

What's It Like

IT'S A MONSTER SMASH

A Blade reporter gets a chance to ride in a really big truck

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This is the first in a year-long series we call "What's It Like?" giving readers a first-hand look at some interesting activities in the region.

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There were only a few people in the arena when a deafening roar broke out and the floor began to rumble.

The monsters were awake.

Mine was named Equalizer, and she's about 11 feet tall.

She was big and powerful, but nothing but a baby, really, in town for her first competition at the Extreme Monster Truck Nationals at SeaGate Convention Centre last weekend.

I was wedged into the Equalizer's cockpit next to driver Mike Hawkins, even though it didn't seem designed to carry a passenger. There was no seat for me ... or seatbelt ... or helmet ... or, um, floor.

You climb into the enormous, 1,800-horsepower truck through a narrow opening in the floor - awkwardly grabbing the metal bars that frame a dune-buggy-like cage to pull yourself up - and I was perched over this hole as we motored onto the competition area.

There were several crunched cars lined up to be crunched some more with dirt ramps leading up to them. In the middle was a yellow school bus. Instead of a dirt ramp, there was a car and a van to be used as Monster Truck stepping stones.

We started with a couple of loops around the floor of the convention center. Then, as Whitesnake's "Here I Go Again" Mike indicated we were going to hit it - it being the line of cars ahead of us.

He revved the engine, drowning out even the illusion of hearing anything, and jumped up the dirt ramp. (Note to self: buy ear plugs.)

We had to be going less than 20 mph, but between the Equalizer's automotive roar, the cool wind whishing around my arm (clamped solidly to the bar in front of me), and my head bobbling back and forth, it seemed much faster.

Then I looked down. What I saw was jaw-dropping.

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Mike, of course, was not fazed. The 30-year-old owner of a Virginia construction company, he got into the business about four years ago after he built the largest street-legal truck he could. Naturally, he upgraded to Monster Trucks.

"It's the most up-to-date, state-of-the-art truck being built right now," he told me earlier as we inspected the machine.

Then he rifled off a list of cool features, which meant nothing to me. All I can safely say is there was a triple-bypass something and a super-charged whatchamacallit, and it was so big that Mike's 5-year-old son Rhett could fit entirely inside the tire rims.

This brand new Equalizer (the original dated to the '80s) is kind of complicated. It has an automatic transmission, so there was no clutch to worry about, but there were a bunch of weird gauges and levers and something labeled "blower pressure."

"You probably wouldn't even know how to start it," Mike laughed.

When he let me sit in the driver's seat - grabbing the steering wheel and pretending to drive, I did everything short of making "vroom vroom" noises - I realized he was right. There was no slot for a key. After some intense investigation, I was able to locate a "power" lever and an ignition switch.

That's when one of Equalizer's crew members jumped up on one of the tires and began cleaning the windshield, just like at the gas station. For a minute - until I looked down, waaaaay down - it felt just like I was sitting in my 2003 Pontiac Vibe (lovingly named Vic).

Technically, I guess there were a few more difference between the two vehicles. First, my car didn't cost \$138,000. It gets better mileage too - Equalizer can eat up 25 gallons of methanol fuel in a single show. Oh, and my car doesn't usually romp around on a track covered in Sprite syrup (to make it stickier and help with traction).

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These thoughts crossed my mind as the Equalizer began crushing the first car - a Pontiac, maybe? It was hard to tell.

Gazing through the hole in the floor, I was amazed to see down into the smashed innards of the vehicle we topped - the squished seats, the busted head rests, the gnarled metal.

It was quite peaceful, really; like being on a glass-bottom boat. The enormous roar of the 540-cubic-inch engine seemed to die down for a few seconds, making room for my grin to get wider and wider.

This was the real deal, much better than the ride visitors to the event could buy for a few bucks on Sergeant Smash, an oversized Hummer that didn't get to crush anything.

And the good news? There were three more cars lined up for flattening.

Bumpa, bumpa, bumpa, BUMP!

(That last bump was a big one, jostling the truck and my head, which painfully whacked one of the bars inside.)

We hopped off the last car with a thump, made a turn, hit the gas, and skidded to a stop.

I was exhilarated. I could feel the blood surgin through my body, and my muscles started to relax, relieved to have a break from keeping my body in place. But Mike didn't even break a sweat. That was nothing, he said.

"Usually, you don't even touch the cars."

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[next >](#)