

BY AIR



ONE

ONE 6,000 LB. BAJA RACE TRUCK @ 110 MPH.



WILD

BY LAND





ONE SKYDIVER FALLING FROM 25,000 FEET.

RACE

WELCOME TO TOP GEAR U.S.
CAN AN AMERICAN VERSION OF THE
GREATEST GEARHEAD SHOW IN
TV HISTORY MATCH ITS SUPERCHARGED
EXPECTATIONS? By Josh Dean



I'm on the passenger side in a truck in the scrubby desert outside the nothing town that is Eloy, Arizona, home to a few truck stops, three prisons, and Skydive Arizona, the world's busiest drop zone. It's monsoon season, the one time of year when the desert's reputation for "dry heat" is foiled by humidity that makes 100°F feel like 120. But where I sit inside this idling, flame-orange Ford, the air is icy cold; open the window and it begins to condense and fog, like a heavy-metal video effect. At the wheel is Tanner Foust, car racer, stuntman, X Games medalist and—as of November—one of three hosts of the biggest, most expensive car show ever to air on American TV: *Top Gear U.S.* Foust is risking dehydration, severe sunburn, and life and limb to race this Ford against one of the world's best skydivers.

If that sentence confuses you, welcome to *Top Gear*, a car show like no other. Based on one of the most successful programs in BBC history, the American version of *Top Gear*, like its British progenitor, will be smart, funny, bizarre, and gonzo. It just won't review cars so much as put them to strange tests. Such as this one.

In a half-hour or so, cloud cover permitting, Foust will race this modified Ford F-150 SVT Raptor against a HALO (high-altitude, low-opening) jumper skydiving from 25,000 feet. First one to the finish—Foust racing five miles on the dry desert ground, the diver falling that same distance from the heavens—wins.

He isn't driving just any Raptor, however. It's a VelociRaptor, a steroidal, aftermarket modified version of a truck that is already factory-tuned by Ford's vaunted Special Vehicle Team. By bolting on new air intakes, new headers, a new exhaust, and reprogramming the truck's software, the Texas-based tuning shop Hennessey Performance—founded and run by John Hennessey, who's on hand today to make sure Foust doesn't trash his truck, Serial No. 1—has boosted the horsepower from 411 to 475. Despite the fact that Ford limits the truck's top speed to 100, Foust has already hit 120 on the pavement and 110 in the sand. And since we have a bit of a lull before the stunt, Foust invites me on board to take the truck for a spin on the off-road course he and the show's producers set up this morning. Already he and the skydiver, Jeff Provenzano, have raced once, and though Foust isn't letting on who won, something about the way he says, "It was super close"—with a hint of frustration—tells me the truck did not prevail.

For a firebreathing monster of an off-road truck, the Raptor seems remarkably peaceful at idle. "Oh, this is quiet," Foust says, then flicks a switch on the dash that activates one of its aftermarket tricks. The truck absolutely roars, like a cigarette boat with loudspeakers mounted on its pipes. The noise causes the show's English director to call it a "redneck Ferrari."

The course starts somewhat tamely—it's a firm desert road of hard-packed, sun-baked sand—but Foust accelerates as he steers the truck into an arroyo, and though you'd never know it from his calm demeanor, I can see him sawing the wheel slightly to keep the truck pointed straight on a "road" that is actually closer to a river of soft sand. Any normal vehicle would be spinning out at this point—my rental SUV would have converted itself into a stationary bicycle with a saguaro cactus

riding shotgun. The VelociRaptor, however, is accelerating.

Foust drifts the truck around a corner and onto a straightaway, where he pounds the gas pedal and points us toward a rise where this road crosses another. I watch the speedometer tick upward past 80, 90, 100 as that rise closes on us, or vice versa. Though a truck has no business moving just this fast over just this terrain, Foust doesn't ease up in the slightest as he crests the rise and the truck catches air, then comes crashing down, landing far more softly than any 6,000-pound vehicle should. Foust laughs. No, scratch that—the sound is some hybrid of celebratory hoot and fiendish cackle. "How good does that feel?" he yells over the engine roar, then answers for me.

