



GO
BIG
OR GO
HOME

We went home. But before we did, we drove Grave Digger - the greatest monster truck in the world

Words: Robert Bright Photography: Justin Leighton

DAWN IN LAS VEGAS. FROM A WINDOW of the MGM Grand hotel, I can just make out the mountain ridges in the distance. Pretty soon the Mojave desert will start to sizzle. Not that it makes any difference here among the hotel-casinos, where the air is always cool and oxygen-rich and the sun never penetrates. At 6am, the retired old dolls are already hunched over the slot machines,

wire-wool hair still gamely trying to imitate the style of some wartime Hollywood starlet, a Lucky Strike on the go, cranking away the whole time. *At 6am, for chrissake.*
But Las Vegas wouldn't have it any other way. Moderation is a dirty word around here – the casino at the relatively new Wynn Hotel has to make \$10 million a day just to break even. ☺



Gunslinger gets air. This ain't gonna come down pretty, no sir

The man above is the great, the legendary Dennis Anderson

No artificial colours used. Not in the hair dye nor the food, no Siree

"I'm sorry to diss you, sunshine, but only the Digger rocks"

Batman's number one fan calls up support from her minions

So if you're the type that knows your limits, you're simply not welcome. In this town, you either go big or go home.

Yessiree. Go big or go home. It's a sentiment that resonates with the strange breed I'm mingling with at the Sam Boyd Stadium on the western fringes of the city. We're just over 24 hours away from the Monster Jam World Final, the biggest event in the Monster Truck calendar, finale to a hectic three-month season. Normally home to American football, the pitch is now covered in 5,000 cubic metres of earth, arranged into vertiginous jumps and ramps. Littered about are the carcasses of old Chevys and Fords, sprayed in lurid greens, yellows and purples. Forklifts move a school bus and a cement mixer into position.

Watching this is a man whose very physiognomy says go big or go home. He stands about 6ft 4in and wears aviator shades the size of dinner plates. His name is Chad Fortune, and he's one of the 24 Monster Truck drivers to make it to the Las Vegas showdown. Right now, he's looking doubtfully at the earth-movers going about their business.

"It's madhouse huge. I mean, these are 12ft ramps, so we'll be getting about 35ft of air, maybe travelling 150-200ft. All this in a truck that weighs close to five tonnes, has 1,250lb ft of torque and is putting out 1,500bhp." My own furrowed brow stares back at me in his giant aviators. He shakes his head. "When I first walked out and looked at these jumps, I was, like, 'What the f—!' It's like they don't care, like they wanna see us wash out big time... But what the hell, this

event is like the World Series, the baddest of the year. You gotta do it for the fans."

Other drivers knocking about the pits today share Chad's reservations. Cam McQueen, driving Nitro Circus, says, "Me and a few other drivers flew over the stadium in a helicopter earlier, and we were like 'Crap, that's even big from up here!'" George Balhan, driving Escalade and famous for his jet-black Mohican, adds, "This is the most extreme I've ever seen. I used to race dirt bikes, but I never saw anything as crazy as this." But like all of them, after commenting on the madness, he shrugs and smiles as if to say 'Bring it on.'

You'd expect nothing less from men with fast, sawn-off names like Randy, Ed, Joe, Rod, Cam, Chad and Trey. These are the sort of guys that haul ass down the interstate, that don't so much reach places as hit them. They're men who grew up amid the vast open spaces of North Carolina, Virginia, Georgia, Iowa and Ohio. Farm country. And given there wasn't a hell of a lot you could be doing amid those vast open spaces, they got their kicks from modding their pick-ups – bigger engines, bigger wheels – and just 'rootin' around in the mud'. This is how the whole Monster Truck scene got started back in the mid-1970s.

"Where I come from, the all-American guy is about nuts and bolts. We might not be able to email your ass to death, but get us in a truck, a tractor or a combine harvester, and we sure as hell know what we're doing."

This is the legend speaking, a man who is to Monster Trucks what Junior Johnson is to NASCAR – Dennis Anderson. If you don't recognise the name, you will almost certainly know his truck, the most famous on the circuit – Grave Digger.

It's been a long road for Dennis. In the early 1980s, he spent all his spare time working on his truck, a beaten up 1951 Ford pick-up. It was everything to him. "I started out putting it on

38in wheels, and I thought, 'Wow, that looks awesome.' Then it's just this madness you get. I was a junkie with this thing." He started to take on locals in mud-bogging competitions – drag races through the mud. Most of the other guys were the sons of rich farmers with brand new Ford F250s. They'd look at Dennis's truck and laugh. "I was the poorest guy there, but I had the toughest, baddest truck. I told these guys, 'I'll take this piece of junk and dig your grave for ya'. And that's what I did. We had maybe 500 people coming to watch back then."

