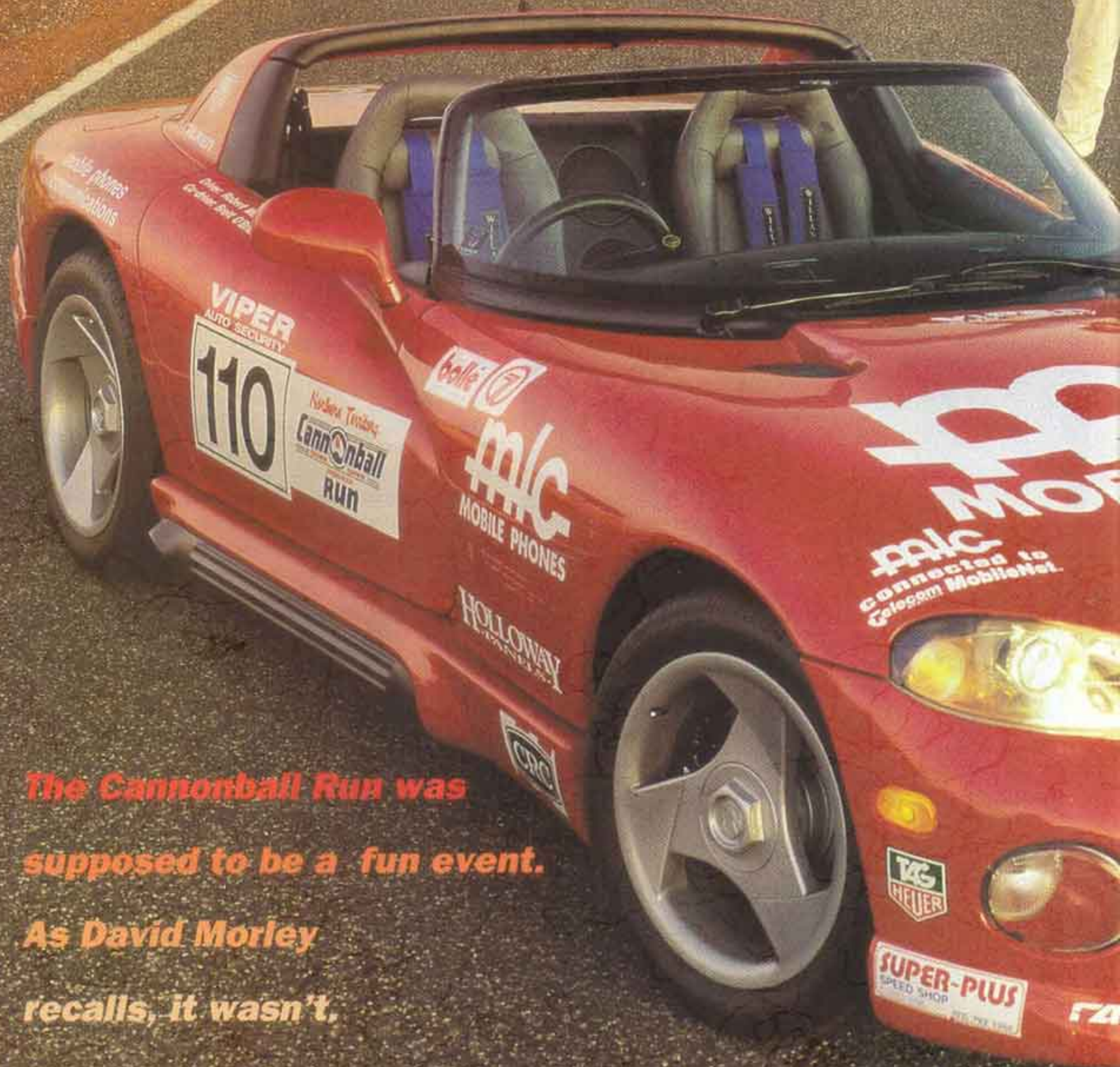


# Cannonball



*The Cannonball Run was supposed to be a fun event. As David Morley recalls, it wasn't.*

PICS BY ANDREW BRITTEN





The Northern Territory Cannonball wasn't even due to start for another hour and here I was; in trouble with Alan Moffat already.