"Like high school, right? It's hard to call that work."



Top Gear U.S. hosts Adam Ferrara, Tanner Foust, and Rutledge Wood. Of the three, only Foust is a professional driver.

This is a show for the 99.9 percent of Americans who don't know *Top Gear*," Foust says. "And hopefully those guys who like *Top Gear* will like us, too." Part of the process of Americanizing the world's most beloved car show—350 million viewers watch the BBC version worldwide (it airs on BBC America here in the States), and there are already spinoffs in Russia and Australia—was to choose the right mix of hosts. Sharing the stage with Foust are two guys drafted more for their personalities than their skills at the wheel

(which does not mean those skills won't be tested, regularly). One is Rutledge Wood, a racing analyst and NASCAR junkie plucked from the relative obscurity of the Speed Channel. The other is even more unlikely: Adam Ferrara, a stand-up comic best known for his role as Chief Needles on *Rescue Me*.

Wood spent six years reporting on NASCAR and is still a regular on the Speed Channel. Hailing from Atlanta, he represents the Southern demographic and is the show's resident grease monkey. He just turned 30 and has owned 52 cars, most of them beaters that he tears up for parts to use on his other beaters. "I am still a car hustler," he says. "I like cars so much that I flipped them in college. That's how I paid for school."

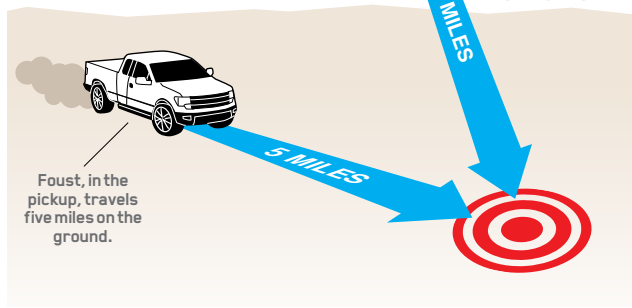
Ferrara is a comedian raised on Long Island who now lives in New York City, "where you have to choose whether you want an apartment or a car." He is a self-proclaimed muscle-car guy and got into cars via his father. "If you wanted to spend time with my dad, you had to go to the garage. My job was to hold the light."

All of them say they've been *Top Gear* fans for years. "It's one of the first shows that didn't take cars super seriously," Foust says. "It just celebrated them." All three hosts are well aware of the skepticism that lurks in the dark corners of Internet message boards for the very idea of an American *Top Gear*. The prevailing sentiment seems to be that it can't possibly be as good as the madcap British version (see highlights, sidebar). "The thought of watching *Top Gear* without British accents may be a tough pill to swallow for some fans," Foust says. "But I think we'll win over the American public."

Top Gear U.S. will air on the History Channel beginning Sunday, November 21, and each hourlong episode will have two to three stunt segments like the one here in Arizona, all of them shot in HD using multiple cameras and often helicopters and chase cars. Other stunts include Foust racing pro skiers down Mam-

DROP ZONE

How the *Top Gear U.S.* crew pitted a Baja truck against a skydiver.



moth Mountain in the Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution; a sequence in which a Cobra gunship races a Dodge Viper through a town in Georgia while attempting to lock the car in its missile sights; and one where Wood and Ferrara are placed in a Toyota Camry that has been converted into a remote-control car. Naturally the controls malfunction, and the two, according to executive producer John Hesling, “were seriously almost killed.”

“The Camry is a boring car,” Ferrara says. “So we thought, What makes this more exciting? We’ll remove the driver and make it remote-control!” So the two men hopped into the backseat and turned the remote over to a producer; all was fine until the remote battery died. The car headed straight for a tree.

“Eventually the car did come to a stop,” Wood says, “but oh, my God.” The fear you see in the footage is legit. “I was real certain we were going to crash into that tree. I think you can tell from the pitch of my voice and the look on my face.”

