

# GIVE 'EM HELL, GRANDMA!

BY JEAN SHEPHERD

The games people will soon be playing with their cars.

• CITIZEN [wearing straw cowboy hat and mirror-lens sunglasses]: "The reason I like to see them stocks run is because I love to see them Dodges clobber them goddamn Fords."

INTERVIEWER: "You mean, sir, you have a feeling of identity with the Dodges on the track?"

CITIZEN: "Well, I don't know what you mean by identity, but if you mean do I own a Dodge, I'd say hell yes!"

INTERVIEWER: "I see. You own a Dodge, so naturally you cheer for Dodges, is that right?"

CITIZEN: "Yep. A '71 Charger with a full load, and she goes like stink. Look, buddy, you don't think I'd be stupid enough to want to see them Fords and Chevys beat a Dodge, do you?"

INTERVIEWER: "Thank you, sir [turning back to camera]. I now return you to Chris up in Network Control."

Of course, I thought, at the conclusion of that brief interview. This is the true egalitarian ideal—the triumph of democracy and the rise of the common man. All sporting events must eventually become reflections of the spectators' own private fantasies. Because most men view life as essentially a running battle against the rest of the world, it was inevitable. Many sports that were once immensely popular have faded from the scene because they belonged to an era when athletes were of a super breed, a race apart; their sports were Olympian in nature, to be observed by a spectator who in no way ever considered himself a potential winner. Or even a competitor on the lowest rung of the sport.

Take polo, for instance. It is hard to believe these days that polo was once played before huge, cheering crowds. Thousands of ordinary working stiffs

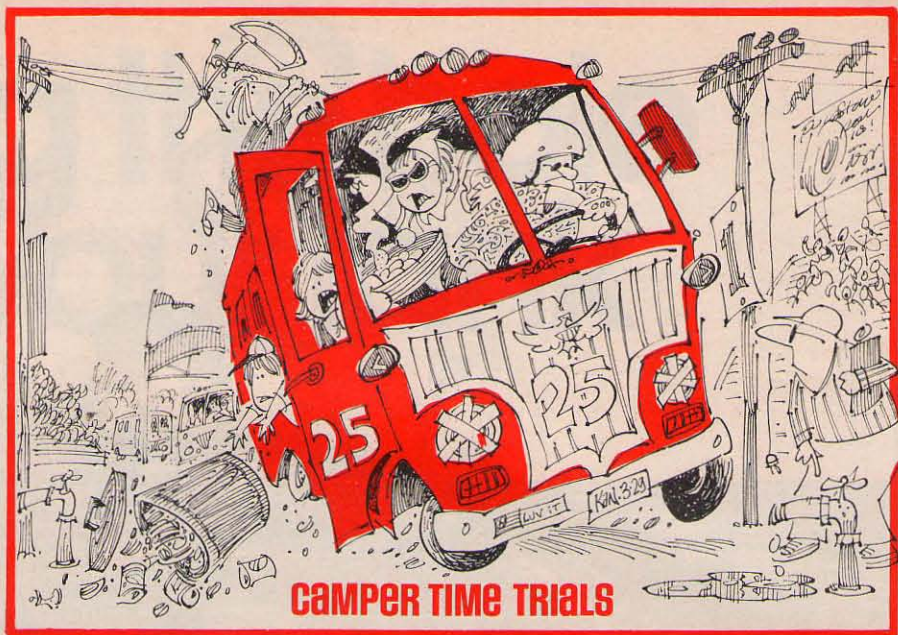
crowded in to see the great polo teams compete in such unlikely places as Chicago and Los Angeles, and superb polo players became household names. Crowds followed Tommy Hitchcock down the street, yet today his name is known to few and what he accomplished would be difficult to explain to your average dedicated demolition-derby fan. Why? Well, for one, polo happens to be one of the most absolutely difficult sports in the world. Simply *staying on* a polo pony is an accomplishment that makes even Eddie Arcaro nervous. They are wiry, lithe beasts that move like kangaroos with hotfoots. And that's just for starters. Trying to hit a ball about the size of an orange with a mallet on the end of a long, flexible shaft while thundering around a field with a mob of other plunging, snorting, murderous beasts ridden by maniacal zealots makes the

roller derby look like something performed on drowsy afternoons by businessmen trying to reduce. Broken arms were as much a part of the everyday polo game as oats and saddles.

