

Back to the Future

Taking a fierce—and perhaps endangered—trip down nostalgia lane

IF YOU WERE A BETTING person, you wouldn't risk much on Chrysler to come out of the ongoing auto Armageddon in recognizable form.

Strapped by a rotten balance sheet and a lineup populated with plastic-dashed rental car refugees, the beleaguered Mopar manufacturer was swallowed by Italian car-maker Fiat last year.

Now, Fiat is figuring out what vestigial Chrysler and Dodge models will survive to integrate with the wave of small four-cylinder cars coming over from Europe.

Root hard for the Challenger to be one of them.

We picked up a Hemi orange R/T in Atlanta for a ride over to Talladega Super-speedway, 100 miles east (and two-thirds of the way to Birmingham, Ala.). The plan was to scout out the golf potential for the 175,000 spectators descending on the track for the NASCAR races April 25th and October 31.

We'll get to the golf—but we almost didn't. The Challenger doesn't break stylistic or technological ground, the seats aren't great, and it's as far away from practical transportation as you can get.

But that's not the point. Drop the six-speed manual into neutral. Coast up to a traffic light, pulse the gas and it's 1970—right down to the hammerhead shark headlights, raked windshield and aircraft style fuel cap. All you need are some fuzzy dice to

complete the anachronism. The angry noise coming out the back and the sinister, dechromed snout make you want to break your entire night into 10-second runs from light to light, forgetting all about fourth gear, golf and plain-Jane Interstate 20 west.

Given Chrysler's financial situation, turning the test car back in with bald tires and a thrashed clutch just wouldn't be right. We settle for a pre-ride stop at The Varsity, an Atlanta drive-through institution. They've been serving hot dogs, sliders and Coke here—in a bus stop-looking building adjacent to the Georgia Tech campus—since 1928, and the menu has barely changed since Bobby Jones first dined here. Order a heavyweight (hot dog with

extra chili) and a steak (burger with ketchup, mustard and pickle) and wash it down with the Varsity's signature Frosted Orange. A squadron of car hops deliver orders right to your window—and provide sharp-eyed automotive commentary. Ours pegged the Challenger's wheels as the optional 20-inchers, and asked if it came with the fuel-saving cylinder deactivation system.

It does. (We had to check.) Built on the same frame as the blocky Chrysler 300M, the Challenger is no small car, even with only two doors. And it doesn't handle much better than a Ram truck. But the look is absolutely iconic—a virtual dead ringer for the '70 version—and punching it, you'll feel as if you're belted directly to the exhaust manifold on top of the Hemi engine. That's either really, really your thing, or you might want to think about a Honda Accord coupe instead.

Getting off at the Talladega exit, it's easy to see why they put the track here. It's on the highway connecting Atlanta and Birmingham, but there's absolutely nobody around to care about the apocalyptic racket stock cars make—or the beer cans left by all those spectators. The track itself is 2.6 miles around, with turns banked so steeply that a car moving too slowly will slide down them sideways.

Before shooting the picture you see on the facing page, we went on a supervised

ride with a track official. Getting mashed down and to the right in your seat by the G-forces on the banks is a surreal, white-knuckle experience at 120 mph—and it makes the fact that the professionals do it at nearly twice the speed (and three feet from other cars) almost incomprehensible.

At least on the golf course, you have the chance to hit a shot like a tour player every once in awhile. We drove 30 miles south from the super-speedway to Sylacagua and the FarmLinks Golf Club. The Pursell family conceived the Michael Hurdzan-Dana Fry-designed golf course as the centerpiece of an agronomy research facility (and boutique resort) to show off technological advancements developed by the family owned pesticide business down the road.

The only giveaway is the scorecard's list of grass strains that populate each tee box, fairway, rough and green. The 10th hole, a 547-yard par-5 framed by hump-back ridge lines and mature hickories, has six different kinds. The look is completely seamless—and intimidating. It's just as easy to flub a chip on TifSport as it is to three-jack on A1/A4 Bentgrass blend.

ROUND TRIP

- 1 The juiced-up Mopar fit right in on Talladega's 33 degree-banked Turn 3.
- 2 The R/T comes with a 370-hp, 5.7-liter Hemi motor and chrome exhaust tips.
- 3 FarmLinks is an agronomy experiment by fertilizer magnate David Pursell.

VITAL STATISTICS



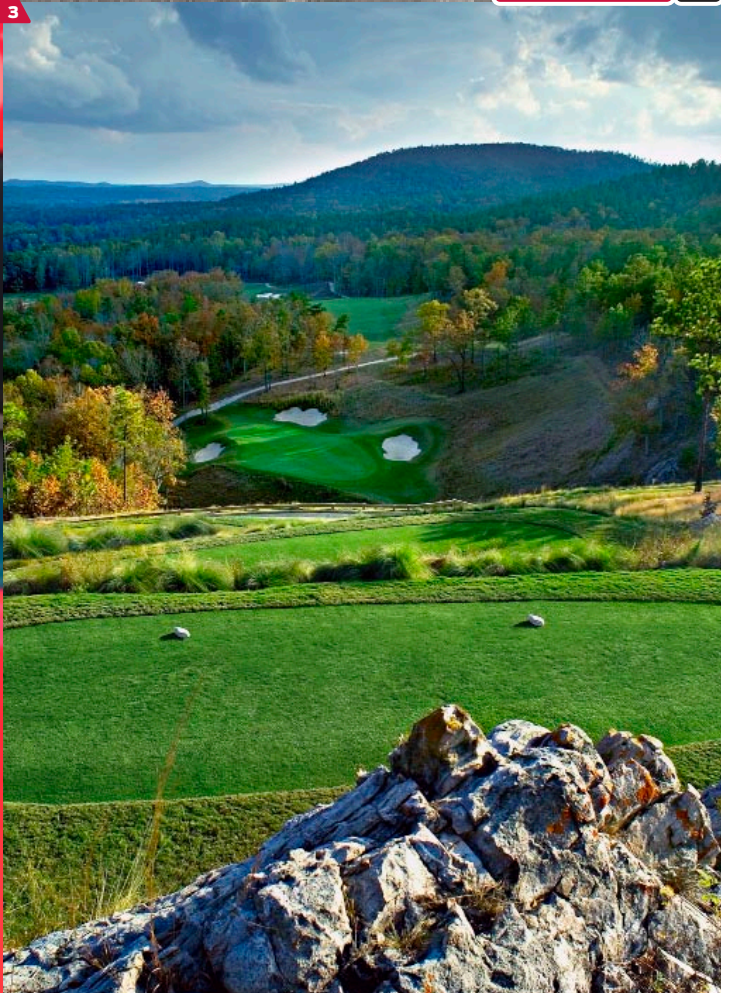
THE TRIP Atlanta to Talladega, Ala., and back: 242 miles.

THE CAR Dodge's retro Challenger R/T muscle car. The 370-horsepower V-8 coupe has a base price of \$32,155. The car we drove had a six-speed manual transmission (\$995), 20-inch wheels (\$1,350) and navigation (\$1,390), and cost \$38,100.

THE COURSE FarmLinks Golf Course (★★★★1/2, \$125) is a short drive from the superspeedway—and 150 decibels quieter. It's a 7,400-yard golf science lab, literally and figuratively.



LONG DRIVES TRAVEL



CAR: CHRIS STANFORD; COURSE: TKTKT KT KT - MAP: KAGAN MCLEOD & JONATHAN RIVAIT