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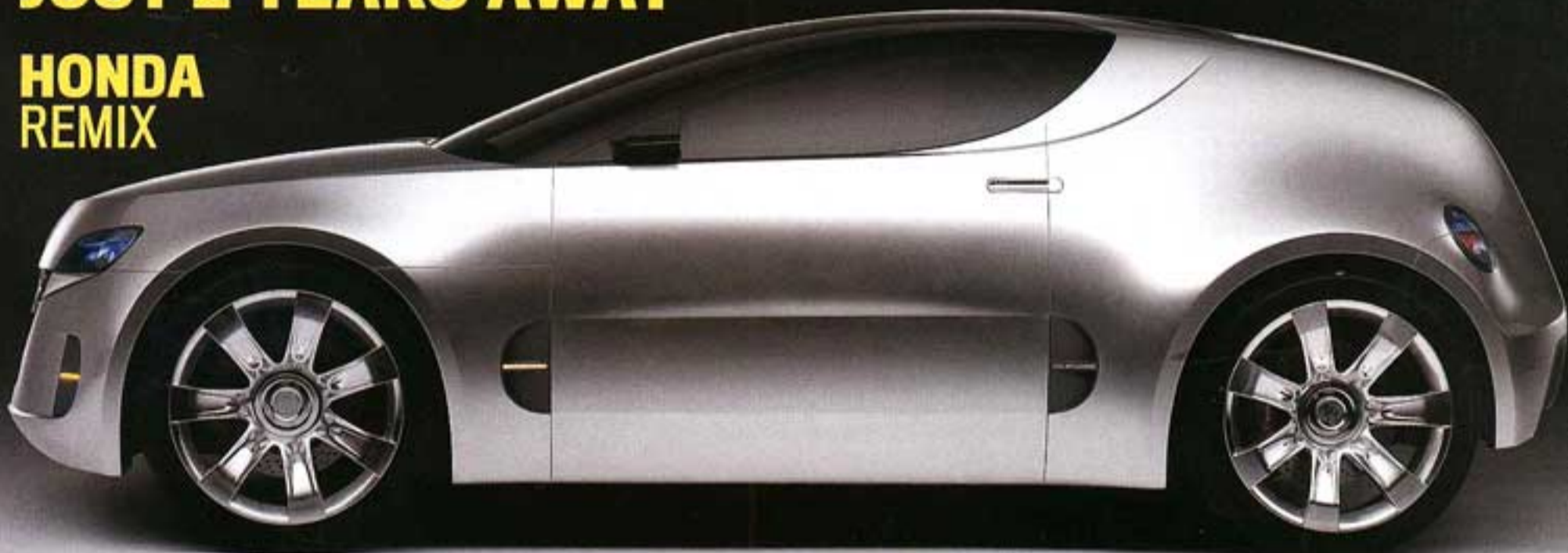
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