



IT'S GO TIME
Actor Jason Statham,
photographed in
California, January 2008

**“NOW WOULD BE AN EXCELLENT
TIME TO FASTEN YOUR
SEATBELT...”**

RIDE SHOTGUN WITH DEATH RACE 3000 STAR **JASON STATHAM** ON AN
EXTREME DRIVER'S ED COURSE THAT WILL LOWER YOUR STRESS, PAIN-PROOF
YOUR BACK—AND MAYBE EVEN SAVE YOUR LIFE
BY JOSH DEAN PHOTOGRAPHS BY LIVIA CORONA



The last time Jason Statham was at Willow Springs, a twisty, rolling, serpent of a racetrack deep in Southern California's Mojave Desert, things were a bit less, let's just say, exciting. The English action-film star had been summoned to practice performance driving, in Mini Coopers, for *The Italian Job*, along with his costars, including Mark Wahlberg (who ralphed, perhaps due to a hangover) and Charlize Theron (who, being the lone woman, was given the privilege of piloting the only car that had any pep: a supercharged Mini Cooper S). For the rest of the group, it was "performance driving" in your basic four-cylinder Mini, an experience

roughly analogous, thrillwise, to commuting to work on the interstate.

"It was the most lame thing you could ever imagine," says Statham, stepping out of a trailer into the chill of a January morning. He is slim but solid-looking, showing no outward signs of the "blur of toxins" he says he ingested over the holidays after five alcohol-free months while shooting his next film in Montreal. "They made me put a helmet on. I could windsurf quicker than this thing. I was not a happy man."

"Today," I tell him, "should be a little different."

Willow Springs claims to be the oldest purpose-built road

course in America. Its nine-turn, 2.5-mile road course has sat here on these dusty desert hills since 1953, much of that time under the stewardship of Bill Huth, who is rumored to have won the joint in a poker game. A second, more technical 1.8-mile course known as "the Streets" was added in 1985, and a shifter-kart track followed a bit later. Huth has turned two of his car tracks over to us for the day, but that's not even the best part. The best part would be the Lamborghinis that recently arrived via tractor-trailer: a canary-yellow Gallardo (retail price: \$198,000) and its fearsome big brother, a \$372,200 tangerine-orange Murciélago LP640 (that number,



FANTASY LAND Statham lights up the muted landscape of the Mojave badlands with a pair of Technicolor Lamborghinis.

if you're wondering, refers to horsepower).

Statham sizes up the cars, smiling like a child, which is pretty much what a supercar reduces a man to, even a 37-year-old man who has built his career, in part, on driving. "The thing is, you can feel like sort of an asshole driving one of these cars," he says. "Then you get into it and five minutes later you're like, *I don't give a f--k. This is amazing!*"

Statham is probably most famous for starring as a driver-for-hire in the two *Transporter* films, and from the beginning he urged his producers to let him handle much of the driving. It's a request that now comes with the package. "As much as they'll

let me do," he says. "I've had tons more time in cars in comparison to most other actors. So producers let me do more. Otherwise, I'll start stomping my feet and throwing shit." He says that as a kid he "was always salivating over the nicer cars" and that his love of speed really intensified when he was on Britain's national diving team (he once placed 12th at the world championships) and would race his best friend and teammate back and forth to practice in their Volkswagen GTIs.

"If I could have been one thing as a kid," he says, "it would have been a boxer or a race-car driver, and I think a race-car driver it is. That's the lifestyle. I'm a fanatic about cars."

For *Death Race 3000* (which came out in August), Statham is again behind the wheel, this time as an ex-racer-turned-prisoner who is recruited to take part in a race to the death in heavily modified cars. The winner's prize is freedom. Statham's car is a Shelby Mustang GT500 in name only. The red-and-black car has been thoroughly made over into a sort of rolling assault vehicle, complete with missiles, oil slicks, napalm, ejector seats, and a pair of miniguns that discharge 4,000 rounds a minute. "The kids," he says, "are gonna go ballistic."

His ride in the first two *Transporter* films (the third comes out in November) was a bit more subdued: a black Audi sedan, chosen in part because Statham loves the marque. "The Germans have it right. Their build quality is far superior to anyone else's in the world. Even German nail clippers are just nicer." The first car Statham bought once he had some money was an Audi RS6 wagon, and it's an RS6 sedan that sits in his driveway today. He also

LIFE SUPPORT

PREVENT YOUR DAILY COMMUTE FROM BECOMING A LITERAL PAIN IN THE NECK

Driving, as any professional racer will tell you, is not only mentally taxing but also hard on your body. Like sitting at a desk all day, it's a repetitive pose that causes people to roll their necks and spines forward, promoting inflammation, back pain, and, over the years, a very defeated Dilbert-like posture. Here's how to prevent your drive time from getting the best of you.

