkably accurate. The event felt like a miniature festival that happened to have a dragstrip down the middle of it. A bewildering variety of merchandise was available. The Barbie-esque dolls dressed in top-to-toe racing gear were particularly tasteful. A game testing reaction times boasted of its star prize: \$25,000 and a night at the Playboy mansion. The height of sophistication in

these parts, I'm sure. Well, far more sophisticated than the men we saw dancing like Christina Aguilera for prizes, anyway.

There seemed to be hundreds of electric golf-carts around; God forbid anyone should have to walk up a hill. I saw some of them towing dragsters near to the start line, which is something you would probably never witness in Formula One.

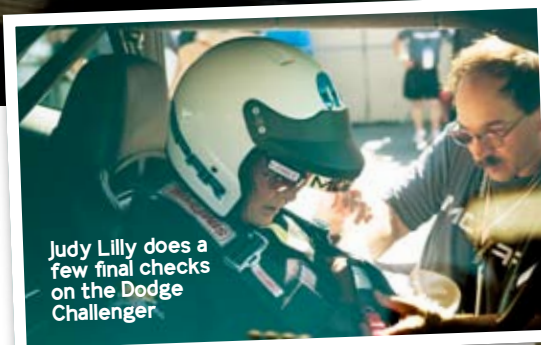
The event's announcer provided a constant commentary throughout, even when there was nothing to say. I'm sure he stayed there overnight, unable to break his programme, talking to empty stands and a deserted racetrack.

One fan seemed to be having a particularly good time by dancing around to his iPod while he watched the racing. He had several teeth missing, a rather fetching vest, and what appeared to be a Brazilian on his chin. I thought he might be interesting to talk to, but when he kept shouting, "Budweiser, number one! Hell, yeah! Wooh!", I quickly changed my mind.

I got chatting instead with Bear, a mountain of a man, who told me that he had come to the event every year for... 27 years. I couldn't decide whether to congratulate him, or ask him if he was insane.

We thought we'd go and have a look at a 'test firing'. This is something that the top-fuellers (the very fastest dragsters, running on some evil concoction of 90 per cent nitromethane and 10 per cent methanol) do before each race. We wandered over to one of the pits, which were basically trailers with awnings attached. The

'Soon the revs, and noise, rose to a level that made you think your brain had been dumped in a deep-fat fryer. People began to back away, tears in their eyes'



Judy Lilly does a few final checks on the Dodge Challenger

engine of the dragster fired up, and idled very loudly. That'll be the test firing, we thought.

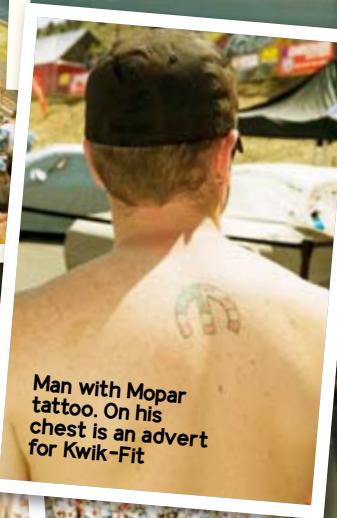
But it wasn't. Soon, the revs, and noise, rose to a level that made you feel like your brain had been dumped in a deep-fat fryer. People started to back away, fingers jammed in ears. The potency of the fumes became overpowering, bringing tears to the eyes. The crowd was now running for cover. When the engine was finally turned off, they slowly returned, clapping and cheering, even though their eyes were streaming and they possibly had permanent hearing damage. What a strange sport.

And when the top-fuellers actually hit the dragstrip, the noise goes through you in pulses as the engines hammer away. Your eardrums vibrate, and it feels like your heart is being shaken in your ribcage, while the fumes attack your eyes. I understand that internal combustion is essentially a series of controlled explosions, but this was like, well, a very large controlled explosion. I was using a Portaloo some distance from the runway when a pair of top-fuellers were racing, and it made the entire cubicle vibrate violently.

After the first day's racing, I was bloodshot-eyed ☹



Judy creates her own micro-climate at the wheel of the Mopar special



Man with Mopar tattoo. On his chest is an advert for Kwik-Fit



"Hey, Mac, don't look now but I slept in that guy's bonnet scoop last night."