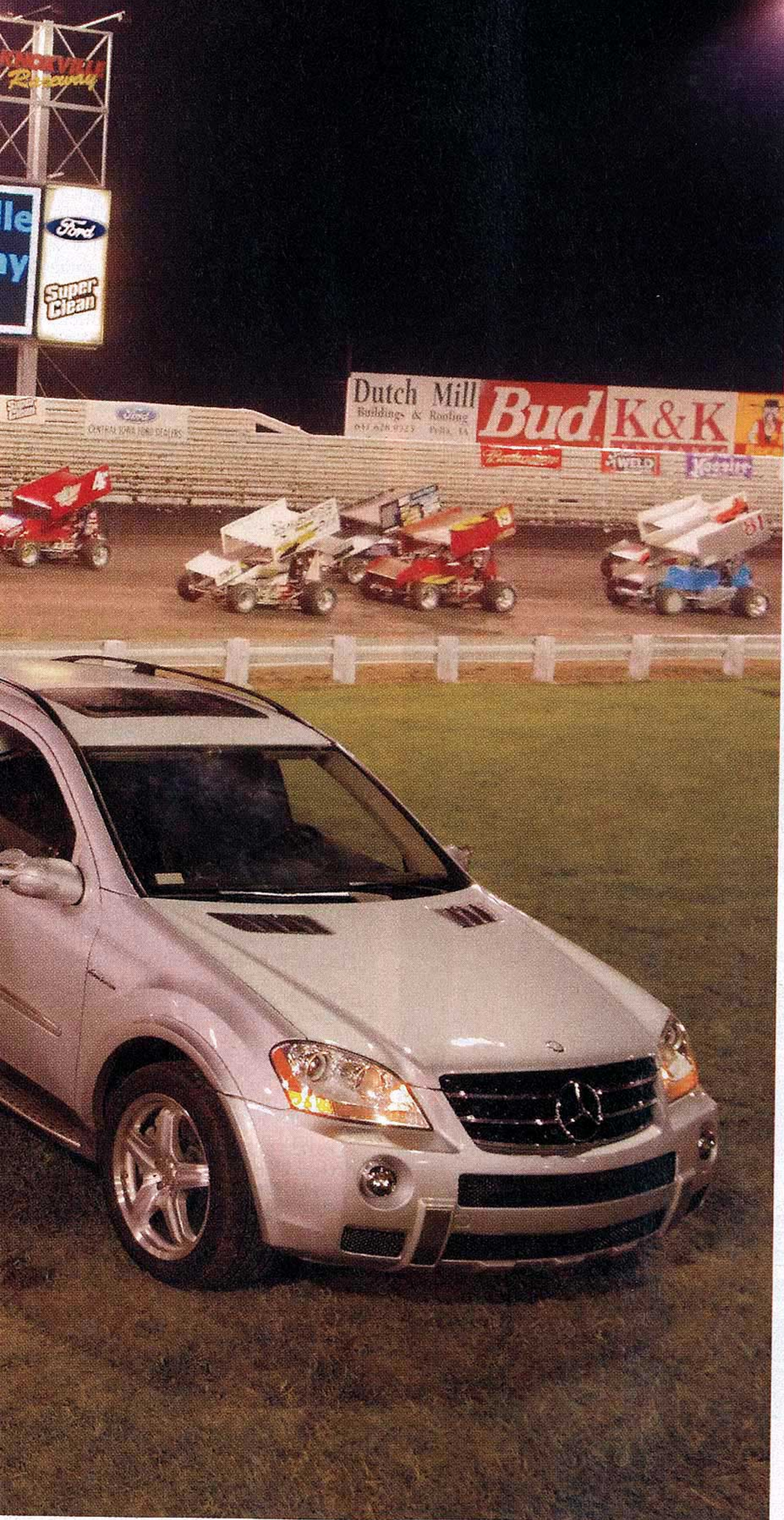
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THE OTHER KNOXVILLE





