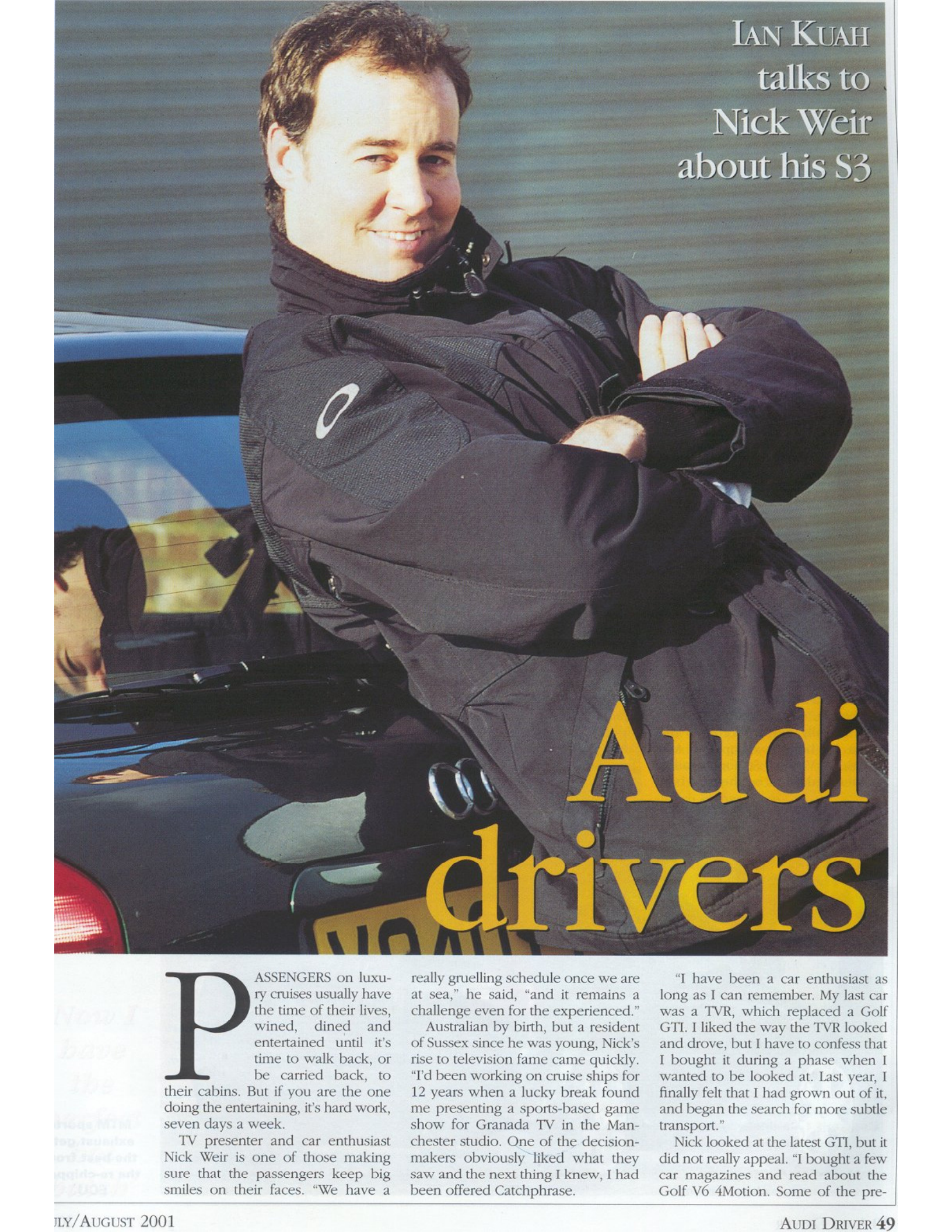


A man with dark hair, smiling, is leaning against the hood of a dark-colored car. He is wearing a dark racing suit with a white circular logo on the chest. His arms are crossed over his chest. The background is a blurred outdoor setting.

IAN KUAH
talks to
Nick Weir
about his S3

Audi drivers

PASSENGERS on luxury cruises usually have the time of their lives, wined, dined and entertained until it's time to walk back, or be carried back, to their cabins. But if you are the one doing the entertaining, it's hard work, seven days a week.