A small matter, really: I hadn't actually been in town long enough to collect my media pass. Or find out exactly where the media centre was. And none of the officials I had asked knew much about the media centre, either. You know, detail stuff. Like where it was.

Oh, I'd talked to quite a few but the results were beginning to produce a disturbing pattern.

"Hi, I'm looking for the media centre."

"Great, you must be from the media?"

"Um, yeah. Do you know where the media centre is?"

"Nup. Sorry."

Eventually, my imagination got the better of me.

"Well, do you know where your backside is?"

"No, not as such."

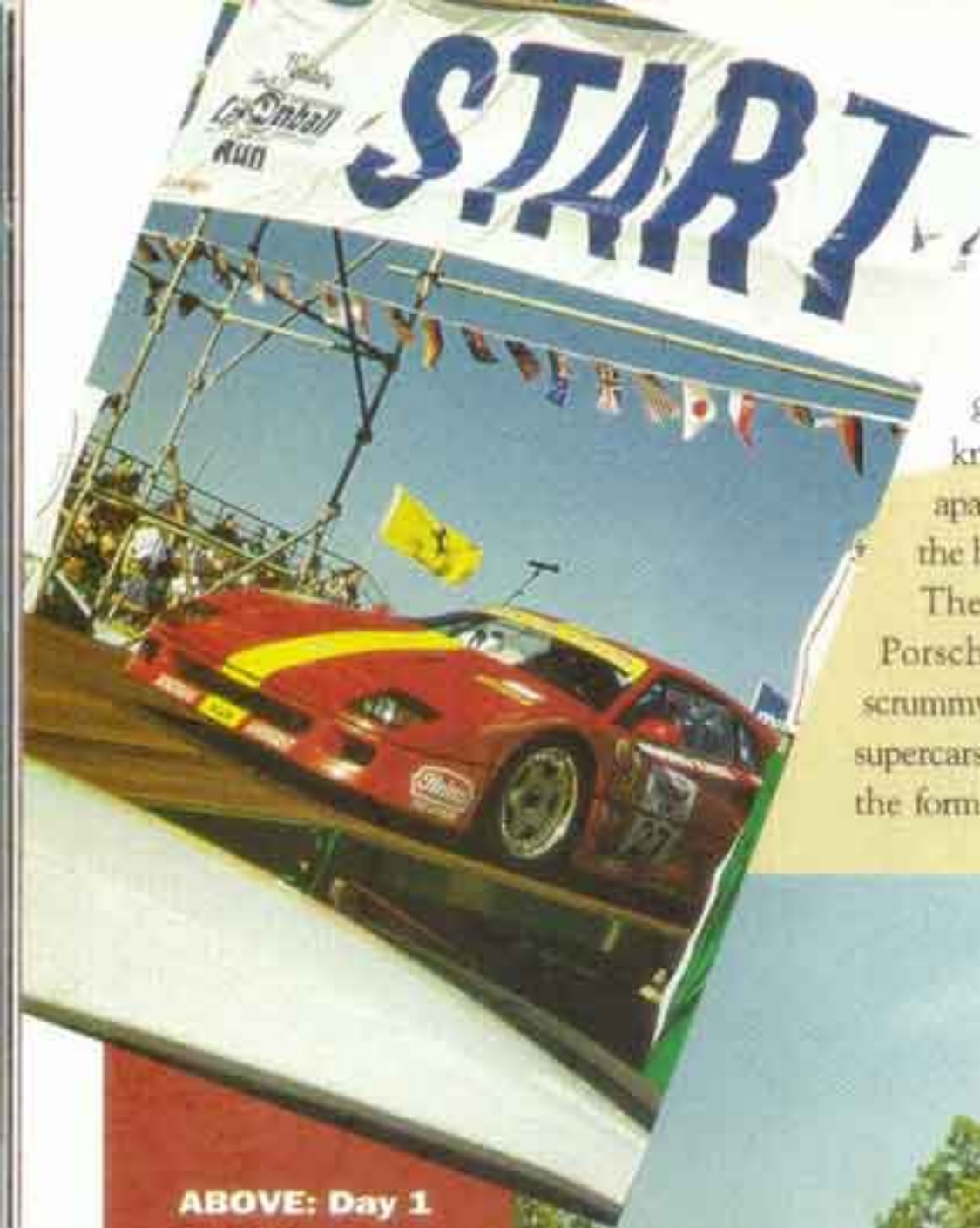
"Well, look, you've got both hands free at the moment, could you have a quick look for it?"