ONE WEEK WITH A 503-HP BENZ, A 20-FOOT AIRSTREAM, AND 124 SPRINT CARS TEARING UP RIVER-BOTTOM GUMBO.

BY JOHN PHILLIPS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GREG JAREM

The assignment here was an exercise in summer self-indulgence, a Pee Wee-goes-to-the-movies sort of thing. The working title was, “What’s the Most Fun You Can Have During One Week in August?” Oh, sure, it was tempting to drive Margaret Atwood to the National Existential Novelists’ Workshop in Toledo. But, as stories go, that’s such a cliché.

So I called a friend at Mercedes-Benz. “What you need,” he said without hesitation, “is a 503-horsepower silver ML63 AMG attached to an equally silver Airstream. Then drive somewhere fun, knock down a few tourists.”

“Mercedes doesn’t make Airstreams,” I pointed out.

“I know their president,” he replied. “Total car guy. Flip him the keys to the ML for 30 minutes, he’ll fix you up.”

Which is how I came to meet 40-year-old Bob Wheeler at Airstream’s 140,000-square-foot factory in bucolic Jackson Center, Ohio, where corn grows six feet high six feet behind the assembly line. Wheeler was in the midst of a burger cook-out with his 400 employees, all of whom he apparently knows by name. He loved the Benz, running his fingers along the stitching of its leather AMG dash and gawping at its 15.4-inch front-brake rotors, which appear to have been sourced from Boeing. From 70 mph, this 5162-pound SUV can stop in 160 feet, same as a Lotus Elise.

When it’s not towing anything, the ML63 blasts to 60 mph in 4.6 seconds, as quick as a Lamborghini Gallardo Spyder, which should never tow anything heavier than Paris Hilton before lunch. Hot-rod SUVs don’t make a lot of sense to us—like using a Savage 12-gauge to fish for cutthroat trout—but they *do* enliven the conversation ’round the KOA waste-dumping station every night.

“How much can that thing tow?” Wheeler asked.

"Five thousand pounds," I informed.

"Okay, what you need is a single-axle 20-foot Safari SE," he said, a gleaming example of which materialized as if by magic. Then he ordered the installation of a trailer hitch slightly more complicated than FEMA's first org chart, which took two men seven hours to attach and entailed the removal of two Benz seats, much of its carpet, and a rewiring job certain to void its warranty.

While the Benz was being gutted, Wheeler led us on a two-hour factory tour, his favorite pastime. On the assembly line, the aluminum Airstreams resemble nothing so much as aircraft fuselages, and they're just about as labor-intensive, requiring five days to complete and 2000 to 3000 rivets per, all bucked by hand. Still, the Ohio factory can spit out 2500 mirror-like Airstreams annually—an icon as

quintessentially American as the Little Rascals and congressional thievery. The trailers range in length from 16 to 34 feet and fetch \$22,000 to \$88,473. Even after 70 years of manufacture, 60 percent of all Airstreams are still trailering their way to rural adventure and a *very* slow death by corrosion.

While we were there, workers put the finishing touches on a 34-foot triple-axle Airstream for actor Matthew McConaughey. It had exactly no windows. It looked like a silver submarine.

Wheeler wondered aloud how fast our AMG Benz might tow the Safari.

"Well, theoretically, 155 mph," I said. "But that would be, uh, immature."

