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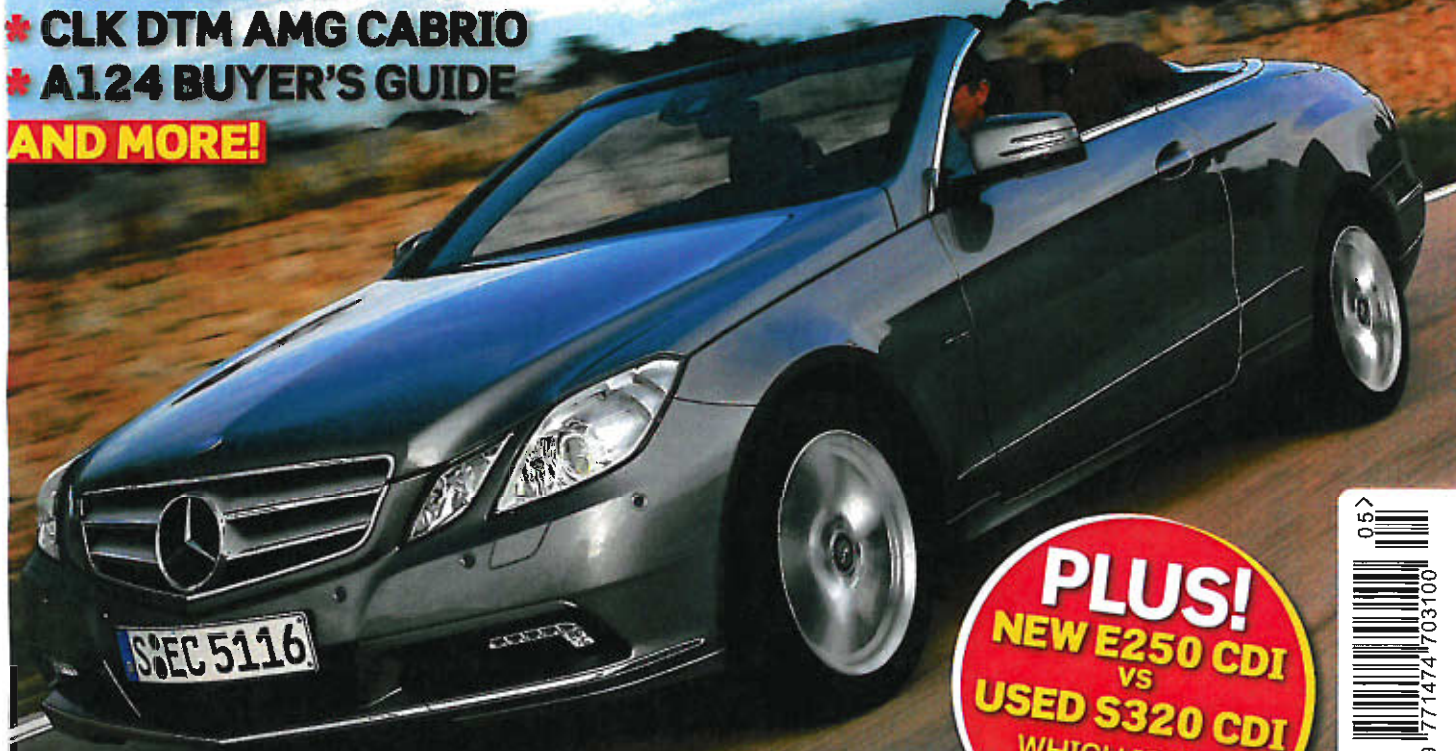
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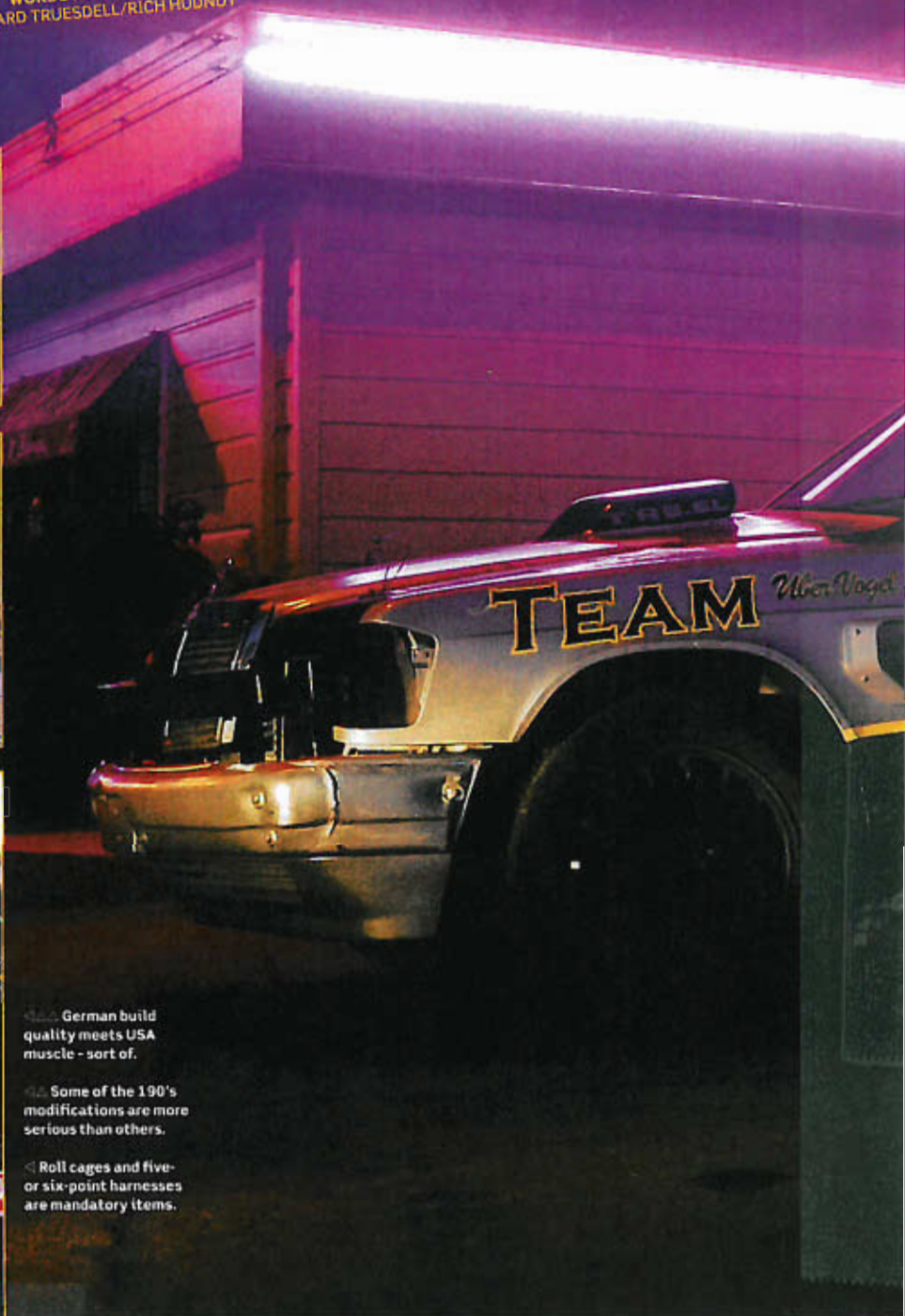