"Tough question. You must be from the media?"

Entertaining as this was, it wasn't getting me any closer to my press pass. So I started collaring the important looking guys.

It was while I was quizzing the Man In Charge that Moff-balls wandered over and started caves-dropping. Then he started shaking his head in my direction and broke into MY conversation to give me a lecture.





**ABOVE: Day 1 and the Cannonball was full of promise for the Japanese crew of the ill-fated F40. RIGHT: Waiting, waiting...**



Apparently, it was entirely remiss of me not to have consulted a physican on the location of the media centre before breaking in at night and stealing my pass. By the time Moff had started prefacing his sentences with "With respect..." I'd glazed over pretty much completely.

I was rescued by the ever-smiling Geoff McVean (race - sorry, *EVENT* - organiser) who told me who to ask next.

By then, however, I'd kind of lost the scent so I wandered back over to the Dodge Viper of Robert Mullholland and Brett O'Brien - two Melbourne enthusiasts who'd entered the Cannonball for the sheer buzz and romance of it all. I mean, what did I need a media pass for? If the officials didn't know where they were, how were they going to know I shouldn't have been there with them?

The Viper you already know about: eight litres; 10 cylinders; no roofs and enough poke to set third fastest time in Friday's speed trials behind a Ferrari F40 and a corn-fed Porsche 930.

Brett, meanwhile, is a driving instructor with a

passion for going quick and the resources to help put the package together. Robert is the guy who actually owns the Viper and a large chunk of computer firm Empire Ridge. He is graciously deferring to Brett's greater knowledge on the business of proceeding apace so he's letting Brett steer for most of the hairier bits.

The rest of the 150-car field consists of Porsches, a smattering of Lamborghinis, a scrummy Maserati Barchetta, plenty of Japanese supercars and not a few home-grown hotties in the form of GT Falcons and swift Commodores.

a time from the top of a ramp. Trouble is, the ramp is so steep, none of the cars can leave at any speed without losing precious bits of bodywork. The spectacle suffers accordingly.

What becomes immediately apparent is that the good folk of Darwin are pretty keen on having a cannonball run start and finish in their town. They line the streets, shoulder to shoulder and eight deep for the first 30km out of town. No, I am not making this up.

They're still hanging in there 60km out of town. Even 200km down the Stuart Highway there are still clumps of cars parked under trees with territorians clutching cameras as the cars zoom by.

# Cannon fodder

Let us not forget a Mini Cooper S and a Mazda RX2. Let us also go figure.

The roads? Well, they're not the dead straight, dead flat ribbons of black you might imagine. There ARE corners (mainly sweepers) and there are plenty of places where you simply can't overtake.

So this is Cannonball, NT-style.

## Day One: Darwin to Katherine

Faithful to the original American cannonballs of a few years ago - or at least the films made about them - the cars leave Darwin wharf, one at

Where do they come from? Beats me, but the address out here is PO Box 0, Nowheresville. You get the impression not much else happens around these parts. Photographer Mutley speculates that the local crim must be doing a hell of a trade today with everybody standing beside the road instead of at home guarding their VCRs. Then again, Mutley was recovering from the shock of ordering a dozen stubbies at a drive-through last night and finding they wouldn't all fit in the boot. Yep, Darwin's that sort of place.

In the meantime, please note the use of the term



"zooming" as applied to the competing cars rather than your actual "hurtling" which, I would have thought, was further up a cannonballer's alley.