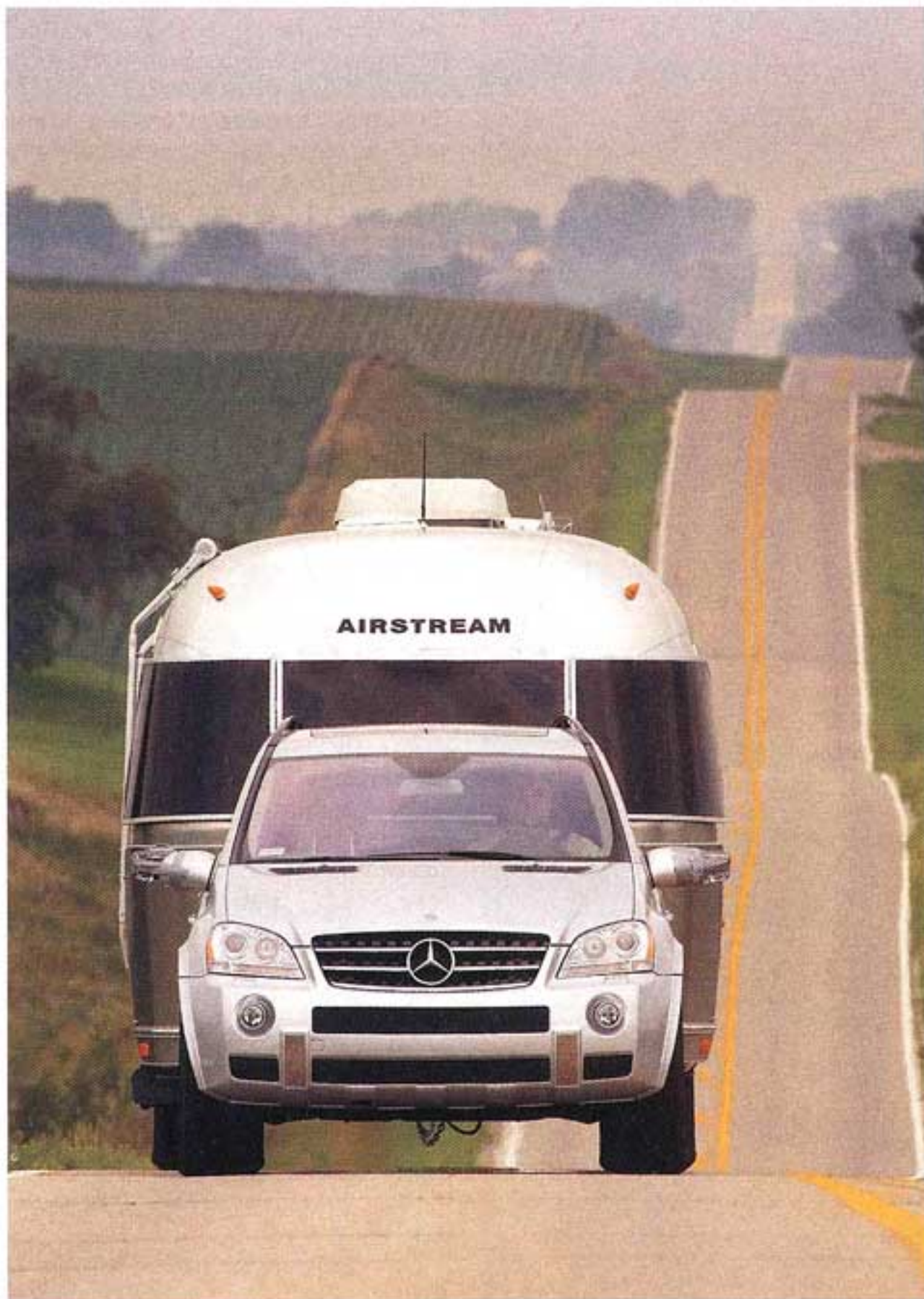
"Reason I ask," he replied, "is we recently hooked a Porsche Cayenne Turbo to one and towed it to Honda's test track. Got up to 122 mph, then it sort of achieved

liftoff, so we had to quit. Our goal is 140 mph. I think that's a world record."

I asked if he'd like to work at C/D.

Then came the debate where to tow our 126-grand rig—\$86,275 for the ML63, \$39,548 for the trailer, and \$47 for an array of Wal-Mart's finest convex stick-on side-view mirrors. But our destination had been pretty much decided weeks earlier.

Knoxville, Iowa—population 7500—is in the heart of the heartland, 30 miles southeast of Des Moines. Every August, it hosts the Knoxville Nationals, the Indy 500 of sprint-car racing. The half-mile banked dirt track is right smack downtown, and its surface is as inky and gooey as Vegemite. "We get our dirt locally," said blond-haired Dwayne Robuck, who has worked at the raceway for 28 years. "Damn near ruin any tractor tries to plow it. Suck you right down. We call it



» MERCEDES-BENZ ML63 AMG

VEHICLE TYPE: front-engine, 4-wheel-drive, 5-passenger, 5-door wagon

PRICE AS TESTED: \$86,275 (base price: \$86,275)

ENGINE TYPE: DOHC 32-valve V-8, aluminum block and heads, port fuel injection
Displacement 379 cu in, 6208cc
Power (SAE net) 503 bhp @ 6800 rpm
Torque (SAE net) 465 lb-ft @ 5200 rpm