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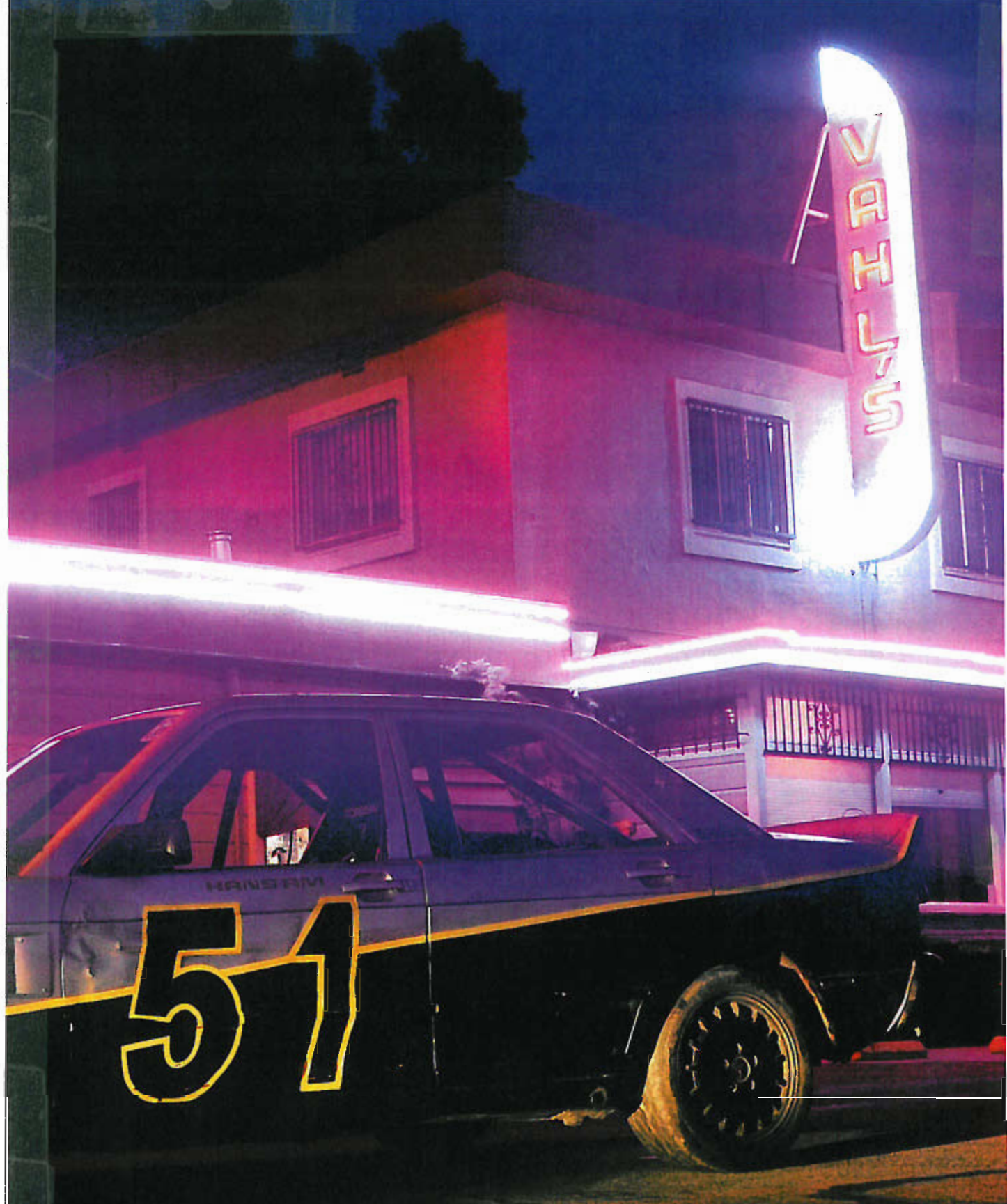
TRACK WARRIOR