The event, you see, is structured so that the competitors need to match a set average speed over many of the sections. Too slow OR too fast will lose points. On the non-competitive sections, the crews can presumably go balls-out but plod is watching and there's no competitive benefit in

The Viper records 220 kay-odd (the speedo's in miles) across the mile with Brett taking things real easy; good enough for a top three finish but well behind the F40's 281km/h.

Now, while the competitors may have enjoyed the spurt down the road, the tourists sure as hell didn't. For a start, they were stopped by cops offering no explana-



when your back was turned. But by hell, that's exactly what I was doing last night. Things can only improve.

It's a biggie today: 1200km and early on, things aren't going exactly swimmingly for some of the teams. Seeing Lamborghinis and Commodores stopped by the highway is nothing new, even before we've reached our arbitrarily selected

morning tea spot. Even so, it's weird to see some Latin masterpiece or other doing the bonnet-up death-dance next to a clump of spinifex and a salt-bush.

Things don't change considerably from there on with a Ferrari 328 catching fire (twice) and a Porsche 930 lunging BOTH back



**RIGHT: At speed on the open road, that's what the Cannonball is about, even if you do get passed by a Joe-Public Corolla doing heaps more kays than you can.**

doing so.

The Cannonball nomenclature is, therefore, a little lost on me.

Of course, even as early as this morning, one of the timed sections was screwed up by a single 60km/h sign (with none at the other end to finish the limited section) and a hovering highway patrol car. Confusion reigned at the next checkpoint. Once again, a pattern was emerging before my very eyes.

About 100km north of Katherine the only sanctioned bit of flat-knacker takes place. For all of a mile. Starting with 60km/h on board, the cars take a single run across 1600m with the highest top speed at the other end scoring the most points. There'll be five flying miles (one a day) over the event. With a \$7500 entry fee, I make that \$1500 a mile.

tion until pressed, and then they had to wait about an hour until the road was briefly reopened. As a special treat, they had Moffat screaming at them because they were too slow clearing the temporary road block in their Land Cruiser Troop Carrier and 40-foot caravan. Great Moments in PR, I think I'd call it. Not.

### Day Two: Katherine to Alice Springs

The memory just won't leave me. If you'd told me at the start of this event that I'd be standing in a paddock in Katherine listening to Normie Rowe sing 'Que Sera, Sera,' I'd probably have done something nasty in your shoe

tyres with expensive looking results.

On the up-side, the Viper is creaming things. The boys are reporting average speeds of between 200 and 230km/h. At 200km/h the Dodge is showing just 2300rpm, so the numbers are credible.