TRANSMISSION: 7-speed automatic with manumatic shifting

DIMENSIONS:
Wheelbase: 114.7 in **Length:** 189.8 in
Width: 75.2 in **Height:** 50.1 in
Curb weight: 5162 lb

C/D TEST RESULTS:
Zero to 60 mph 4.6 sec
Zero to 100 mph 11.5 sec
Zero to 150 mph 35.0 sec
Street start, 5-60 mph 4.9 sec
Standing ¼-mile 13.2 sec @ 107 mph
Top speed (governor limited) 155 mph
Braking, 70-0 mph 160 ft
Roadholding, 300-ft-dia skidpad* 0.81 g

FUEL ECONOMY:
EPA city driving 12 mpg
C/D-observed 11 mpg

*Stability-control-inhibited.

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A TANGLED TALE OF TRAILERING

We had to remove the Benz's seats (top left) to ensure a "live" hitch, then spent \$47 for tacky tack-on mirrors. The Airstream's art deco exterior belies its warm and modern interior (above).

river-bottom gumbo. Or zook."

The locals wear T-shirts that reflect an earthiness akin to the loamy zook. One shirt reads, "If it's wet, slide it in." Another says, "Warning: The Surgeon General Said Nothing About Me Smokin' Your Ass." Another carries the caution, "If You're Not a Sprint-Car Fan, Blow Me." And there are any number of shirts suggesting that Osama is the outcome of a furtive barnyard coupling, plus others even more direct, such as, "1. Turn Their Desert Into Glass, 2. Take Their Oil." We did not notice any mosques in Knoxville.

Twelve-time Nationals winner Steve Kinser was once asked if he'd like to see Michael Schumacher drive a winged 410-cid, 850-horse sprint car. "Ooo-eee, I'd like it just fine," he replied. "These ol' boys'll eat his lunch, then puke it on him."

But if you think sprint-car fans are dumb, you'd be wrong, and we can prove it. Knoxville Nationals spectators actually understand the four-day qualifying system that winnows the 124-car field to a mere two-dozen sprinters that contest the main event on Saturday night. It's a process that involves all manner of inversions, scrambles, consolations, A Features, A Mains, B, C, D, and E Mains, a few water mains, and endless conversations—up, down, sideways, and possibly to Catholicism.

Photographer Greg Jarem and I col-lared a veteran who'd attended 22 consecu-

tive Nationals and asked him to explain it all. "Well, that's easy," he said as he sat down, implying it wasn't. Then he pulled out a tattered cheat sheet. "See, the first 10 cars in each heat are inverted according to time, and the top five finishers—or sometimes top four, depending on car numbers," he clarified, "go to the A Feature, although the succeeding five—again, sometimes four—go to the B, while the first eight in the A are inverted according to times, but this applies only to Wednesday and Thursday." Then he lit a cigarette and took a short break. "Of course," he continued, "the two cars finishing first and second in the B are allowed to tag the tail of the A, but they forfeit their B Feature points. Naturally."

"Naturally," we agreed. I took a seat myself and wondered if this might be a good time to take up smoking.

"The final 10 spots in the C, plus the D and E for Saturday," he continued, "will be sorted out in the Friday show, although the points on Friday's scramble are tacked onto Wednesday and Thursday nights' points to determine Saturday night's positions. And if there's a tie in the scramble..."

"Then we know it was actually Iowa that had the WMDs?" interrupted Jarem.

"No," he said emphatically. "All we know is that the feature will be straight up and elbows out. See?"

"Yes," we lied, as Jarem pointed a finger

in the direction of the Dingus Lounge, a saloon directly across from the raceway's entrance on Lincoln Street, a dark and comfortably evil establishment featuring multiple sunburned bouncers and a kind of feed-lot cage in which patrons dance and eat BBQ pork while slopping beer on their flip-flops. It is a bar that looks and smells pretty much like a dingus. Tradition has it that every Nationals winner is obliged to buy a round for the regulars, but last year's king, Kraig Kinser, was only 20 and couldn't legally enter. "I'll buy from outside the door," he promised fans.