TV presenter and car enthusiast Nick Weir is one of those making sure that the passengers keep big smiles on their faces. "We have a

really gruelling schedule once we are at sea," he said, "and it remains a challenge even for the experienced."

Australian by birth, but a resident of Sussex since he was young, Nick's rise to television fame came quickly. "I'd been working on cruise ships for 12 years when a lucky break found me presenting a sports-based game show for Granada TV in the Manchester studio. One of the decision-makers obviously liked what they saw and the next thing I knew, I had been offered Catchphrase.

"I have been a car enthusiast as long as I can remember. My last car was a TVR, which replaced a Golf GTI. I liked the way the TVR looked and drove, but I have to confess that I bought it during a phase when I wanted to be looked at. Last year, I finally felt that I had grown out of it, and began the search for more subtle transport."

Nick looked at the latest GTI, but it did not really appeal. "I bought a few car magazines and read about the Golf V6 4Motion. Some of the pre-

UK launch tests compared it to the Audi S3, which made me curious to find out more about the Audi, especially as it always won the comparison tests.

"I went to my local dealer, Caffyns of Brighton, and asked for more information. The upshot of this was that I put my name down for one of the first cars in the UK, which had been earmarked as Caffyns' demonstrator. I was particularly impressed with the dealership because the staff didn't recognise me from Adam yet bent over backwards to help.

"It was very unusual for me to buy a car without having driven it, but when I took delivery in December 1999, I immediately knew I had made the right choice. The build quality was superb, and I liked the understated luxury feel."

Another plus was the substantial headroom. "The S3 has more headroom than my old GTI," said Nick, who, at 6ft. 6in., struggles even to get into a TT.

There was a catch. As much as Nick liked the car and the way it was built, the driving experience did not come up to expectations. "The power was too smooth and rather flat," he explained. "After the instant push in the back of the TVR, I was expecting a similar sensation as the Audi seemed almost as quick on paper. But even though the car was rapid against the stopwatch, it felt very clinical and detached from the road. Although I did not want a car as involving as the TVR, I expected more sensation."

Nick had never owned a modified car before, so the world of tuning was a totally new concept for him when he bought a copy of AUDI DRIVER at Victoria Station. Reading about tuned Audis on the train back

to Brighton, he made a note of the advertisements and picked up the phone the next day. "The first company I spoke to did not leave a good impression," said Nick. "The voice at the other end of the phone sounded neither friendly nor knowledgeable.

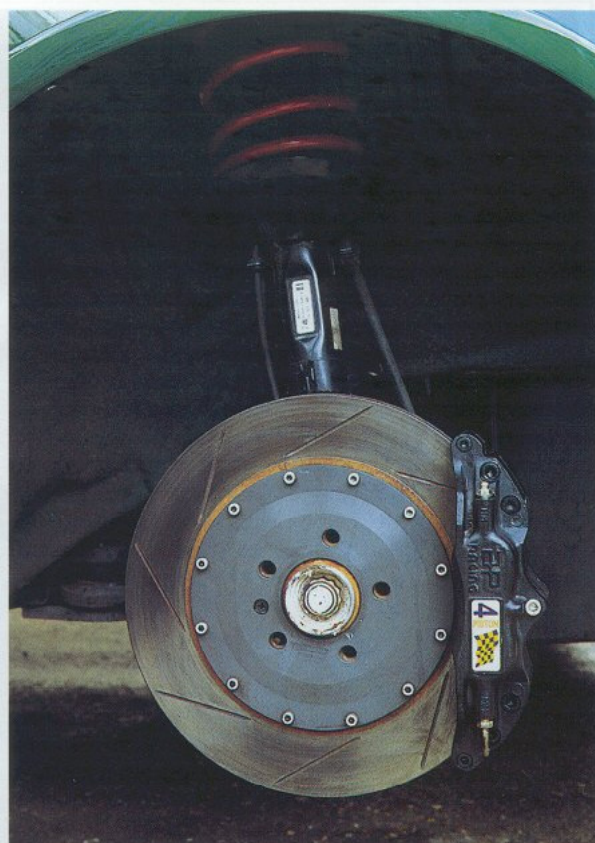
"The second number I called was Kim Collins. His enthusiasm and knowledge quickly won me over, and the bonus was that his premises were just a few miles up the road in Haywards Heath."

