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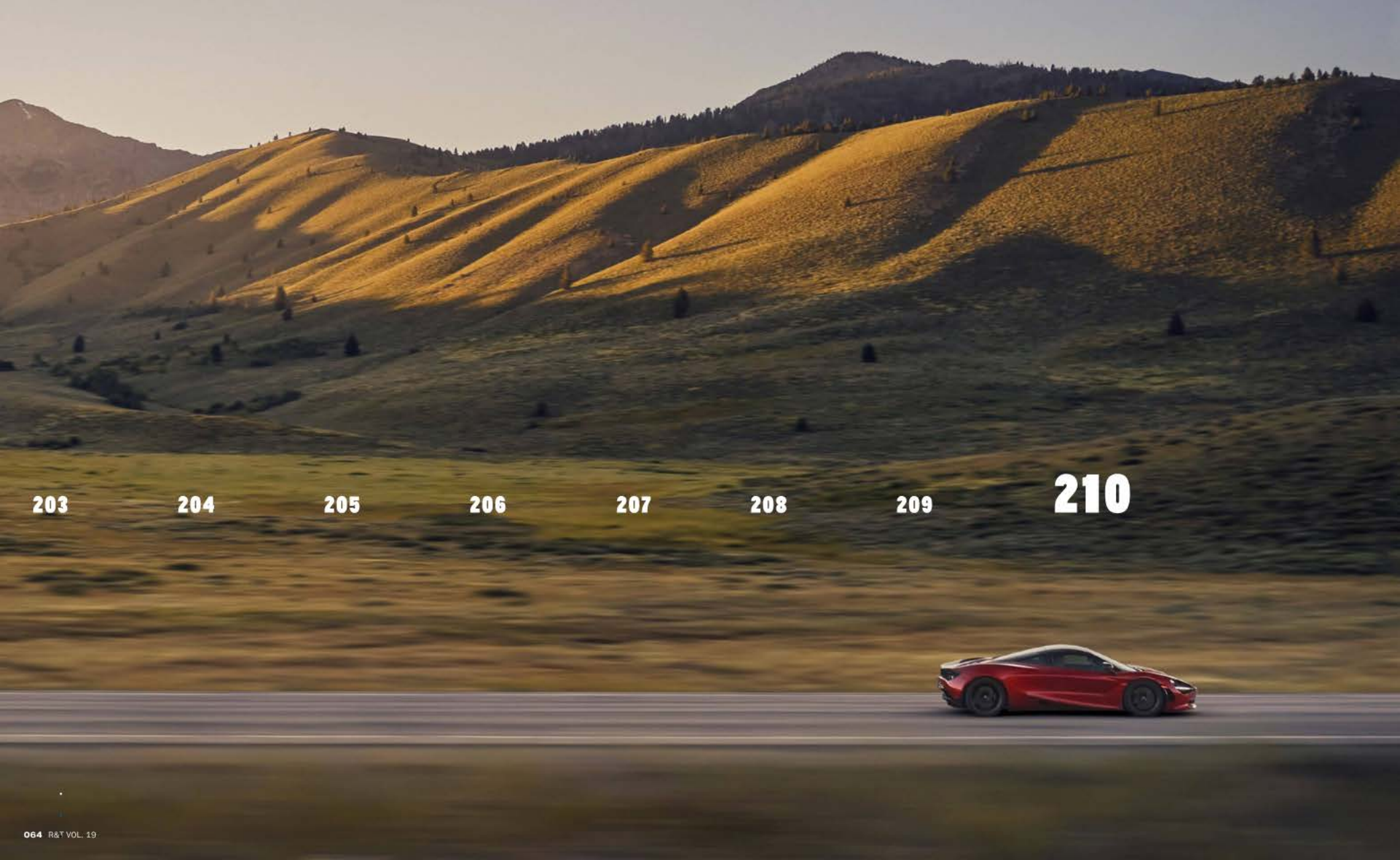
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THE SUN VALLEY TOUR DE FORCE PROVIDES THE LOCATION FOR CHASING A LARGELY POINTLESS AND ENORMOUSLY GRATIFYING NUMBER.

BY DANIEL PUND

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GREG PAJO

Here's the secret of driving very fast: It's really easy.

All you need to do is reappropriate all your trust. Do not trust your instruments. At least don't trust your speedometer (reserve some faith in your temperature gauge). Speedometers are always wrong. Always. Renounce trust in yourself too. Do not trust your reactions. At 200 mph, you are covering nearly 300 feet every second. Your reactions will always be in response to something that happened at least a quarter-mile back.

