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ZOOM

in on america

By the U.S. Missions of Austria and Poland

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Car Racing in the USA



In this issue: Races

Zoom in on America

In this photo provided by NHRA, Funny Car driver Gary Densham races to the qualifying lead on February 14, 2013, at the O'Reilly Auto Parts NHRA Winternationals drag race at Auto Club Raceway in Pomona, California. (Photo © AP Images)

Car Racing the American Way

Humans have devised countless forms of sports throughout history. While all competitions have common roots, they often assume forms that reflect the culture and customs of different countries.

In the United States, auto racing has a decidedly American color. The sky seems to be the limit when it comes to the design of “funny cars” and “monster trucks” (see photos on pp. 2-5). Car races are not always about winning: sometimes entertaining the audience is more important. Even NASCAR (National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing), which looks like a traditional car race, has unique origins.

MONSTER TRUCKS

The first thing you notice about monster trucks is their huge wheels and tires. Monster trucks are not a very practical vehicle for a family vacation, but they are not made for regular driving. Monster trucks are built to entertain. Their wheels are capable of going over huge obstacles and crushing everything in their path. And this is what they do during monster truck shows. They crush lined-up vehicles, trailers and even planes. They are truly monster trucks.

Monster truck competitions and shows started in the late 1970s when events like mud bogging and truck pulling were gaining in popularity. The owners of

these trucks lifted and modified them to make them look bigger and more monstrous. Eventually, the truck owners started competing to build the highest, the most powerful, and the biggest truck.

Monster trucks bear “big” names that point to their size and power: Bigfoot, King Kong, King Krunch, Maddog, Virginia Giant, Battle Beast, Jurassic Attack, Bounty Hunter, and High Anxiety, for instance.

Bob Chandler’s Bigfoot was the first star of monster truck shows. Fred Shafer and Jack Willman Sr.’s Bear Foot and Jeff Dane’s King Kong followed. The legendary Bigfoot truck won the monster truck racing series championship a dozen times. The original



Christopher Roy, right, driving High Anxiety, wins the first round in Monster Trucks competition over Mike Hogan, driving Battle Beast, at the Monster Truck Challenge at Castle Rock Race Track in Castle Rock, Washington. (Photo © AP Images)

Bigfoot is now retired and on display in St. Louis. In this video from 1981, you can watch Chandler driving an early version of Bigfoot:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=InrdfXhMHnQ>

Monster truck races have been organized since 1985. A common feature of monster truck shows today is the crushing of some smaller cars. Where do the cars doomed for destruction come from? They are old cars volunteered by their owners in exchange for around \$500. The Volvo car company once ran a TV ad claiming that their cars could not be crushed so easily. In 1990, Steve Dane, the driver of "Bear Foot," crushed a row of Volvos during a promotional stunt in Philadelphia. Volvo later admitted that the car used in its TV ad had been reinforced.

Constructors now aim to build lighter and more powerful vehicles, which are capable of going faster and faster. Shock absorbers are another important part of monster trucks. Constructors continually try to build better shock absorbers to im-

prove the performance of their trucks.

Monster trucks are styled after pickup trucks' bodies while their wheels and suspension systems are modified. They are equipped with a special system that prevents accidents if a driver loses control of the vehicle. The system, called the Remote Ignition Interruptor, shuts off all electrical power in case of a rollover. The trucks use small tires when they are transported in trailers. The big tires, measuring 66 inches high and 43 inches wide, are installed before they perform. The average monster truck goes through eight tires a year. Each tire costs about \$2,600.

Useful expressions:

- * Mud bogging - an off-road auto race in which vehicles must drive through a pit of mud.
- * Truck and tractor pulling - a race in which modified tractors pull a heavy sledge along a track. The winner is the vehicle that pulls the sledge farthest.



(clockwise from top left: Visitors pose for pictures in the wheel wells on Bigfoot 5; Bigfoot driver Darron Schnell sits in the driver's seat for the legendary monster truck Bigfoot; An oversize, 13,000-pound truck named "Bear Foot" crushes a row of Volvo automobiles during a promotional stunt in Philadelphia, November 9, 1990; Crew chief Cole Vernard works to wiggle the giant tires onto the Grave Digger monster truck as the crew gets it ready for a show. (photos © AP Images)

DRAG RACING

A parachute on a car? Yes, not for landing, but to slow it down. The sight of one or two parachutes attached to the back of a super fast racing car is not unusual on drag race tracks. Why? The reason is simple; the enormous speed with which these cars drive over a short distance makes it necessary to bring them to a quick and safe stop after they have crossed the finish line.