Stripped down and sexed up for low budget, grassroots motorsport, this 190 is ready for another year of battles in 2010

WORDS RICHARD TRUESDELL
IMAGES RICHARD TRUESDELL/RICH HUDNUT



- ◀ German build quality meets USA muscle - sort of.
- ◀ Some of the 190's modifications are more serious than others.
- ◀ Roll cages and five- or six-point harnesses are mandatory items.



“The premise of the LeMons series is quite simple - to participate, one does not need a budget of a Formula 1 or NASCAR team”



Team Über Vogel's best result so far is sixth place at Altamont in this 190.



The Hans Am 190 boasts Sportline springs, Bilstein shock absorbers and an LSD.

“Over the last three years Team Über Vogel has updated the 190 – something that most cars do not last long enough to enjoy

▷ (L to R) Ken Martz, Peter Congistre, Rod Diridon, Rich Hudnut.



A fire extinguisher situated in easy reach of the driver is compulsory for LeMons.

GRASSROOTS RACING COMES in many forms around the world. In the United States one of the most popular is The 24 Hours of LeMons series, the brain child of automotive journalist Jay Lamm, who has given up his duties as the editor of *Corvette* magazine to devote all his energy (and waking moments) to the promotion of the series.

The premise of the LeMons series is quite simple. To participate, one does not need a budget of a Formula 1 or NASCAR team – entry into the series costs just \$500 (around £330) per car plus \$100 (about £65) per driver. A suitable car can usually be found by prowling the nether regions of eBay, Craigslist or that old standby, the newspaper classifieds. Or finding someone willing to sign over the title for free and getting the junker happily out of their life. Some teams are more ambitious than others. This is the story of one such team, one that has chosen to participate in a 1987 Mercedes-Benz 190E 2.6.

For Rod Diridon and Team Über Vogel, based in the San Francisco Bay area, the choice of car to compete in has a lot to do with Diridon's familiarity with the W201 190. Owning a 1992 190E Sportline, he has

experienced first hand its reputation as one of the best built and stoutest Mercedes-Benz models of the last quarter of a century. “The trick with LeMons is as much staying on the track as it is going fast,” says Diridon. “We placed sixth a couple of races back because we ran with about 85 per cent of the field in speed, but had very few repair stops. They are great cars right out of the gate, but are old enough that some are starting to have cost prohibitive electrical, vacuum and accessory system problems that have driven the price down,” he explained. “Of course we gutted the thing, AC and electric windows are as useful on a race car as screen doors on a submarine.”