SIT CORRECTLY

"The control center for good posture comes from the lower back," says Colin O'Banion, a physical therapist at New York City's Eastside Sports Physical Therapy. "The important thing is to keep a nice curve in the lower back. Most people let it round forward and they end up sitting down on their tailbone, which puts excessive pressure on their disks." If you stay like that for 30 minutes an hour, he says, you'll start to cause muscle tightness and inflammation. Instead, maintain proper spine alignment with a small pillow in the curve of your lower back or, if your car has it, fully inflate the lumbar support.

TRICK OUT YOUR MIRRORS

If using a pillow for support isn't, well, masculine enough for you, try this: Adjust your mirrors so that they automatically put you in the right posture. Get the back of your chair upright, don't recline, and make sure you can reach the steering wheel and pedals without leaning forward.

TAKE BREAKS

Men are notorious for pushing through long hauls at any cost. Instead, they should embrace the fact that their wives are equipped with small bladders, argues Laura Sykes, senior physical therapist at Texas's Baylor Regional Medical Center at Grapevine. "I recommend one 10-minute break every two hours," she says. "It is important to stand and lean backward to gently stretch. This will reverse the forward curve created by sitting."

USE CRUISE CONTROL

Another secret to protecting your back can be found in your auto's onboard electronics. Applying the cruise control for long stretches of highway driving allows you to relax your feet and rest them firmly on the floor, taking pressure off your lower back.

APPLY THE 15-MINUTE RULE

If you've been on a long haul with a car full of things to be unloaded, take it easy when you first arrive at your destination. "I would suggest walking and gentle stretching for 10 to 15 minutes before starting," says Sykes. "It will reduce the chance of back strain." J. D.

him. "They didn't send a babysitter for the cars."

"No one?"

"They just sent them on a truck. It's sort of amazing."

"In a way, I'm quite happy," he says. It's classic English understatement, quickly punctuated with some American hyperbole. "I would probably give you one of my toes to come and do this."

As bold as Jason Statham may be, he's not stupid. He acknowledges the potential

of two 500-plus-horsepower cars placed in the hands of relative—and unsupervised—amateurs and loosed upon a complicated racetrack with off-camber corners and dramatic elevation changes. That potential would be carnage. Which is where Ryan Negri comes in. Negri is president of KRC Racing Schools, on location at Willow Springs, and president of R3 Motorsports, a collection of very rich men who race very expensive cars in a competitive amateur series that tours the globe. Negri is a former professional racer himself and has been squealing around the corners at Willow Springs for more than a decade. He was, coincidentally, also there the day that Statham was training in the Minis. "You helped pay for my house," he says a few minutes after meeting the actor. "Glad I could help," Statham answers.

Negri's first advice to us is to steer clear of the big track, which has corners so difficult that it would take only a minor slipup to turn a \$300,000 car into a pile of scrap metal. He takes us for a hot lap in his Audi S6 wagon that he handles like a Formula 1 car, narrating each corner. Through several, I catch him saying something like, "If

has an Audi S8 sedan.

It just so happens that Audi also now owns the venerable Italian automaker behind the beautiful Technicolor sculptures sitting in front of him on the paddock. And that company, apparently, really trusts us.

"The amazing thing is no one from Lamborghini is here," I tell

you get on the gas way too hard here in too low of a gear, most people end up spinning out. And the bad part about spinning out here is the car usually goes backward...into that brick wall. The hay barrels aren't gonna do anything. It'll destroy the car."

He shows us the quickest way through the course, what drivers call the racing line, and has us both gripping the sides of our seats. The first thing you notice when a professional is driving is that a car is capable of so much more than you think it is. A professional will wait as long as possible to brake, and when he brakes, it is hard—so that the weight of the car is shifted from back to front as quickly as possible; in order to turn the car, the weight needs to be up front. The idea is to go as fast as you can for as long as you can, but, as Negri points out, sometimes that means going slower too. A common amateur mistake is to come into a corner far too fast, and then brake too hard too deep, so that the driver has lost all momentum by the time he's ready to accelerate. When you figure that most race cars are roughly equally quick in a straight line, it makes sense that races are won and lost in the corners.

It's pretty evident that the big course is technical and riddled with hazards and, anyway, Negri says the real fun is to be had on the Streets course, where no section is straight enough to

allow for carnage in the corners, and where the runoff is abundant and the walls nonexistent. "You want to go sideways, right?" he says, a question that Statham hardly needs to answer. For a moment Negri breaks character from "driving instructor" to "guy who just loves thrills" (not that the two are mutually exclusive). "There's all this technical mumbo jumbo, 'apex' this and 'braking points' that. Honestly, the most fun you can have is going sideways. The other track is much more, like, you can throw it around. The speeds are generally slower going into the corners. You feel more like you're driving in the city." Only sideways.