He has a good face, does Dennis Anderson; a faintly ruddy complexion, undeviating Prussian blue eyes, a silver-plated Zapata moustache and teeth that actually glow. But there's also an aura that sticks to him, one that's gathered over 28 years of driving out there on the edge of reason. And when he gets into his stride in an interview, his delivery is like a cross between Muhammad Ali and an evangelical preacher, the sentences rolling out in a rhythmic pitter-patter style.

"Sometimes I just stop and look around at the size of the Monster Jam operation now and think back to that first Grave Digger truck. It cost me about \$25,000. These days, if you wanna get down with the programme, you gotta have about \$250,000. But I still have the same fire in my

That first Grave Digger truck cost me about \$25,000. These days you gotta have \$250,000

belly, I still drive this thing like a raging idiot, and that's what the fans love. And the fans mean everything, let me tell ya. They paid for every nut and bolt on this truck and every piece of shingle on the roof of my house, and I always tell 'em that and thank 'em for it, too. Basically I'm an all-American guy living a dream."

For all his success, Dennis has a problem and that problem's name is Tom Meents. If Dennis is Monster Trucks's Junior Johnson, then Tom Meents is its Richard Petty. Behind the wheel of Maximum Destruction he's 'the winningest of the winningest', with eight Monster Jam World Finals titles. He's the only driver to ever 'Double Down' – win both the racing and freestyle elements of the competition in the same year. Dennis might have more cachet, more marketability, but he's a long way behind in accolades with three titles.

Tomorrow, they'll lock horns again. "When that guy goes out there, he takes a 50-50 chance with his truck and himself. He's like a madman," says Dennis. "If he blows a wheel off, he'll just keep going. And the darndest thing is, he might just beat you on three wheels."

As for Tom Meents, when I ask him about Dennis, he smiles and replies in a Huckleberry drawl, "First thing I don't wanna do is lose to him, the second is to make sure he loses, it's that kind of deal. But who knows what's gonna happen? This is the most extreme course you're gonna see anywhere. And when you have the name Maximum Destruction on the side of your truck, there's only one way you can drive."

All they need now is tomorrow...

AND SO, ONCE ALL THE GLOWING NEON HAS flashed and strobed and glittered its way through the Las Vegas night, and gamblers loaded with drink have emptied their wallets and crawled away from the Blackjack tables, tomorrow comes around. The shadows on the Joshua trees out in





Accelerator pedal.
Built for that all-
American size 12



Notice the toggle to
the right of the wheel.
That's the rear steer



the Mojave start to shrink, the old dolls take up their positions on the slots and the merry-go-round completes another turn. Except, that is, for the folks out at the Sam Boyd Stadium, waking up in their trailers. This is not just another day for them. This is *the* day.

The crowds start arriving early at the stadium. The event doesn't kick off until 7pm, but they're all here at 3pm for the 'Pit Party', a chance to check out the trucks and get autographs from the drivers. The Monster Truck fan represents a curiously mixed demographic. With some of them, it's as if an extended branch of the Manson Family had wandered out of the desert – all goatee beards, tattoos and eyebrow studs. Then there are the nuclear families: sugary apple-pie moms, affable pops broad as silverback gorillas, the 2.4s supping on Mountain Dew and screaming for Monster Truck merchandise.

Eventually, the sky takes on a blueberry hue, the floodlights go on, and everyone takes their seats. First, we have a kind of opening ceremony. A huge American flag is carried into the arena, and a gritty 80-a-day voice pipes up over the PA system: "Laydees and genelmen. We wanna make sure every one of ya recognises our brave servicemen and women. Here's the bottom line y'all – without the sacrifices of these people, we wouldn't be here today doin' what we wanna do."

On the big screen, we see a montage of US Forces in action, accompanied by the song 'Proud to be an American'. "I'm proud to be an American where at least I know I'm free, and I won't forget the

At the finale there are whoops and tears and disconcerting primal roars

men who died who gave that right to me." They're laying on the syrup pretty thick, giving it the whole rootin' tootin' howdy-hollerin' NRA-lovin' package. "And I'd gladly stand up next to you and defend her still today, coz there ain't no doubt I love this land, God Bless the USA." At any moment I expect members of the crowd to start leaping from their seats and screaming "FROM MY COLD DEAD HANDS!"

After this, about 40 kids march on and take the 'Oath of Entitlement' to join the US Air Force, their hands raised, swearing by Almighty God to kick ass wherever it needs kicking. After which we have the national anthem sung in that warbling Whitney Houston style. At the crescendo, amid the whoops and howls and tears and disconcerting primal roars, there are fireworks accompanied by



Rob Bright decides not to go big in any way at all

Digging the Grave Digger

So what exactly is it like driving a five-tonne 1,500bhp monster truck worth \$300,000?