During race week, Knoxville devolves into a sort of pork-and-soybean Mardi Gras, a casually contained carnival comprising thousands of sweaty revelers wandering past hundreds of concession stands filled with bobble-head Kinsers, fluorescent T-shirts, mechanical-bull rides, and sprint-car parts. There are rock bands and parades and farm wagons that shuttle overheated fans who are politely asked to dump their beers before climbing aboard. There are trailers in which celebrities sign autographs—Slammin' Sammy Swindell, baby-faced NASCAR ace Kasey Kahne, and, for reasons very unclear, former senator and vice-presidential candidate John Edwards of North Carolina.

But most of the trailers are doling out steaming plates of the planet's most un-

healthy edibles. We personally sampled "walking tacos" (a bag of Doritos slit up the side, with a half pint of bright orange cheese-like material smothering the contents), "Texas tacos" (ditto but dunked in chili), and a 16-ounce rib-eye on a bun the size of a catcher's mitt. Iowa-raised pork is the most popular entrée. Nikki's BBQ sells a pulled-pork sandwich so sloppy that it comes with a spoon, and you can ask for a free sample of the hot sauce Nikki is perfecting for next year's Nationals. There are corn-dog brats and "Iowa Polish" sausages, giant deep-fried pickles on a stick, and smoked or fried turkey legs that weigh almost two pounds apiece. The Marion County Pork Producers are famous for a juicy pork-chop sandwich that rivals Nikki's finest, but you can buy it only in their temporary headquarters in the Hayes Bump Shop, which adds to your culinary experience the faint whiff of DuPont clear-coat. The Rotary Club sells six-inch spears of smoked turkey jammed into regulation hot-dog buns, garnished with firm, sweet wedges of Iowa tomatoes. You can buy quarter-inch slabs of bacon and cold Iowa butter on Wonder Bread. And there's a brisket-sandwich combo that includes an ear of locally grown sweet corn

and a pail of coleslaw made fresh on the spot every 20 minutes.

Then there are the homemade pies. They're cooked by farm wives and sold from little tents erected at the ends of their driveways. For \$9, we purchased a still-warm rhubarb pie from a pink-cheeked lady named Elaine. "Been peddlin' at the Nationals goin' on 10 years," she allowed, noting that gooseberry is now the hot ticket. She handed our pie through the Benz's window. "Cash only, please," she whispered. "And be careful. Full moon tonight. They'll be runnin' naked in the streets."

Despite the sweltering August heat, Nationals celebrants eat as often as the gag reflex allows. A five-sandwich day is but an amateurish warm-up. Between meals, veteran eaters pass out randomly on the grassy berm along Lincoln Street. Others have such trouble walking that they carry their own folding chairs, which they deploy every block or so to stave off labored breathing, flop sweat, and pork-related cardiac catastrophe.

During the four days of the Nationals, our Airstream proved a relaxing haven. Knoxville doesn't have sufficient parking for this event. To ensure a spot, it's

necessary to drive into town by noon and pay a local \$5 to \$20 to squat in his yard. Then you relax in your trailer until 7:15 each night, when racing commences. By 7:30, a guy could leisurely burglarize every home in Knoxville with little fear of interruption.

Before the main event Saturday night, the announcer screamed, "We don't have to worry about no gas prices, the economy, or jobs, 'cause *we're goin' racing!*" Then a Black Hawk helicopter whopped overhead, eliciting thunderous stamping of feet and whooping from 24,000 fans in the grandstands and another 10,000 or so standing around unsupervised and largely drunk in 52 luxury suites and on the balconies of the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame. A four-day grandstand seat costs \$148 to \$173—one of life's last remaining great deals.