The nice thing about Lamborghinis is that, under the meticulous Teutonic direction of Audi engineers, these once-difficult beasts now double as fairly comfortable street cars. Sure, they are powerful and ornery and require a sort of modified limbo to get inside, but they also have comfortable seats, dependable air-conditioning, and useful tricks such as back-up cameras and a button that raises the nose for driving over curbs. I think of it as an angry Italian race car with a German conscience.

"YOU WANT TO GO SIDWAYS, RIGHT?" A QUESTION THAT STATHAM HARDLY NEEDS TO ANSWER.

Negri suggests to Statham, who is almost salivating by now as he stares at the steering wheel, a plan for getting

accustomed to the track: "Why don't we go out first? I'll drive the car, you sit shotgun. Then we'll flip. I'll sit here and teach you. And then, I think, we'll really have the most fun. I'll jump in one car, you jump in the other, and we'll just do lead-follow. I'll start off medium speed and work up. And if you're ever uncomfortable, just flash the high beams and I'll slow down." As if that's ever going to happen.

Negri says all this casually, while roaring around the big track's final corner; a half-mile straightaway beckons ahead. The wagon is screeching, its tires clinging at the edge of traction, and yet Negri is lightly clutching the wheel and talking calmly. He could just as easily be sitting at a stoplight.

"It's adrenaline, man. It's pure adrenaline," Statham says once we're stopped on pit lane. "Yeah, when you're on the edge it's...it's a lesson, isn't it?"

"When you do it right, it's wonderful," says Negri. "But the problem is, if you lose it, that's..."

Statham grins. "Let's see."

The LP640 is broken. For reasons Negri can only guess—disconnected wheel speed sensor seems to be the most plausible explanation—the car will not advance beyond second gear, so we're left to trade off laps of the Streets in the Gallardo. Poor us.

Negri, however, has an idea for the Murciélago. It would be a shame, after all, for this beautiful machine to just sit idle. "We've got good tires...let's do burnouts!" He'll give Statham a lesson in drifting, or the controlled sliding of the car while moving forward, which is actually now a motor sport in its own right, perfected by Japanese street racers and made famous in a series of manga comics. The idea is to break traction and get the car sliding, but then hold that slide at a particular angle by manipulating the accelerator and the wheel, maintaining just enough traction so that the car doesn't completely spin out.

I head out in the Gallardo for a few laps, leaving behind me an orange streak whirling around in a cloud of tire smoke. Minutes later, I return to see both men standing next to the LP640. A cloud of atomized rubber has yet to dissipate from the air over the skid pad. They're laughing. "This one's done," says Statham, pointing to the back, where the tires are smoking.

THE DEATH-RACE WORKOUT

JASON STATHAM OVERHAULED HIS FITNESS PLAN AND DROPPED 20 POUNDS IN JUST 10 WEEKS. HERE'S HOW HE GOT INTO THE BEST

Action stars don't generally come with extra padding. They're paid to possess the kind of chiseled physique and commitment to fitness that might land other men in Beijing. "In preparation for Death Race 3000, I gave up drinking for five months and got myself down to 7 percent body fat," says actor Jason Statham, who also slashed his calorie intake to just

2,100 a day while training for the futuristic action flick. "Let me tell you, I wanted a f--king medal after that."

His goal was simple: Develop the hardened, sinuous build of a prison-yard bare-knuckler for his new role, and do so in an hour or less a day. "The key for Jason was to focus on some tangible strength and performance goals rather

than training for aesthetics," says Logan Hood, the former Navy SEAL and founder of Epoch Training, in Los Angeles, who trained Statham. In practice, that translated into six weekly workouts that ranged from one-mile tire drags (with a 135-pound truck tire) to gut-busting interval sessions on a rowing machine, as well as the following circuit/

superset workout. Weave it into your weekly routine in place of a normal strength session to supercharge your fitness gains and to build your own action-hero body.

INSTRUCTIONS:

After warming up for 10 minutes on a rowing machine (don't exceed 20 strokes per minute), begin the circuit, moving from one

exercise to the next with only 10 seconds of rest in between. Repeat the circuit four times, going back to the first exercise immediately after completing the last one. Next, rest for three minutes, and then start the superset, moving from one exercise to the next with no rest in between. Repeat five times, resting for 90 seconds between each superset.



SPEED ADDICT
Statham has made a living manhandling dream cars.

“It’s done,” says Negri. “The tire is done.”

