

Stunt gladiators live in action

There is no doubt that the stunts of the live shows will be the high-octane draw cards to MPH '07, scheduled 8 - 11 February 2007 at the Coca Cola Dome, Johannesburg. Jeremy Clarkson and his co-presenters might be able to entertain the audience but the true thrills come courtesy of the men behind the wheel, who skid around the stage in a mesmerising display of precision driving.



Previous years have seen an Opel Astra literally flying over the heads of the audience, JCB diggers dancing to music and a helicopter gunship attempting to get a missile lock on a Lotus. But for MPH '07, visitors have been promised more super cars and more stunts than ever and it's up to drivers such as Terry Grant and Ben Collins to make sure they're not disappointed.

Gladiators' pit

Says Paul Edmunds, show director of MPH '07: "The atmosphere behind the scenes is always intense. It's pitch black and the drivers absorb a heady mixture of carbon monoxide and adrenaline before blasting onto the arena. As they enter what is fondly referred to as the 'gladiators' pit', the flash of cameras and stage lights makes it quite difficult to see. There's no turning back for these drivers as they swing into the routine and try not to hit anything."



"My biggest fear is that I'll turn a six-figure super car into a second-hand forecourt clearance special in front of thousands of people," Collins adds teasingly.

The action takes place inside the MPH arena, which is surrounded by a ring of giant concrete blocks, leaving an area no bigger than a tennis

court in which to power slide a variety of cars within inches of one another and the unforgiving barrier. Not that the confined space limits the creative masterminds who decide what the drivers have to do. The directors and producers of MPH '07 have spent months planning the event and the drivers will spend weeks learning how to turn their pipe dreams into a reality.

Each MPH spectacular follows the same procedure. First they decide which cars to work with and on which stunt. Then comes the practice. For MPH '06 in the UK, the team of drivers met at a remote airfield where they mark out the dimensions of the MPH stage with traffic cones.



Miniature models

"Before moving onto the real cars, we use miniature models to consider the possibilities. Everything seems quite easy as the replicas respond perfectly to our every move," says Collins.

Out on the airfield everything goes surprisingly well. Sliding a car is not as hard as it might look - doing it inch-perfect is. "You slide the car by turning or hand braking, then accelerating until the rear wheels spin. Applying opposite lock and left-foot braking controls the speed and direction of the slide; the rest is down to a delicate throttle foot, timing and luck. The key thing is to maintain the balance between grip and power. There is no shortcut to learning this, it is simply a case of practice," says Collins. Easier said than done.

"And then there are the presenters. At MPH '05, the presenters Jeremy Clarkson and Tiff Needell booted two of the drivers out of their Nissan 350Zs to 'show 'em how to do it'. After a fairly graceful power slide, Clarkson kept the power on a touch

too long and crunched the front of the car into the wall. Ouch," chuckles Collins.

Tickets will be on sale at Computicket from 6 November 2006.

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