There's no way polo could be popular today. To play the game on an international scale you had to not only be superbly gifted but also superbly rich. Polo players all maintained their own strings of ponies, using as many as five or six in a game. They played for stakes that were only symbolic—a cup, a silver tray, a championship blazer. Yet in their day, polo matches were given as much press coverage as baseball.

Who the hell cares today for a sport where guys play for silver trays and laurel leaves? Who can identify with people who would risk their neck for some silly blazer? What we want are more Evel Knievels—guys who wouldn't blow their nose in public for less than \$5000 (in advance), a percentage of the gate and guaranteed network coverage.

There are signs, however, that many of the great sports of our time are beginning to slip in popularity, and for the same reason that brought about the downfall of polo, six-day bike racing and international contract bridge tournaments. (There was a time, believe it or not, when international bridge stars were true household names, and the results of great matches were actually followed by millions. There even were huge

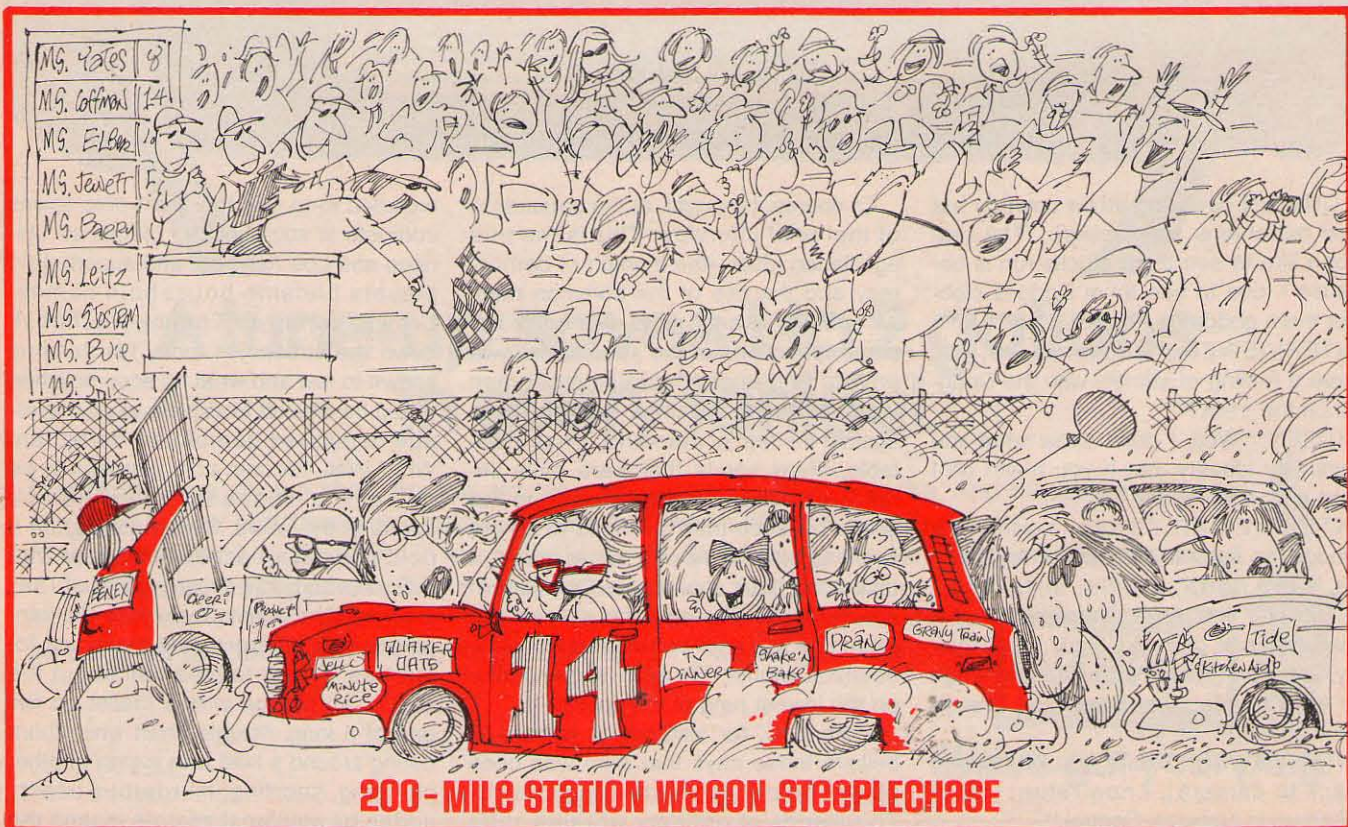


### CAMPER TIME TRIALS

screens set up in theaters and sports arenas all around the country, and the hands were flashed in color on these screens so that the paying spectators could watch each bid. Ely Culbertson was interviewed about everything from what he ate for breakfast to his political views. He was, in fact, the Richard Petty of bridge.)