Most drag races are 400 meters (1/4 mile), but shorter races of 200 or 300 meters are organized as well. Usually two cars compete at a time in a drag race. When one car loses a race, it is knocked out of the competition while the winning car moves on to the next round. Finally, just one car stays on the track. The winner of a race is not necessarily the car that crosses the finish line first. In determining which car has won, two times are measured and added up: the elapsed time, i.e. the time of the drive, and the reaction time, which is the time between the moment the green light is lit and the start.

In races where milliseconds determine victory, all measurements are calculated electronically. The most important part of the race is the start, which is

also electronically ignited. The competitors first drive slowly to a “pre-stage” line where they briefly stop, and then move 7 inches on to the starting line where they “stage” their cars. When the front tires of the first staged car break the laser beam on the lane, the starting procedure is triggered for all lanes. The so-called “Christmas Tree” system is ignited. The “Christmas Tree” is a panel with six lights that are lit in sequence. The blue light comes first followed by a series of three amber lights. Finally, a green light marks the start of the race. If a car leaves before the green light, it is disqualified.

Watching cars travel at speeds of up to 325 miles per hour is spectacular, but spectators expect even more than that. They are thrilled by the so-called “standing burnouts” performed by drivers before the start of a race. Standing burnouts are used to warm up the cars’ tires. Vehicles drive onto pavement that has been watered down. The drivers stop their cars and then powerfully spin the wheels. Smoke fumes surround the car and its driver in a spectacular way. This practice is actually good for the tires, which heat and clean for a better traction. For many spectators this is an important part of the show.

Two associations organize most of the drag races in the United States: the National Hot Rod Associa-

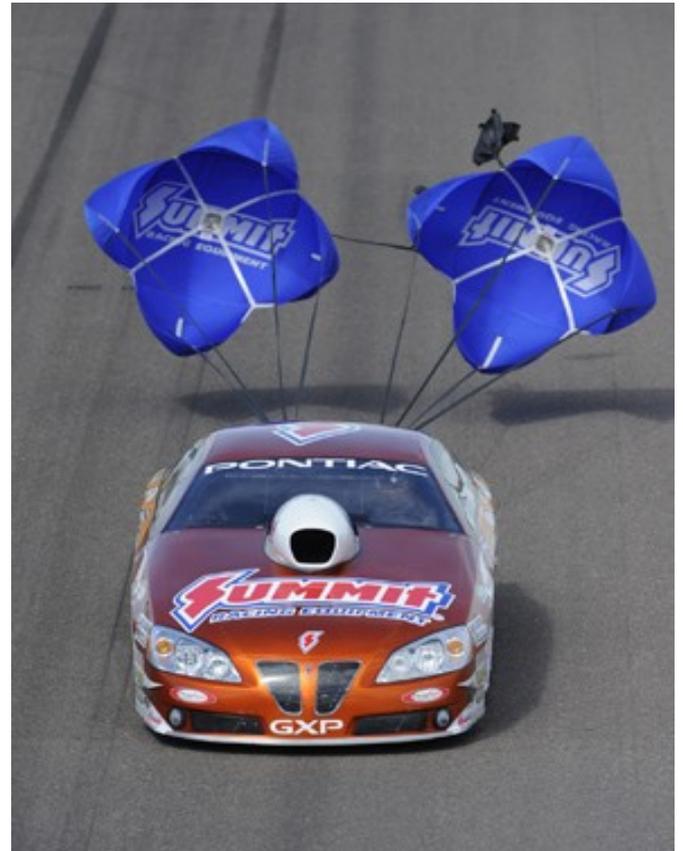


In this photo provided by NHRA, Spencer Massey performs a burnout prior to a qualifying pass on June 2, 2012, at the Toyota NHRA SuperNationals drag races at Old Bridge Township Raceway Park in Englishtown, New Jersey. (photo © AP Images)

-tion (NHRA) and the International Hot Rod Association (IHRA). These organizations work on safety rules, regulations and restrictions with regard to drag racing. Restrictions relate to engine size, fuel type, weight, and body style. The result of these regulations is the division of the vehicles into many different classes such as Top Fuel dragsters (the fastest class), Top Fuel Funny Cars, Pro Modified, Pro Stock, and Pro Stock Bike. There is even a class called Nostalgia Su-

per Stock class, which follows the style of drag racing from the 1960s. The extremely high speeds make drag racing a dangerous sport. As a result, drag race cars are required to pass a very stringent safety inspection before they can enter a competition.