Finding the right car took some time, but a suitable victim, in this case a six-cylinder 1987 190E was located in nearby Santa Cruz. Best of all, it was driven off, or shall we say towed home for just \$300 (around £200). “It was truly vile,” recalls Diridon. “It smelled of rotten sea water and feral cat, the champagne colour was peeling off, there was rust, an empty dash where the stereo had been stolen – but it had decent mechanicals and a stiff chassis.”

Once back in the garage Diridon and Team Über Vogel, which includes fellow enthusiasts Duane Ablamis, Peter Congistre, Todd

DiPaola, Christopher Leal, Rich Hudnut, Evan Mandel and Ken Martz attacked the forlorn Mercedes-Benz and set about making it a contender. While there is the initial \$500 entry, Diridon explains that there are additional costs involved. “They let you fix anything that will kill you or someone else. So, between the roll cage, a proper seat, harnesses, wheels, tyres and brakes it takes around \$3,500 [approximately £2,300] to put a car together. But when you're splitting it with four or five guys, it's a nominal cost to go bumper to bumper racing. Today, \$3,500 won't get you a valve job on a 911, or a front wheel and tyre on a Daytona, so I count that as pretty solid value.”

BUILT TO LAST

But each race provides an added ‘residual value’ budget to make incremental improvements. Over the last three years Team Über Vogel has updated the 190 while staying within the LeMons guidelines, something that most cars do not last long enough to enjoy. Over the past three seasons improvements have included new Bilstein shocks, while a limited-slip differential took two races to buy and rebuild. Local junkyards and online venues have allowed the team to locate used Sportline springs, sway



△ This W201 has survived three tough seasons of LeMons.

◁ The 190's black painted wheels show scars of battles past.

◀◁ A leaf spring from a Toyota pickup protects the radiator.

◀◀◀ Once a 190E 2.6, it now has the engine from a 1986 300E.

bars, fans and other low dollar components, including beefier items from larger E-Class models. "The hardest part is building a car with such a limited budget that will actually finish the race, let alone do it quickly," said team member Congistre. "Just the clutch packs for the diff took almost the entire budget for one race." It also now has more go thanks to a three-litre engine from a 1986 300E.

Quite possibly the most distinctive modification can be found at the front of the car. As the early LeMons races sometimes had more in common with a figure of eight demolition derby than its namesake race in France, vulnerable and vital components like the radiator needed special and innovative protection. The solution was suggested by Andre Schagerer from Tri-Star Motorsports in Sacramento, California. In West Coast LeMons circles it is known as the 'spring-o-matic'. The ingenious contraption consists of a leaf spring from a Toyota pickup, which is attached to the front clip above where the 190's front bumper once resided, meant as Diridon explains it, "to fend any over aggressive competitors away from the radiator."

As part of a tongue in cheek promotional effort behind the car, Team Über Vogel

produced a humorous and openly fictitious history for this 'Hans Am' 190, part of which explains the car's name. "The car featured here is one of the few remaining examples from an almost forgotten partnership during the 1980s between Mercedes-Benz and Pontiac. Known as the 'Hans Am' the name combined the legendary Pontiac Trans-Am and German rally ace Hans Gewurztraminer, who also served as the effort's project manager and champion."

TRACK ADDICTION

While the members of Team Über Vogel may not take themselves seriously, they are an accomplished group of car enthusiasts, many of them former professional mechanics. And it takes a lot to keep them from the track – Diridon recently raced with a broken arm and ribs, while Congistre has raced in the past with a separated shoulder. "People have driven with worse," says Diridon, quickly dismissing any concerns we have.

Over the past three LeMons seasons, Team Über Vogel has enjoyed a moderate degree of success in the hyper competitive series. While the team's inaugural race ended with an unimpressive 50th place finish out of 83 cars, the Hans Am has been continually refined and

improved – although 'well sorted' would probably qualify as an overstatement. The team's top finish turned out to be sixth place at Altamont and the Hans Am Mercedes-Benz most recently finished 35th out of 156 cars at Thunderhill Raceway Park in California. While there have been no podium finishes, these results stand as moral victories for the crowded field of rolling wrecks. Overall, the Team Über Vogel 190 has competed in five 24 Hours of LeMons races, covering 1,906 laps. And the team has donated 25 cents per lap, per driver for each race, raising \$2,180 (almost £1,500) for the American Cancer Society, the Canary Foundation, the Court Summerfield Fund, Shriners Children's Hospitals and the Veterans of Foreign Wars Foundation.

By the time you read this the Team Über Vogel Mercedes-Benz will have already returned to the series for 2010 competing in the 24 Hours of LeMons Western Region at Thunderhill, Buttonwillow and Infineon raceways. To follow the 190's exploits visit the team's website at www.UberVogelRacing.com. It promises to be quite an adventure. ■

► For further details on the 24 Hours of LeMons series visit www.24hoursoflemons.com