Gone, all gone. Shortly, the same will happen to pro football, basketball and even baseball. And why? Because your average straw-cowboy-hat-wearing citizen is beginning to demand that he per-

sonally identify with the sports he enjoys. Widespread defections by pro-football fans were seen last season when immense sums were demanded by first-year rookies as compensation for playing maybe 10 to 15 games a year. The average fan, who was having problems paying for five gallons of no-lead just to drive to the game, began to be bugged. He no longer could identify with people who commanded \$400,000 to sign, \$100,000 a year and full retirement at age 30. When middle linebackers became richer than polo players, the game



### 200-MILE STATION WAGON STEEPLCHASE



certainly drifted away from the masses.

The time has come for a completely new structure of relevant sports. It is no coincidence that the biggest crowds in motorsport these days are drawn regularly by stock-car racing. The day Cale Yarborough switches to a Lamborghini is the day he will go the way of Tommy Hitchcock and Ely Culbertson. Our day, being the age of the total personal ego, demands heroes who are much like we are—good ole boys who blow the doors off Matadors and run bumper to bumper on Route 22, trying to cut off an opposing piece of hog-iron in the first turn.

A TV-producer friend of mine tells me that the Grandma Demolition Derby—a curious sporting event in which certified grandmothers crash cars into smoking hulks in such cultural centers as Islip, Long Island—gets higher ratings on

ABC's *Wide World of Sports* than the America's Cup races or the Wimbledon tennis championships.

This is the wave of the future. By 1990, pro football will be a thing of the past—a few old codgers will show up at the games and mumble to one another about the good old days when legendary giants such as Joe Namath and O.J. Simpson were magic names. Baseball will be as outdated as jousting, another dead sport that at one time had widespread support. Big-time basketball—and it is rapidly going that way already—will have all the validity of the roller derby or six-day bike racing or tag-team Australian mud-wrestling between a pair of midgets and two orangutans.

I submit the following sports for promoters' consideration, each with a built-in identification factor that is irresistible.

They can all be easily organized and with the proper promotion can't help but take off as true folk competitions.

#### 200-MILE STATION WAGON STEEPLECHASE

A race to be run by stock American station wagons of over 3000 pounds, for female drivers 30 and over. Points will be given if the driver equips her vehicle with one or more children under the age of nine. Each additional child will be good for 50 extra points in calculating the winner. One hundred and fifty free points will be awarded to drivers who also carry a dog weighing over 85 pounds, preferably a Newfoundland, Great Dane or Saint Bernard. Additional points will be awarded if the dog is a pregnant German shepherd. All other points to be awarded for speed alone.

#### CAMPER TIME TRIALS

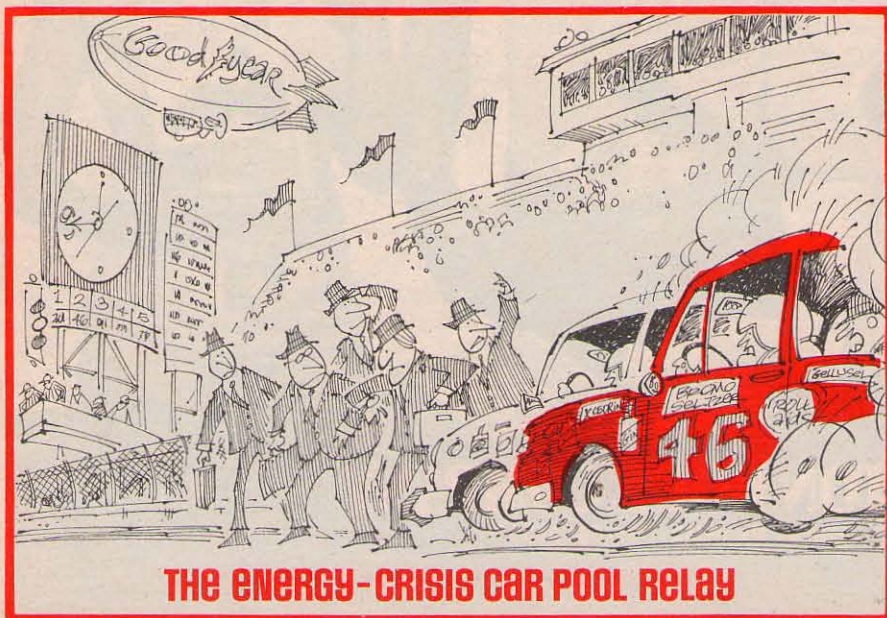
Since it is not uncommon these days to see huge Winnebagos booming along at speeds in excess of 90 mph, it is only natural that these vehicles be put to competition use. Sub-specialty races for Airstreams could also be popular, but the basic Winnebago head-to-head race would be the main event. A 100-mile, flat-out race for a symbolic camp spot at the finish line would be a natural crowd-grabber. The race would not be completed until the participant had actually set up his camper on the site, connected his sewage facilities, plugged in the AC line, run up his TV antenna and had an actual steak broiling on the portable barbeque. Bonus points would be awarded for the quick distribution of prepared garbage and empty Coke cans around the camper. The event would be restricted to families of five or more.

