



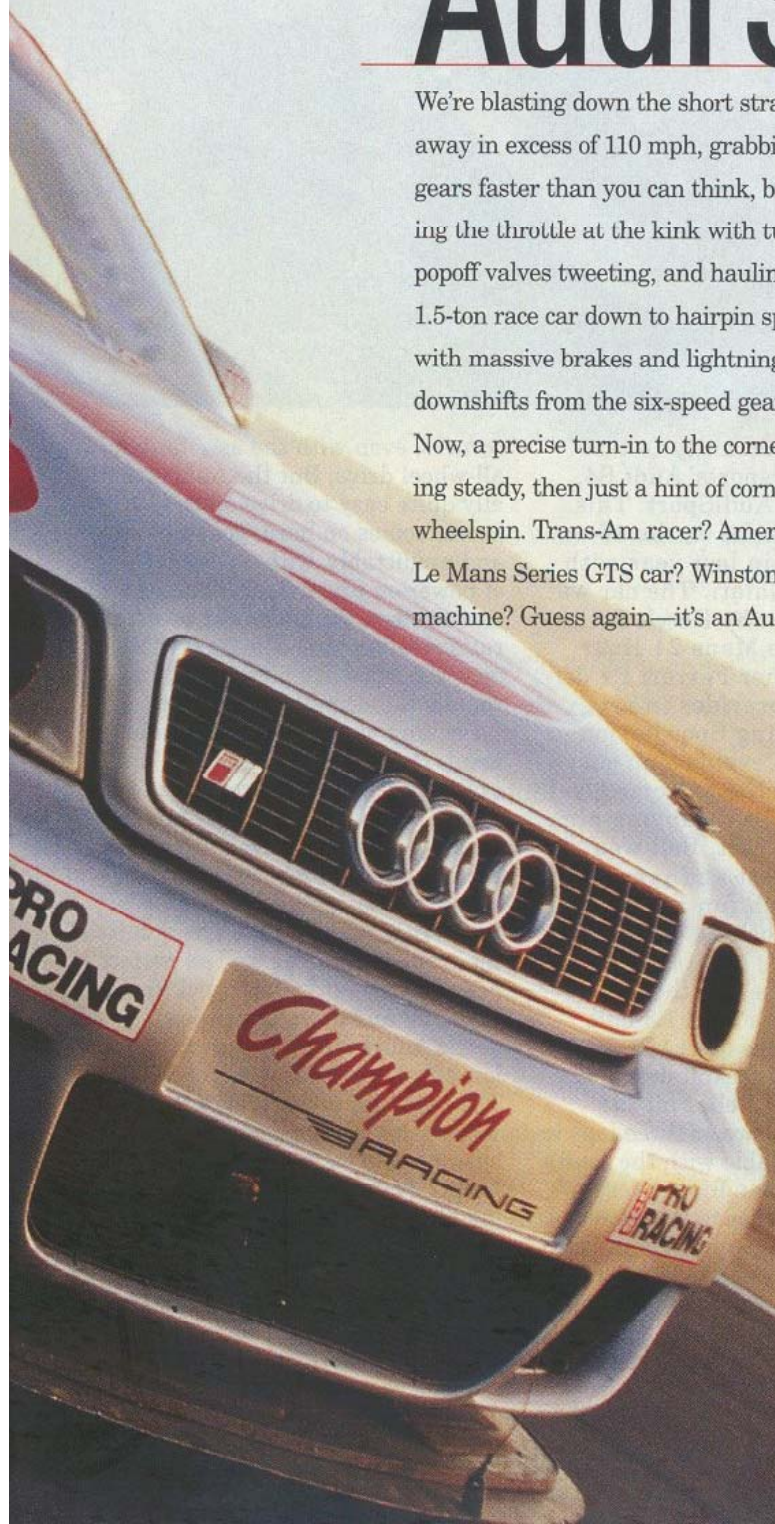
We Race... **Speedvision** World Challenge **Audi S4**