“The fact is, the adventure and the danger of these stunts are real,” Foust adds.

In a clip of the show that was leaked to the Internet, all three are given different Lamborghinis and asked to drive at top speed on an airstrip in the California desert. Both Ferrara and Foust tease Wood for slowing down too early. “It’s usually like, ‘Rutledge, it’s OK to go a little faster. You’re going to be OK,’” Foust says, to protests from his cohort. “With Adam it’s like, ‘OK, you really need to slow it down.’”

“This is one big childhood dream come true,” says Wood.

“It’s like three idiots with a budget,” Ferrara says.

“Like?” Foust says.

He said he can go up to 200,” Foust says of his skydiving opponent as he buckles in and prepares to take another crack at the race. “Bastard.” Provenzano is wiry with a gaunt face and the relaxed manner of an extreme athlete. His HALO getup is all black, from shoes to helmet, which has a black tinted visor. He wears two thin oxygen tanks on his left side, and his folded-up parachute is alarmingly tiny. With more than 14,000 jumps completed, he’s one of the best skydivers in the world, capable of high altitudes and low openings and the kinds of man-as-bullet flying required to race a 475-horsepower truck across a finish line in the desert.

Because Provenzano has been winning most of the test races—often by just a little—the director asks him to slow down if the two seem to him to be too far apart, so that, for the purpose of drama, they’ll have good footage that shows a close finish. (This is just for detail shots, they assure me; the actual race will be portrayed accurately.) “Tell Tanner,” he answers. “He’s got the horsepower. I’m gravity-powered.”

There’s not much light left for another jump, but from the finish line, the producers decide they want to try anyway. Meanwhile, the gray clouds above thicken and turn black, the winds pick up, and lightning stabs at the desert floor in the distance. Across the desert, Foust waits for the signal. A man from the airport stares at the sky and at the tiny dot falling from the airplane that has just flown over and deposited Provenzano overhead. His job is to estimate the jumper’s height and tell the producers when to unleash Foust. He nods.

“Action, Tanner,” the director says into his radio.

Within seconds the dust cloud behind his truck is in view. The orange dot that is the VelociRaptor grows in size quickly as Foust bounces over the rough terrain. Overhead Provenzano looks to be behind, but when he’s a few hundred feet up, he makes a ridiculously quick turn and plunges to the ground, losing the equivalent of a Manhattan skyscraper’s altitude in seconds, and he lands on the finish line before the truck gets there. Foust flies across the line, wheels around, and slides to a halt. He makes a fist and wallops the dash as Provenzano bundles up his parachute, tucks it under his arm, and walks to the truck.

“I thought you had me,” he says to Foust.

“We all did!” a production assistant says.

“Why don’t you land in the bed next time?” I ask him, mostly as a joke, because it seems crazy to imagine such a thing.

“I could,” the skydiver answers, not joking. “But it would take some practice for Tanner. His truck’s gotta match my speed.”

Foust laughs. “I could do it. No problem.”

THANKS FOR THE ROAD RASH!

Hop on YouTube and peep the craziest car stunts in *Top Gear* (UK) history.



CAR DARTS (SERIES 4)

A highly pressurized cannon launches used cars onto an enormous dartboard at the bottom of a quarry.



TRIP TO AMERICA (SERIES 9)

Top Gear tests the breaking points of Alabama folk, driving through the state with phrases like MAN LOVE RULES OK painted across their beater rides.



EVO VS. ARMED FORCES (SERIES 13)

Host Jeremy Clarkson races the British Army’s latest war vehicles in a modified Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution. Guess what? The Army wins.



POLAR SPECIAL (2007)

The crew takes down gin-and-tonics while navigating a modified Toyota pickup toward the magnetic North Pole, where drinking and driving isn’t exactly illegal.



JAMES VS. VOLCANO (SERIES 15)

About a week before the Icelandic volcano Eyjafjallajökull would make world headlines, cohort James May drives the same pickup right up to its blast zone. He survives, though the truck’s tires don’t.