Your eyesight will fail you too. Your peripheral vision goes lights out at high speed. Now you're in a tunnel. There's a glaring spotlight firing stimulation into the center of your vision, though. Oh, and your brain; definitely don't trust that thing. That tangle of dendrites evolved at a time when hominids could travel only as fast as their dirty legs could carry them. If your brain isn't fed reference information in the form of nearby stationary objects, it becomes confused. And then it lies to you. Things appear to slow down as your noodle struggles to compensate for the unusual state in which it finds itself.

Reinvest all of that trust in your car. Yes, that mechanical thing that sometimes fails. And if it's a car capable of 200-plus mph, it probably fails much more frequently than the average Honda CR-V. Trust that the aerodynamicists did their job in balancing lift versus drag. Trust that the engineers, parts makers, and assembly workers did their jobs properly. But put all of that out of your head, lest you find yourself death-gripping the

steering wheel at 200 mph. You want light hands on the wheel. You want to let it write in your hands as it reacts to inputs from the front wheels.

Oh, and you did check your tires, right?

Good thing for me that an amiable McLaren tech named Joseph Moore has examined the tires of the 720S I'll be driving and added about 6 psi to each (up to 39 psi). At 200 mph, the friction of a tire on tarmac generates enormous heat. Generate too much, and the rubber comes apart in spectacular and catastrophic fashion. Increased pressure helps keep the heat in check.

Moore also checked the general fitness of the car, so I had enough faith not to dwell on its condition. That's good, because I'd flown about 1900 miles to Sun Valley, Idaho, to drive on a closed two-lane public road at better than 200 mph. It does occur to me immediately before the first of my two top-speed runs that I didn't actually witness these vehicle checks. But hey, you buy the ticket, you take the ride.

AN ACKNOWLEDGMENT: Outside of the Bonneville Salt Flats, the Black Rock Desert, and the Ehra-Lessien test facility, automotive top speed is a pretty pointless measure. Top speed is the stuff of bench racing. My unscientific survey says precious few supercar drivers have ever come anywhere close to unleashing the maximum capabilities of their precious carbon-fiber missiles. It's just a number.

But judging by the past decade's pitched battle for fastest-production-car record, which the Bugatti Chiron Super Sport finally pushed beyond



A



B

- A. In the maelstrom of a top-speed run, vision is compromised.
- B. The majority of the Highway 75 course is arrow straight and downhill. Speed comes easily here.



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300 mph, numbers matter a great deal. One might reasonably ask why. What exactly is the point of it all? Where would an owner ever use such speed?

Driving on a public road at half the terminal velocity of the 720S could result in, at the very least, a reckless-driving charge and possibly arrest and vehicle seizure. And most racetracks don't have straights anywhere near long enough to top out such a machine.

So, again, where would you ever achieve top speed? The answer is simpler than it might seem.

The location is a portion of Idaho State Highway 75 about 10 miles north of the town of Ketchum. The stretch, called Phantom Hill, is within a 10-minute drive of Arnold Schwarzenegger's 18,000-square-foot vacation home, Ernest Hemingway's grave, and some of America's best skiing. For one summer day each year, drivers have four miles of closed highway nestled in the Sawtooth Mountains to finally unleash all of that speed.

I PACE NERVOUSLY in a lay-by off Highway 75, set up as a paddock by the organizers of the Sun Valley Tour de Force event. It's early, and the air

is cool and clear. I'll be in the second group of cars to run, and I'm unsure of when I should be getting into my 720S to prepare. Mostly I just watch cars from the first group slowing at the end of their runs and pulling into the lay-by, which is crowded with exotic cars, a large tent, and a couple of port-a-potties.

A cheer goes up from the small crowd huddled in front of a large screen. I hear "Yay, Alex!" Curious, I have a peek, and there it is: Someone named Alex Hainer has gone 218.8 mph in a... let's see... a McLaren 720S. Wow. It's not until I'm in the car heading to the starting line that I think, "Wait a second. A 720S can't do 218 mph." The company lists a top speed of 212 mph.