And indeed it is. I notice the back right tire is fully shredded, as if someone has taken a cheese slicer to it. It’s also, for the record, smoking.

“You know what, send me the bill,” says Negri, pulling Statham back toward the Gallardo. “I had as much fun as you did. Now c’mon—let me bust your hymen out on the Streets track.”

They start with another hot lap, on which Negri again shows off the driving line. “Holy

shit,” Statham howls. He mocks being pinned to the seat and holds out his hand; it’s shaking. “That is a f--king rush.” And then Statham is turned loose. Out on the course, the car is whipping around corners until it’s not. On the third lap, Statham spins out. When he pulls back into the pit, gravel spills out of the wheels like Rice Krispies being poured from a bowl.

“Control that car,” Negri tells him. “So when it’s sideways, fight it. It’s like being on a wild horse. You either gotta pull

its reins or it’ll toss you into the weeds.”

“You gotta have a lesson,” Statham tells me, noting that just a limited time watching Negri drive improved his own skills exponentially. “You have double the bravery.”

“You know what?” says Negri. “You have it up here.” He points to his head. “You just aren’t thinking it when you’re too focused on being scared.”

Out on the track, I can actually watch Statham’s confidence growing. He is hard on the gas, the brakes, the tires—in other words, he’s driving the Lamborghini the way a performance car should be driven. There’s a reason racing is expensive. When you push a car’s various parts to their limits—limits they are designed to reach—things wear out quickly. Statham plows a little too wildly around a corner and loses the car in a 360-degree spin. He returns, giddy.

Negri has some new advice for him: “Keep the traction control on. Not because you’re not capable—you’re more than capable. But the tires are getting loose, and traction will keep you out of trouble.” What he means is that the rubber on the tires has heated up, making it slippery, and combine that with the residual rubber already on the track, and the loose dirt and gravel, and...well, it’s easy for those of us who don’t have a professional’s feel for the car to lose it. Clearly.

Negri tells me he thinks Statham is a natural and that he has something you can’t teach:

balls. “If he gained one thing today, it’s that you have to be in control. Technique means diddly if you’re not in control. You’re in charge.”

“I’ll tell you something,” says Statham. “With the traction control on, you can’t go wrong. I was hammering it like a motherf--ker! For beginners—which is basically what we are—it’s awesome. You can’t screw up.”

Negri doesn’t entirely agree, but the point is taken. “It does what your foot is supposed to be doing. Now you’re in control. You can get in big trouble without it...as you saw.” Here he’s referring to the two spinouts. “Traction control will give you all the power you can have. The wheels are telling the computer ‘Go...Don’t go...Go...Don’t go!’” The computer, he means, allocates power to the wheels based on the amount of traction. If the back left wheel is slipping, engine power gets directed to the wheels that still have grip. Professional drivers can manipulate car physics in other ways, but even the best pro isn’t as fast acting as a computer.

As Statham disappears for one last lap, Negri is already thinking about the action star’s next lesson, and—perhaps—a new addition to his house.

“I wanna get him out here to do some training. I’ll get him to where he can do his own stunt driving. He’s got the agility and the balls. If he’s gonna be that guy—the driver—he may as well be that guy.”

Because he can. ■

SHAPE OF HIS LIFE...AND HOW YOU CAN TOO

CIRCUIT

Pull-ups
Do two regular pull-ups, hold the third for 15 seconds, and then do two more pull-ups.

Handstand Push-ups
Kick up into a handstand against a wall, touching it with your heels for balance. Lower your head to within a few inches of the floor by bending your elbows, and

then push back up into a handstand. Repeat twice, hold the third rep at the bottom of the move for 15 seconds, then do two more.

Bent-Over Rows
Set up a barbell so that it weighs 30 to 40 percent of your body weight. Do four bent-over rows, hold the fifth for 30 seconds, and then complete four more.

Push-ups
Do four push-ups, hold the fifth at the bottom of the move for 30 seconds, and then do four more push-ups.

SUPERSET
Good Mornings
Stand with your feet shoulder-width apart and your knees slightly bent. Hold a barbell weighing 60 to 70 percent of your body weight

across your shoulders, and then bend forward at the waist until your chest is almost parallel with the floor. Return to the starting position by pushing down with your heels. Do 10 reps.

Back Squats
Stand with your feet hip-width apart and hold a barbell across your shoulders. Keeping your back straight,

bend at the knees and lower your body as far as possible, pause, and then return to the starting position. Do 15 reps.

Deep-Squat Box Jumps
Facing a bench or sturdy box that’s two feet high, perform a deep back squat (no barbell this time), and then jump up, landing on top of the bench. Step off and repeat. Do 20 reps. **TREVOR THIEME**