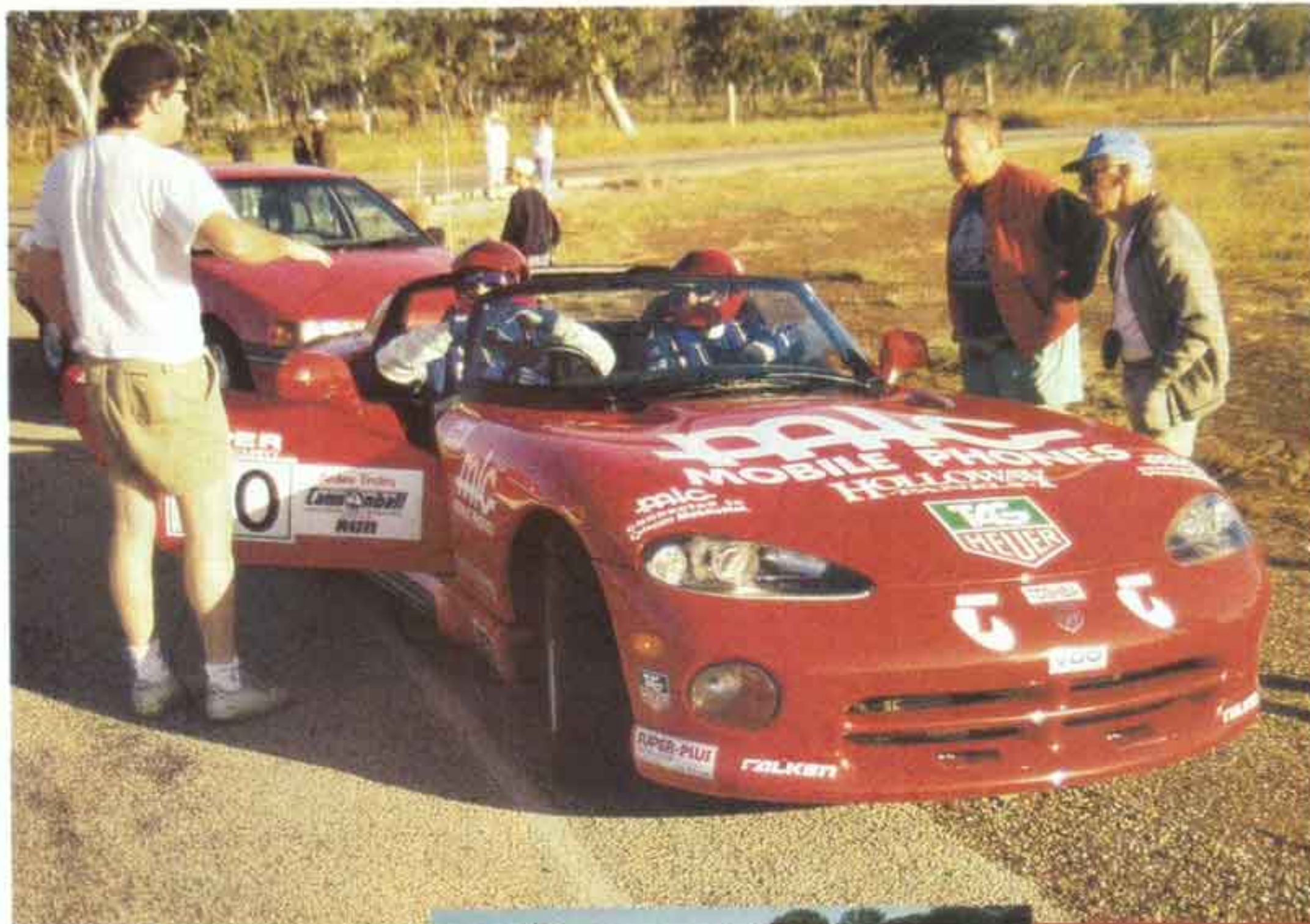
I'm not the first person to notice this, I'm sure, but when you've just driven 1200km through scrub and dingo crap (and I'll gladly include Tennant Creek in that) Alice Springs leaps out of the desert and leaves you rubbing your eyes.

Just out of Alice we overtake the Cooper S, plugging along at a heady 130km/h. You want to talk about a long, deafening, uncomfortable trip? The guy in the Mini will be able to write the book.

In the few places we can pick up any radio stations, the reports on the Cannonball coming in from Our Man On The Scene are just unbelievable. A joke, even. Somebody has obviously forgotten to tell the local radio hacks that the car that's first on the road isn't necessarily the car that's leading the event. In a real Cannonball maybe...but.







**LEFT:** "Know where the media centre is?"...Same to you fella!  
**BELOW:** Allan Moffat farewells the Japanese F40 crew at the Darwin start of the Cannonball.

## Day Three: Alice Springs to Yulara (Ayers Rock for the red-necks)

The Erldunda Roadhouse is, as the name roughly suggests, a nothingburger service station at Erldunda. In fact, the roadhouse IS Erldunda because other than the turn-off from the Stuart Highway to Yulara there exists precisely sod-all else.

An earlier than usual start has put Mutley and I ahead of the field so we can stop at Erldunda and take some pics as the first cars roll in for fuel and, presumably, repairs.

And then the word comes through via the woman running the snack bar. There's been a prang. Two people are dead. We think. The F40 is involved. We think. An official is also hurt. We think.

Jesus H. Christ. What's going on?

We hang out at the roadhouse until the Viper pulls in. Brett and Robert are both doing pretty good zombie impersonations.

Very carefully, I press them for information. What had they seen?