#### THE MYOPIA HANDICAP

With the population of oldsters in our society growing at explosive rates and with advanced medical technology and improving retirement conditions, this could be a really big one. One of the most common sights on today's highways is that of a tiny old person of indeterminate sex, shrunken with age, barely able to see through (certainly not over) the steering wheel, hurtling armored-car fashion along the highway in a 500-hp Eldorado or Imperial. This event could have all the violence, flame and smoke of the Grandma Demolition Derby but with additional aesthetic values. All contestants would be required to produce proof of age certifying that they are at least 75 or over and have a vision acuity

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CAR and DRIVER





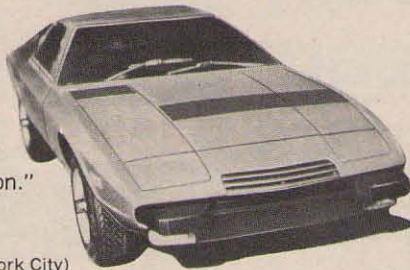
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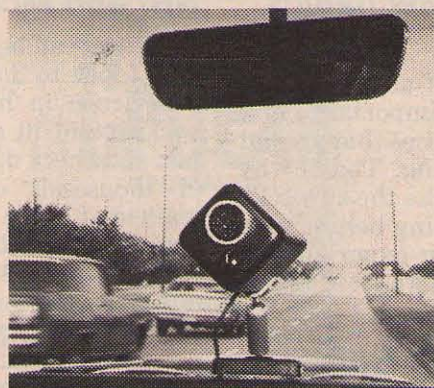
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of no less than 20/800 corrected to no better than 20/500. Those suffering from cataracts would be given favored position on the starting grid. They would be equipped with the vehicles they usually drive in ordinary conditions—the heaviest Cadillacs, Lincolns and Chryslers, brand-new and with a minimum of 400 hp. This would be a gymkhana event in which the contestants would demonstrate their ability to smash grilles in parking, make left-hand turns from right-hand lanes, run stoplights and display a general air of blissful arrogance. This event, driven over a one-mile closed circuit, would cause even Curt Gowdy to become excited. A natural sponsor would be Allstate, with warmup sprints sponsored by Geritol.

### THE ENERGY-CRISIS CAR POOL RELAY

An exciting event run for junior executives all starting from a fixed point on a road course, driving standard middle-range family sedans. The object would be for the driver to hurtle down the track from a standing start and stop at designated points to pick up a junior-executive "passenger" dressed in a standard junior-executive uniform and carrying a briefcase containing important papers. Four such stops would be made along the route, racing against other contestants also performing the same task. The final stretch run for a smashing finish would be toward an area marked in day-glo letters as *The Office*. The entire event would be timed by a huge clock looming over the track with the seconds ticking off as the hand approaches 9:00 a.m. All contestants who arrive at *The Office* late (after 9:00) would be "fired" and barred from further competition. Eventually there would be a single national champion, and the tension as week-after-week eliminations were run would be unbearable.

There are signs everywhere that the old sports are dying, cut off by institutional bias and individual greed from the great mass of fans that made them popular in the first place. The only way to bring the fans back, to earn their devotion, is to give them some sense of identification with the game, some feeling that they too could participate if they had a mind to. What better way is there to do this than to offer up a flock of mothers, kids, camper-nuts, grandmas and junior execs in hot pursuit of immortality behind the wheel of a car?