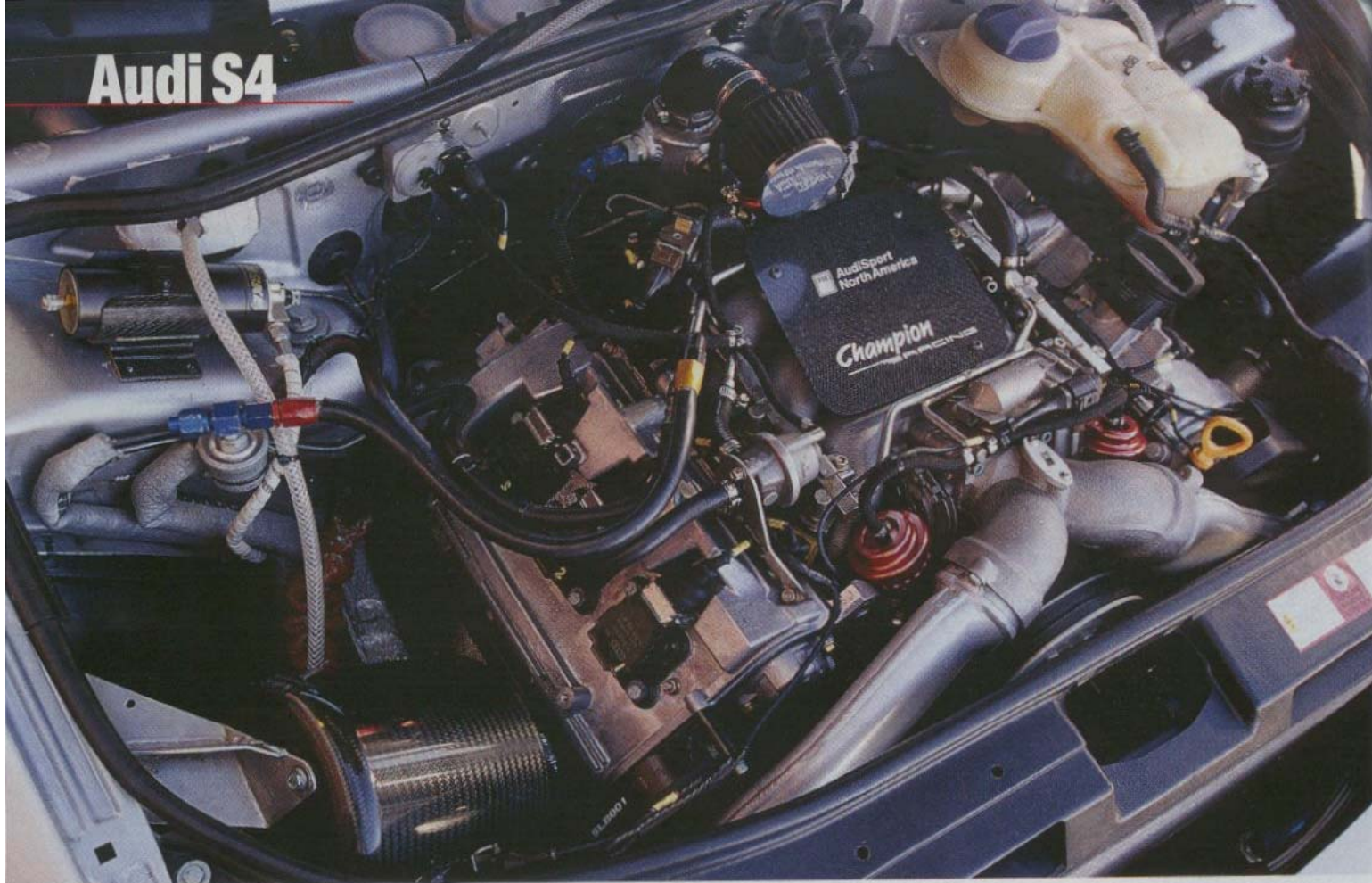
Trans-Am racer? Winston Cup car? Guess again
by Don Alexander
photography by Wes Allison

We're blasting down the short straight-away in excess of 110 mph, grabbing gears faster than you can think, breathing the throttle at the kink with turbo popoff valves tweeting, and hauling the 1.5-ton race car down to hairpin speeds with massive brakes and lightning-fast downshifts from the six-speed gearbox. Now, a precise turn-in to the corner, holding steady, then just a hint of corner exit wheelspin. Trans-Am racer? American Le Mans Series GTS car? Winston Cup machine? Guess again—it's an Audi.

We're talking a real Audi here, not some tube-framed carbon-fiber bodied silhouette racer where the only stock part on the whole car is the air-cleaner stud. In fact, you can walk into your local dealership, plunk down some cash (well, a lot of cash) and—eventually—go home with a 420-hp ready-to-race championship contender.

Some 50 years ago, this is the way you went NASCAR racing. And 35 years ago, Trans-Am race cars stemmed from actual Mustangs and Camaros that rolled off





■ SWC Audi S4: Just your average 420-hp 180-mph sedan.

a factory assembly line. Today, these race series consist of tube-frame lookalike cars purpose-built for racing. Nothing wrong with that, but they have little to no relationship with any street car out there.

One of the few places you can find serious racing with cars that started life intended for the streets, highways, and autobahns of the world is the Sports Car Club of America Speedvision World Challenge. SWC reaches out to a certain type of racing enthusiast, not unlike those who enjoy the British Touring Car Championship series, with rules allowing major manufacturers to compete on a nearly level playing field. The series offers exceptional competition among a wide range of makes and models. At the 2000-season-ending Speedvision event in San Diego, California, six different makes of cars occupied the top-10 grid positions in the GT class with even more makes represented in the Touring car field. Door-banging fender-crunching action dominates these races.

We had an opportunity to test Champion Motorsports' Audi S4, which is sold by AudiSport. This team finished second in the 10-race championship last year with driver Michael Galati. The car we tested was driven by Derek Bell, winner of five Le Mans 24-Hour classics and former Ferrari F1 driver. Derek also provides in-car commentary during Speedvision World Challenge events—no easy task considering the extreme level of action otherwise occupying him. The ever-affable Brit, Bell was present for our test and proved to be almost as much fun as the car. We also had a stock S4 on hand for a comparison.