Click to listen to the article



(top left): Funny car drivers compete in a four-wide drag racing event in Concord, North Carolina, (middle left): Top Fuel driver Spencer Massey deploys the parachute of his dragster during qualifying. Massey raced to the qualifying lead with a 3.837-second pass at 319.60 mph, (bottom left): Robert Hight drives to the provisional qualifying lead. He topped the field with a performance of 4.067 seconds at 302.62 mph, (top right): Jason Line slows after his winning run in Pro Stock at the NHRA Arizona Nationals drag races, (bottom left): Fans watch a drag race. (photos © AP Images)

NASCAR

NASCAR (National Association for Stock Auto Racing) is the most popular form of car racing in the United States. "Stock car" racing started during Prohibition (1913-1933), particularly in the Appalachian region of the American south.

During Prohibition, the production and sale of alcohol was banned in the United States. This led to the illegal transport of alcohol, known as bootlegging. Alcohol smugglers feared being caught by the police. They needed small and fast vehicles. Bootleggers modified regular cars to make them faster and capable of carrying larger loads of cargo.

At the same time, Daytona Beach in Florida became the most popular venue for car racers try-

ing to set new speed records. Drivers from around the world came to Daytona because of its long stretch of hard packed sand.

In 1935, William France, an unknown driver seeking to escape the Great Depression, began to race in Daytona events. France realized the potential to expand stock car racing nationally. In 1938 he took over the race course in Daytona and in 1947 he officially established the National Association for Stock Auto Racing (NASCAR). Some of the most popular drivers in NASCAR's early days were former bootleggers.

NASCAR is still a family-run business operated by the France family. Each year, there are more than 1500 NASCAR races on more than 100 racetracks around the United States. NASCAR races are broadcast on television in more than 150 countries.



(top left and right): the NASCAR Michigan Auto Racing, (bottom): NASCAR driver Ricky Rudd gets his car serviced on pit road during the Gatorade Duel #1 at the Daytona International Speedway in Daytona Beach, Florida. (photos © AP

Activity Page

EXERCISE 1: SPEAKING

Work with a partner. Divide the two pictures below between you.

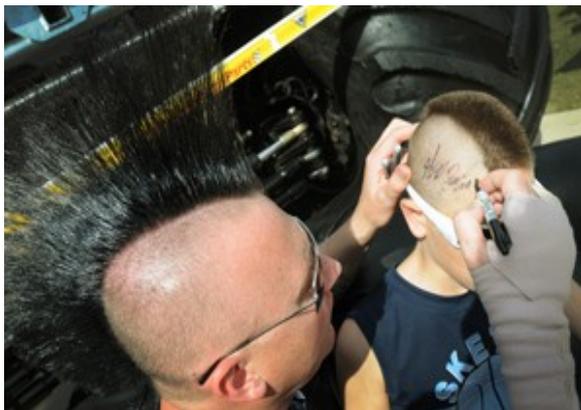
1. Look at your picture and read the captions. Then describe your picture to your partner.
2. In a conversation compare and contrast the pictures.
3. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of extreme car races.
4. Would you like to be a famous race driver?

Student A: discuss the dangers involved in drag racing. Do accidents like the one in the photo discourage drivers from participating in races? What features of character are important for a race driver?

Student B: discuss the role of fans in sports like drag racing or monster truck races. Are fans a major motivation for drivers?



*A funny car drag racer driven by Ron Dudley of Tulsa, Oklahoma, explodes in a fireball as he crosses the finish line at Indianapolis Raceway Park Thursday, September 3, 1987, during qualifications for the 33rd running of the U.S. National's drag race. Dudley escaped serious injury.
(photo © AP Images)*



*Matthew Moncrief, 11, of Jacksonville, is having the side of his head shaved by the driver of the Mohawk Warrior truck George Balhan during the Pit Party where fans get an up close and personal look at the trucks they will be seeing compete later in the evening event, which draws 75,000 people to the stadium.
(photo © AP Images)*

EXERCISE 3: WRITING

Write a paragraph about your favorite sport. Include some of its basic rules.

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About ZOOM

Contact us at
arc@usembassy.at

American Reference Center
U.S. Embassy Vienna
Boltzmanngasse 16
1090 Vienna

[http://
austria.usembassy.gov/
arc.html](http://austria.usembassy.gov/arc.html)



People look at the Funny Car of drag racer Bob Tasca on display in front of the New York Stock Exchange. (photo © AP Images)