Nick did not know anything about chip tuning, and his biggest problem was the concept of how something so small could make so much difference, and why it cost so much. Kim explained all this, and Nick rolled up a week later to have the MTM chip upgrade installed.

The S3 uses the same twin-inter-cooled engine as its 225bhp TT cousin but its ECU is dialled in to produce 15bhp less. With the basic material already there, all MTM has to do is re-map the ECU and a much more interesting 255bhp appears.

In the overall scheme of things, the extra 45bhp which arrives at 5,990rpm is a moot point. It is the extra torque which makes the difference. The standard engine develops 199lb.ft (270Nm) between 2,100 and 5,000rpm, but the new Motronic box ups that to a whopping 266lb.ft (360Nm) between 2,260 and 5,500rpm. That is as much torque as the latest 911 Carrera, but over a wider band.

MTM knows that this level of power and torque is difficult to deploy in a front-wheel-drive car, so for the non-quattro variants, the programme includes an additional algorithm which reduces torque by 50 and 25 per cent respectively in the first two gears, saving the clutch, driveshafts and tyres.



AP four-piston brakes cope with the extra performance

No such worries arise with the 4WD S3. Audi uses a heavy duty 240mm clutch on the S3 and this is up to the extra grunt of the MTM/Quattro Sports S3, providing you do not abuse the car.

Apart from sheer straight-line speed, the effect of the uprated engine on the driving experience is quite dramatic, as we found out first hand. Nail the throttle on the move and the swift reply is an aggressive rush of torque, as if the fuel/air mixture has woken up and discovered it is seriously late for a hot date.

"I was more than pleased with the result," said Nick. "It has completely



MTM sports exhaust gets the best from the re-chipped ECU.



Nick Weir's S3 now has more torque and power, better handling and better brakes.

changed the character of the car, giving it real sparkle. It feels different altogether, and goes like a scalded cat, with a lot more character thrown in. It is the best £1,000 I have ever spent!"

The conversion was not perfect, though. In everyday driving, the throttle was too sensitive, especially on the motorway. "I called Kim again and he explained that MTM had developed the chip to work in conjunction with a sports exhaust." Forced aspirated engines are very sensitive to back pressure, and the sports exhaust removes a lot which is inherent in the standard exhaust system. "At this point, I wasn't actually looking for more power, but rather a smoother drive. I agreed to the MTM exhaust, with freer flowing front and rear silencers, and everything was sweetness and light again."

By now the tuning bug had bitten deep. The standard S3 rolls a bit too much in corners, partly because of its standard ride height. Nick had heard about a modified Audi TT with a similar engine conversion and a suspension upgrade as well. A discussion with Kim Collins about 20mm lower



springs to sharpen things up led to their installation and a marked improvement in handling and poise through the bends.

"There was a slight compromise in ride quality, but that is something I don't mind," said Nick. "Now that I had power, smoothness, character, sharper steering and better handling, I began to question the efficiency of the standard brakes. Although I am not a really hard driver, I felt that they could be improved, so Kim and I had another one of our chats."

Kim recommended either Brembo or AP Racing four-pot calipers and vented discs. In the end, the AP Racing option was chosen, partly because Nick felt their black-painted

calipers were more subtle. The improvement in pedal feel and real world stopping power was worth the money, and now acceleration, cornering and braking are as balanced as on the standard car, just on a much higher plane.

"Now I have the perfect hot hatch," Nick said. "It has cost me a lot of money, especially at UK prices, but that sort of crept up on me. At the end of the day, I am really happy with the car and that is what counts. Any sacrifices, like a bit of ride comfort, have been far outweighed by the overall improvements. But I'm definitely stopping here, as any more changes might upset the fine balance we have achieved."

While we were at Quattro Sports, an unmodified red S3 turned up, its owner interested in having the same modifications. Nick asked if he could go round the block with its owner just to remind himself what it was like before the mods were done. "Two roundabouts and six corners was all it took for the standard suspension to make me feel ill," said Nick. "There is no way I could go back now." 

'Now I have the perfect hot hatch'