Brett is choosing his words carefully. They're obviously hard to come by. To be honest, nobody is feeling too good about things, but it's still a rumour at this stage. When Brett gets his vocal chords together, it becomes fact.

Apparently the Viper crew arrived on the scene



about three minutes after the Ferrari arrived at the check point way too hot and tried to make the turn off the bitumen on to the gravelled check point. It didn't work, and couldn't have worked. And F40s don't have ABS.

Brett and Robert pulled up and were half out of the car when a cop stopped them. They watched as the driver of the F40 lay on the ground and Moffat himself took to what was left of the Ferrari with a crow-bar, trying to free the Japanese navigator who was, at that stage, still breathing.

Robert pointed to the driver.

"Shouldn't he be in the recovery position," he suggested to the cop.

The cop just shook his head.

"Get back in the car and go," said the cop. "It's



the best thing you can do."

They did, but stopped a few kilometres up the road and waited. Till they stopped shaking.

Now, at Erldunda, less than an hour after the crash, Brett is flitting between shock and reflection.

"Jesus, I was doing 175 miles-an-hour yesterday. That's it for me - I've got too much to lose."

Then: "...I was talking to them (the Japanese crew) this morning. We were going to swap cars for a few miles tomorrow. I've got too much to lose."



# modern

We cruise the last 260km into Yulara. Mutley and I are stopped by a police road block a few metres short of the resort and questioned on where we'd come from today, whether we were part of the Cannonball circus and whether we'd seen anything. They took down our car rego and addresses, too. A witch-hunt already? Hard to say.

On the other hand, the NT elections are due next week and the government, which initially thought the Cannonball was a terrific idea, might have suddenly...well, you can guess the rest.

Back at the resort, it's a media bunfight as everybody tries to find out exactly what happened. By mid-afternoon it's apparent that four people – two of them volunteer marshals – have lost their lives. Mobile phones don't work out here and the resort's lines are clogged with cannonballers phoning home.

Brett and Robert are phoned in their room and asked by plod to attend the local cop shop for a quick Q&A session. The questions were, apparently, the usual stuff and despite being the third or fourth car on the scene, the lads don't think they've been much help.

As part of the theatrics, the cops produce the Japanese crew's blood-stained route notes. Brett returns looking a little pale.

About six o'clock and a cardboard cut-out looking Moffat appears to tell the assembled throng that the event will go ahead. Some changes may be made, including a speed limit on the competing cars. There's also the very real possibility that the cops – who up until now have vowed to book anyone doing, and I quote: "61 in a 60 zone" – might start to get heavy.

I'm still damned if I



after when they'd been overtaken by tourists unencumbered by enormous driving skills, a quarter of a mill's worth of car and a Cannonball-issue driving suit.

really know what terrible things happened at 9.30 this morning, 100km south of Alice Springs. I do know that four people are dead.

Well may you ask: What more do I need to know?

## Days Four, Five and Six: Here to Eternity

That was where the Cannonball ended for me I'm afraid. And I wasn't the only one.

A few competitors decided enough was enough and quietly taped over the competition numbers and politely told the Cannonball to go and get stuffed. Fear can do that.

Then there were some who realised that pulling out of the event would relieve them of the responsibility to stick to the 180km/h speed limit. So they did; some on the lay-day, some the day

Brett and Robert, keen to make the best of a bad situation, elect to carry on but publicly announced the day before that if the event had been stopped in its tracks, they weren't going to argue.

The record will show that Sydneysider Conrad won the event in a Porsche 930 but the public's (and possibly my own) recollections will doubtless consist of some television footage of a pummelled Ferrari and a general sense of the stupidity of it all.

Will the event ever happen again? Moffat – who wept real tears as the cars rolled back into Darwin at the end of the event – was quoted as saying he'll do it all again. I doubt it. If there is some kind of event, it won't be run along even remotely similar lines. And you can bet your bobby it won't be called a Cannonball. Just like I won't be standing in any more paddocks listening to Normie Rowe (although anyone who slugs Ron Casey can't be all bad) singing Doris Day covers.

And I never did get my media pass.



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