GIVEN GRAVE DIGGER STANDS at 13ft high, the first issue is how to get in it. Fortunately, the rollcage uses plenty of aluminium tubing (extremely stout DOM tubing), convenient for grabbing onto as you work your way up into the cockpit. You'll only find one seat in here, positioned in the centre. The rev counter sits right behind the steering wheel, with the other dials smaller and to the right. Also to the right is a toggle switch that looks like it's come out of a B52. This is the rear steer.

The red cylindrical struts heading in the direction of each wheel are the nitrogen shock absorbers, designed to give 26 inches of travel at the front and 30 inches at the rear. The huge amounts of give are essential to cushion five tonnes of metal as it's reunited with the earth after a 30ft drop.

The engine – a 540 cubic inch Merlin, costing about \$30,000 – is the kind familiar to drag racers, as is the

supercharger, an 8-71 Blower. The engine runs on methanol-alcohol and can be tuned anywhere between 375 and 1,900bhp, depending on how it's chipped. For my little jaunt, they give me access to just under half of it.

Then there are those tyres. Standing at 66in high, they're traditionally found on tractors, although the sport now gets tyres custom-made in China, too. When a tyre is taken straight off the farm, the cleats used for traction in the mud have to be cut right down and buffed. The rubber is also hollowed out, creating hundreds of grooves, all in the name of weight saving – they can shave 60lb off each tyre.

So I don the fireproof suit, clamber up and settle in the relatively upright driving position. Clamped by the five-point harness, I pull on the Fuel and Power plungers, switch the Motor Start and flick the Ignition. The beast rumbles into life, guttural and ominous. I'm given the thumbs-up, and my shaky right foot slowly starts to apply pressure to the huge accelerator pedal. It moves away in a surprisingly civilised manner, no sudden jolts, no kangarooing. As the revs hit 4,000rpm, I move it through the dog-leg

gearbox into its second and final gear – the first is used to get you rolling, but once in second you stay there. I take the first ramp (the ramps are more like enlarged speed bumps) at about 5mph.

Now the next big concern approaches, to do with that toggle switch for the rear steer. Henry Cross, Race Team Director, says, "When you first hit the rear steer



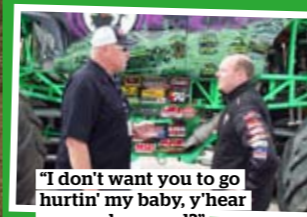
'Using the toggle switch for the rear steer is like putting the monster truck into a slow-motion drift'



toggle, you'll feel like you're doing it wrong. Ignore that feeling. Don't try to think about it too much, just trust the seat-of-your-pants instinct."

As I'm only going at about 10mph, I'm able to experiment with the toggle without the fear of doing any lasting damage to a \$300,000 vehicle. And it turns out Henry is right. After a couple of turns you stop thinking about it and simply feel what the truck is doing. The sensation when using it is as if you're putting the vehicle into an automatic slow-motion drift every time you flick the toggle.

After another 10 minutes, I'm starting to get cocky. Grave Digger is re-chipped to give me more power and I'm actually encouraged to floor it. For a brief, beautiful moment, I do just that, foot to the floor as I head up to the ramp, the engine roaring its approval at this righteous behaviour. And do you know what? As I breach the ramp, I can feel the shocks loosen up. There's a moment, mere milliseconds, and then a subtle bump. I can see the smiles on people's faces. Henry gives me a thumbs-up. I actually get air. It's little more than a few inches, but all the same... air.



"I don't want you to go hurtin' my baby, y'hear me, peckerwood?"

Charlie Pauken in Monster Mutt, the 2010 Freestyle champ



Unlikely that Blue Thunder will recover from that one...



A great view of those nitro shocks in the post-event graveyard



(Left) Half-time entertainment; women towed in a speedboat...



They've got the pyros. Now they need the porno for rock bliss

an actual fly-by involving five US fighter jets. By now, all my frazzled indoctrinated brain can think of as I stare at the extreme pointy-ness of these fighter jets is, "America... Fuck, yeah!" Eventually the kids march off and everyone is able to calm down enough to get all hopped up again, this time as the Monster trucks enter the arena in a huge earth-shattering convoy. The noise a Monster Truck makes on its own is hard enough to describe, but when all 24 of them come tearing into the arena on a parade lap, all 36,000bhp of them, it's practically impossible. My notes include the following: 'screaming pack of mythical jackals... like riding the thunder as it peels out of the clouds... Sauron's pitbulls... blistering roar of Armageddon...' None of which comes close.