In the end, Donny Schatz from Fargo, North Dakota, won the five-foot-tall Nationals trophy for 2006, plus \$140,000 and a kiss not from race queen Jess Ball but from his dad. It was a popular win—Schatz had previously been a runner-up four times. Along the way, fans were treated to typical Knoxville drama, including the crash of 33-year-old NCRA champion Steve King



CHEST PAINS TO FOLLOW

First it was the rhubarb pie, then two-pound fried turkey legs, then walking tacos. After that, we finessed our way past the Dingus bouncers (below) into the stunning Dingus Lounge.





NO ANIMALS? OKAY, JUST A FEW

Iowa race queens (top left) ride like everyone else. Joey Saldana and Donny Schatz (above) hammered each other for every lap of the finale. At the Nationals, you'll find some interesting spectators standing next to you at the fence—in this instance, young Kasey Kahne (left).



on Wednesday night, who unfortunately became the 15th fatality since racing began here in the 1920s. It has always been a dangerous place. Dwayne Robuck told us that three drivers have cleared *all eight levels* of steel guardrail in the turns, subsequently exiting the premises to land atop parked cars whose owners, yet in the grandstands, lustily cheered a calamity whose ironic and expensive outcome they could not see.

And there was extra drama during a final-night qualifying heat in which four-time Nationals winner Danny Lasoski tangled with nephew Brian Brown. This so enraged Lasoski that he hunted down Brown during a caution and rammed his relative's car six to eight times, which, in turn, so enraged Lasoski's onlooking father that the two later fell into a screaming-and-shoving family feud that had to be quelled by Iowa State Patrolmen on hand for exactly such dust-ups. "You want to hit me, old man?" screamed the younger Lasoski. "Go ahead. *Hit me!*" The mêlée was shown perhaps eight times in slow motion on the Turn Three JumboTron, causing the frenzied crowd to boo wildly and in unison, as if Saddam had just sauntered down the front stretch.

Even as big winner Schatz concluded his interviews on the Speed Channel, Jarem and I retired to the Airstream, whose roof was black with four days' worth of sooty tire dust and river-bottom gumbo. We collapsed inside, isolated from the noise and chaos all around, sipping dirty martinis and munching Pringles slathered with anchovy paste. Then, using bare hands alone, we consumed the last of our rhubarb pie. Until 1 a.m., we debated whether to shoulder our way into the dim and dingy Dingus. We agreed to drive by instead, arriving just as a bouncer ejected a skinny shirtless kid who ricocheted off a five-wide crowd of well-oiled celebrants jostling to get in. Jarem's flashbulbs got the kid's attention. "Dude," he slurred, "*very cool hoss trailer.*"

Half the Iowans who noticed our rig wanted only to tour the Airstream, and the other half wanted only to view the Benz's V-8, personally signed by its German assembler. "I pay attention to rigs," said the driver of a 40-foot race-car hauler from Broken Arrow, Oklahoma. "You got the fastest tow vehicle in Knoxville, probably the whole Midwest. And I *know* it's the only one with a 200-mph speedometer."

During our drive home, we passed through a surreal olive-green storm in western Indiana, whose tornado-like gusts threatened to air-freight our Airstream to Emerald City. Up to that point, we'd indulged perhaps 100 wide-open accels to 60 mph, mostly to revel in the Benz's exhaust note, an aural ringer for a Corvette Z06's. But we'd only ventured to a max towing speed of maybe 90 mph. Pointing to the sky, Jarem said, "Here's our big chance for the 140-mph record."

It was late Sunday when we returned to the Ohio Airstream factory. A lone guard greeted us. "How'd it work out?" he asked.

"Fantastic," I said. "It's so light. Tows like a feather, especially when it's attached to 503 horsepower."

"What *didn't* work out," Jarem complained, "was the trailer's round roof. You climb up there to watch the races, you'll fall off, maybe break your dingus."

The guard studied the top of the Airstream as if it were the first time he'd noticed its art deco shape. "How come it's all black up there?" he asked. Then he looked at Jarem, who was preparing the day's first dirty martini. "You guys drive through a forest fire?"