The Challenger is advertising Mopar the car tuner, not Mopar anti-freeze





Camilla and Seb used to enjoy equestrian events. Now they prefer drag racing



"Hi, I'll just have a large mug of fat and a packet of salt please."



'The crowd was whipped into a hysterical frenzy. Just before the covers came off, the announcer hollered, "Are you ready for some Mopar, baby?!"'

and covered in grime from all the fumes, bearing a resemblance to the kind of wild drunk you see arguing with himself outside a train station.

As the qualifying rounds became the eliminators became the finals, we grew eager to see the new Challenger Mopar car. Did it deserve to be here amongst such mighty machines? One young man told us how excited he was about the prospect of seeing the first Mopar pack car to be released in decades. But then, that's not so surprising; he did have a Mopar tattoo on his back. Other people waiting for the launch spoke about the beginnings of hot-rodding, the early street races, the iconic drag-racing package cars of the Sixties, all the legends and romance of the scene.

And the organisers knew how to capitalise on this romance to get the Mopar pack car launch underway – with some subtle advertising, racing the Budweiser and Bud Light beer trucks down the dragstrip. Classy. Thankfully, it wasn't long before Dodge introduced a pair of drag-racing's legendary drivers for the first drive of the Mopar Challengers; 'Big Daddy' Don Garlits, widely regarded as the greatest drag-racer of all time, and Judy 'Miss Mighty Mopar' Lilly, who was a trail-blazer for women's drag racing.

The crowd was whipped into a hysterical frenzy. Just before the covers came off, the announcer hollered, "Are you ready for some Mopar, baby? I wanna hear a one, two, three, MOPAR!" The cars were revealed, and even at idle, you could still hear the Hemis thundering away above the yells of the crowd. When they came to perform burn-outs, the noise rose to a harsh metallic scream. Judy's burn-out was easily the longest of the whole event, and at one point, all I could see was the nose of her Challenger

poking out from an enormous white cloud.

When the smoke had cleared a little, the two Challengers made their way to the start line, the lights changed, and they thundered off down the drag strip. Unfortunately, the timing gear had been disabled, just in case any mistakes resulted in rubbish times being shown in bright lights for all to see. The cars were parked up immediately afterwards, and that was all we would see of them in action.

We went to have a nose around and to find out more about the new Challenger. Apparently, it's a thousand pounds lighter than the standard model. One of the more maverick weight-saving measures involved is removing the airbags and side-impact door beams. So remember not to crash. Luckily, perhaps, the car isn't actually road-legal. One feature that makes this abundantly obvious is an ignition cut-off handle on the rear bumper. I'm sure pranksters just wouldn't be able to resist giving that a quick tug when no one's looking.

The exterior is dramatic, with an air scoop on the bonnet large enough to ski down, huge racing slicks, and one or two understated decals that you might just be able to make out in some of the pictures.

Inside, it feels rather 'home-brew', something an amateur mechanic could knock up in their garage,



armed with some gaffer tape and a Demon Tweaks catalogue, or whatever the American equivalent is. There's an oversized rev-counter stuck to the top of the dash, and masses of other dials where you'd normally find such creature comforts as air vents.

There's a choice of three engines, including a 5.7-litre Hemi, a 5.9-litre Hemi Magnum Wedge and the 6.1-litre drag equivalent of our car. Pricing will start somewhere in the low \$30,000 range, which sounds like a bargain until you remember that you'll only get to use it on a drag strip.

What would be ideal is an edition of the Challenger that you could use on the road. Shedding a few pounds would be a nice idea, but perhaps it could hang on to some of the luxuries, such as the airbags and rear seats.

As for the Mile-High Nationals, I'd say it's definitely worth going to see an NHRA event for the sheer whooping, all-American spectacle, the glitzy, kitschy exuberance of the whole scene. As for the racing itself, it's dramatic and unique in motorsport, offering spectators a truly visceral, immersive experience. It's also non-stop, with a never-ending queue of cars waiting to race. There's a lot more to this sport than I first thought. I still can't quite believe what a physical experience it was; I'm not sure if everyone could cope for the full three days unless their name was Hank, but I can definitely now see why Americans go so wild for it.

Oh, and I still don't know if dragsters can actually go round corners. But who cares if they can't, watching them race is still bloody good fun. Can I fly to another exotic location now, *Top Gear*?