The Monster Jam World Final has two elements – racing and freestyle. The 24 drivers compete in both disciplines. The racing is a bit like drag racing, except at the end of the 250-metre straight, the drivers have to execute a U-turn, then drive up a ramp and make a jump that takes them over the finishing line. Each race lasts just over 15 seconds. As for the freestyle, they come at that completely cold. No one gets a chance to have a crack at any of the jumps beforehand. "That's the weirdest thing about this sport," says Cam McQueen, "there's no real time to practise."

The racing comes first, and as the rounds progress, the true brilliance of Dennis Anderson emerges. He's clinical on the turn, and this is really where Monster Truck races are won or lost. He uses just the right amount of rear steer on the truck and then drifts it round, straightens it up and toe-nails the throttle. But his nemesis, despite one or two close shaves, remains in contention. At the semi-final stage, Grave Digger dispatches Toro Loco with ease, and Tom Meents in Maximum Destruction beats Blue Thunder in a photo finish. It's the final everyone wanted.

A few minutes of monster truck freestyle is like putting your insides in a food mixer

Right now, you're probably raising a cynical eyebrow at how convenient this is. Clearly, in terms of showmanship and presentation, this sport has much in common with wrestling. But drivers balk at suggestions that it's fixed. With the freestyle, in which judging plays its part, there's room for favouritism, but even then it's the reactions of the crowd that tend to dictate scores. And there are just too many variables in play. "When you've made a jump and you're up there, there ain't nothing you can do. You don't know which way it's gonna come down," says Henry Cross, Race Team Director for Grave Digger. Or as Cam McQueen puts it, "These things bounce different every time."

So anyway, here we are, an Anderson vs Meents final. Fifteen seconds to make a hero. Queen's 'We Will Rock You' comes over the PA. Heavy metal thunder as the trucks tear into the stadium at over 70mph. They get towards the braking point, the suspension unloads and the trucks come loose. Anderson holds it together perfectly, and he's through the J-hook ahead of Meents. Foot on the gas and he's over the jump and home. He celebrates victory with a monstrous donut, climbs out of the vehicle and heads up to the compere in the crowd, grabbing the microphone and screaming, "YOU GUYS ROCK!" to the crowd.

Now for the freestyle competition. This is what most people have paid their money to see – if the Monster Jam constitutes 'sports entertainment', freestyle is the entertainment. It's also excruciatingly tough on drivers. A couple of minutes of freestyle is compared to "falling down a flight of stairs", "jumping off the roof of a house", "being on a rollercoaster", "experiencing a car wreck seven times in two minutes" and "putting your insides in a food mixer". Drivers are strapped in so tight they can barely breathe, yet there's still enough flex in these things to see them come close to head-butting the steering wheel. The fans want destruction, but they also want to see drivers make last-minute recoveries, feel that heart-in-the-mouth moment as a vehicle about to beach on its side receives a sudden injection of power that sends it spinning back onto all fours.

The first three or four freestyle competitors all fail dramatically. Wheels quickly depart company from axles; after a single jump, one truck bounces and flips onto its roof like a paralysed giant beetle; another, when its five tonnes hit *terra firma* from 30ft, simply conks out. Maybe the drivers' misgivings were right. Maybe this is too extreme. And what's this? Booing from the crowd? That's a worry. Imagine 40,000 highly charged, extremely disgruntled monster truck fans unleashing their ids on Las Vegas... There'd be nothing left, just the charred remains of thousands of slot machines like some defeated robot army.

George Balhan, he of the Mohican, saves the day with a great drive. When he gets big air, camera flashlights go off around the stadium like TV static. He finishes his piece with the Ben Hur of donuts, spinning for what seems like hours. Dennis Anderson and Tom Meents both go for it, but the jumps really do seem to be too much for these trucks, wheels snapping off seconds into their routines. Well then comes Charlie Pauken in Monster Mutt, the man I'm told is the best driver never to win a Monster Jam title. And he finds his groove – plenty of big air, a few wheelies, good ol' car-crushing-chaos all-round, even finishing with a kamikaze run in which his truck flips trying to jump the course's water feature. It's a performance that earns him the highest score. Climbing the stairs to the compere, he takes the microphone and, out of breath, wheezes, "This is the greatest moment of my life," before filling his lungs enough to scream, "YOU GUYS ROCK!"

When the floodlights finally go out on the Monster Jam World Finals, the organisers estimate about half a million dollars' worth of damage has been done to vehicles. As for the drivers, they limp back to their trailers to call the chiropractor and grab some well-earned suds. And as the beer slowly anaesthetises their aches, strains, bruises and hairline fractures, they can rest easy, knowing that when they were asked to put their spines on the line, they didn't fail. They came to Las Vegas, and they sure as hell went big. 🍷

Catch Monster Trucks at the Birmingham NIA Arena 17, 18, 19 September (ticketfactory.com); Manchester MEN Arena 18, 19 September, and Cardiff Millennium Stadium 9 October (ticketmaster.co.uk)