Our chosen venue was the Streets of Willow Springs, a tight 1.3-mile road course *MT* uses quite often. After squeezing into the cockpit designed for the more svelte Bell, I hit the track. It took only two or three laps to feel really comfortable with the Audi's performance and handling. Everything from the brakes to the power application is linear and smooth, and the controls are a snap to learn and use. I was able to get close to Derek's times within a few laps—in short, a well-balanced, "no surprises" race car.

With a serious 420 hp on tap from the race-prepped 2.7L twin-turbo V-6, I expected a harsher feel upon exiting

corners, even with the assistance of all-wheel drive. But the Audi is actually quite easy to drive off the turns. Power comes on hard, yet smoothly and predictably, with no sudden surge of power-on understeer-inducing torque steer. With a power-to-weight ratio rivaling that of a Ferrari Modena, you know it's plenty fast and sounds wonderfully aggressive.

Braking was another easy adjustment. Perfect bias, linear feel, and excellent feedback all combine to give a high degree of confidence under braking—a good thing, since velocity accumulates quickly. Shifting the stock-ratio six-speed box is a no-brainer, as it should be. The quality of the transmission, as well as perfect pedal placement, allow quick smooth shifts up and down the ratios.

The Audi's steering is precise, with low effort, yet high levels of feedback. The only hint of understeer comes when attempting to carry too much braking into a slow turn; the slightest hint of oversteer shows up when lifting abruptly off the throttle in mid-turn. A beautifully crafted rollcage and reinforced chassis add a high degree of rigidity, which translates into precise response to driver control inputs. The platform feels nearly as responsive as a tube-frame racer.

All Speedvision World Challenge cars run the same spec tire for '01, in



Audi's Euro-market-only 380-hp RS4 provides the SWC car's front bumper, while the composite front splitter is a race-only piece. Even though the S4 racer begins life as a street car, the cockpit is all business; its PI digital instrument panel allows up to eight different channels of data logging. Our guy Alexander chats with five-time LeMans winner and Speedvision commentator Derek Bell.



this case, a Toyo Proxes T1S, size 245/40R18, mounted on 18x9.0-in. BBS magnesium wheels. The Proxes T1S is a true street tire offering excellent performance and wear. Just for fun, we also tried last year's race compound tire; naturally, it shaved over 3 sec off the lap times. But retuning the chassis for the new Toyos should eliminate about half that difference by the time the series kicks off in 2001. A street S4 weighs 3593 lb, while the race car weighs in at around 3000.

Derek and I also spent some wheel time with a stock S4, just to get a feel for how much of an advancement the race version is. As expected, the stocker serves up more understeer and considerably less grip. Its track behavior is still impressive though, even on its standard all-season tires—not the best choice for track driving. It certainly offers a much higher level of creature comfort than the racing version, and plenty of all-around performance. Times? About 10 sec a lap slower than the racer (on Willow's Streets course) though perhaps four of those seconds would be recovered by mounting up the race Toyo/BBS rolling stock combo.

The race-spec engine comes right out of the European RS4 (another great car we don't get here!) and, like the street version, is developed by Cosworth. The use of racing exhaust

and a Pectel engine management system, plus an increase in turbo boost, raise horsepower output from the RS4's 380 to about 420 for the race car. Believe it or not, the turbochargers and the rest of the engine's mechanicals are massaged street/stock components. So strong is the engine package that the car we tested made it through an entire season of testing and racing without a rebuild. That tells us two important things: The engine is understressed and has even more power potential, and the street RS4 must be bulletproof. So the current U.S. version S4, at only 250 hp, should last just about forever under normal, and even aggressive, driving conditions.

As we all know, "Speed Costs Money." A standard S4 will set you back about \$45,000: That part's the bargain. An RS4, if you could buy one in the U.S., runs about \$75,000 and would split the performance difference between a stock S4 and the racer. But don't forget, the race car will not only get around the track faster, but also do so lap after lap, whereas the streetbound versions wilt after a few circuits.

The World Challenge machine also includes a raft of safety gear, a PI electronic dash, huge Alcon brakes, impressive adjustable suspension, and hundreds of hours of custom fabrica-

tion. Given its apparent toughness, you should need to change only tires, fluids, brake pads, and the occasional body panel during the season. But the sticker is heavy: \$190,000 ready to race. Considering the workmanship and performance, however, it's worth every penny. Let's see, if I sold the house, ate mac and cheese for a decade or so, then maybe...just maybe.

MT

Base price	\$190,000
Vehicle layout	1-pass 4-door race sedan
Engine	Race-prepped twin-turbo V-6 DOHC, 5 valves/cyl
Displacement, ci/cc	163.0/2671
Horsepower	420
Torque	340
Transmission	6-speed manual
Curb weight, lb	3000
0-60 mph, sec	4.6 (est)
Top speed, mph	180+ (est)
Additional equipment	Full rollcage, adjustable front/rear spoilers, fuel cell, Recaro FIA seat/harness, upgraded intercoolers, AP race clutch, Penske adjustable shocks, adjustable anti-roll bars, integrated air-jack system, two-way radio



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