After my first run, I have another break in the paddock. I ask someone to point me to Alex. Alex turns out to be Alexandra, a 25-year-old woman who is here with her parents, Anders and Julie. They've brought a Porsche 911 Turbo S and the McLaren 720S, and they're all taking turns driving them. Neither parent can match Alex's speed. In fact, no one can. She has driven so fast that a large rectangular piece of the silver McLaren

undertray has been sucked off and left on the course. Sitting under the tent chatting, she looks comfortable, like a kid at a family reunion.

And, in a way, she is. This is the California native's third year running in the Sun Valley Tour de Force, and she's been around race cars for most of her life. Her father, who grew up in Sweden, was a champion downhill skier, a successful businessman, and, for a while, a race-car driver in SCCA and Grand-Am production-based classes. Oh, he was also once a Chippendales dancer. The bone structure on this family is ridiculous.

A photographer who races a Porsche 991.2 GT3 Cup car in Porsche Owners Club events, Alex is quick to offer that the family's McLaren has benefited from an ECU tune that gives another 100 hp on race fuel. I start feeling better about my initial 210.2-mph run.

There is a more collegial feel to this event than I've ever experienced in the presence of so many supercars. There is none of the bravado, arrogance, or distilled douchebaggery that often accompanies such gatherings. This is by design, according to the event's originator, Dave Stone,

who came up with the idea of running a high-speed event on the spot back in 2008. The animated Stone is an enthusiast with broad tastes, driving both his Singer-reimagined Porsche 911 (169.9 mph) and his 1981 VW Pickup (111.7 mph) in this year's event. He made it clear that participants who act like jerks or are stingy about donations to the Sun Valley Tour de Force's chosen charitable organization, the Hunger Coalition, are not welcomed back.

The event has been sold out for the past few years with a lengthy waiting list, so the organizers can be choosy. The \$1 million raised through donations and sponsorship this year is nearly twice last year's total. The charity component goes some way toward assuaging locals inconvenienced by the periodic closure of their main thoroughfare. To well-heeled participants, the \$2950-per-run cost seems trivial, certainly since it comes with a scenic drive event and various other gatherings over three days.

But that drive and the receptions are just window dressing around the main event, Saturday morning's speed runs.

A/C OFF. Powertrain in Track mode to lock out the overdrive seventh gear; the 720S is faster in sixth. Chassis in Comfort mode to soak up the bumps. "Don't lift. Don't lift. Do. Not. Lift." It's all I can think as I sit at the starting line, readying myself for my second and final run. On my first run, I eased off the throttle as I fired the McLaren into the off-camber curve near the beginning of the course. I didn't realize that experienced participants were taking the hill/curve flat out.

This time I don't lift. The McLaren stays planted, climbing the left-hand bend at full acceleration. As the bend straightens out and I enter the downhill section, I know it's all straight from here to the finish pylons about two miles up the road. I might still be cursing myself for hesitating on the first run, but I know this time is as good as it's going to get.

I don't even have to remind myself to lighten my grip on the wheel. I know the bumps that are coming about a half-mile from the finish. I know it will feel like a seismic event, but if I don't react to it, the car will just barrel straight through. I'm prepared for the partial loss of vision, muffled

sounds, and jostling that make me feel like the fetus of a particularly active mother.

I'm comfortable enough to actually glance at the speedometer readout for the first time. It says 211 mph, and I've still got about a half-mile to go. I recall saying, "I am become Speed!" (GoPro footage indicates I said it only within the confines of my head.) I vow to keep the pedal pinned right through the finish pylons this time. That should be good for a tenth of an mph, maybe several. I will collect all the tenths.

I hadn't expected a hero's welcome in the lay-by. After all, I'd only kept a pedal pushed for a few miles without doing anything catastrophically stupid. But maybe I'd get an "Attaboy!" I nonchalantly walk over to the big screen, just to have a look at what I know will be my big number.

As it turns out, I had managed only a feeble 205.9 mph. This sunny July day was toasting up. And the morning's light tailwind had turned into a headwind. Speeds were falling across the board. Speed is such a fickle bitch. But hey, it's just a number, right? Pointless.

Still, 212 mph would have been nice. **E**



A. Phantom Hill, the place to finally unleash all of that pent-up speed.
B. Alex Hainer's 218.8-mph run in the family's modified McLaren 720S was the fastest of the 2023 event.
C. It was the local police who suggested, more than a decade ago, that the speed runs be a charitable event.
D. The seven highest-speed runs of the year all were posted by McLaren 720Ss.
E. The audio in my head before my second run: "Don't lift. Don't lift. Do. Not. Lift."