

ARIZONA DRIVER

THE ENTHUSIAST'S GUIDE TO LIFE BEHIND THE WHEEL

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Premiere Issue!

The all-new 2003 Viper

The massively upgraded bad boy of Arizona's back roads goes toe-to-toe with the US Air Force F-16 "Viper" at Luke AFB.

Land Rover Freelander

We tackle the East Verde River Trail

Ford Living Legends Tour

GT40, Forty-Nine, Mustang Mach 1, Mustang Pony and Thunderbird

Bridgestone Winter Driving School

Tackling the white stuff to hone your everyday skills

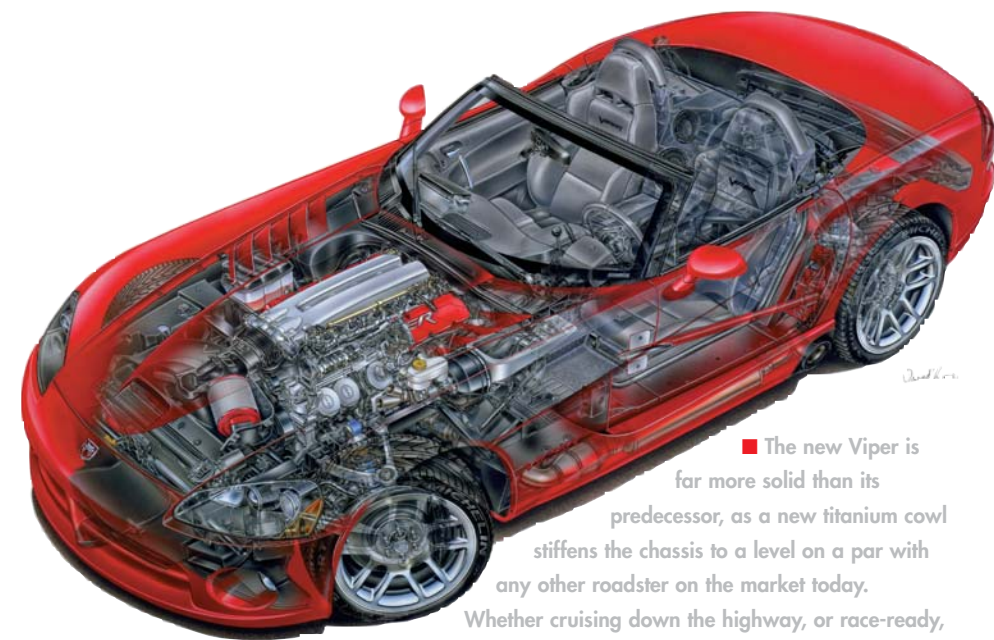
The All-new Hyundai Tiburon

A comprehensive rework brings this affordable rocket new respect

Audi A4 Cabriolet

Hats off to a totally rebuilt drop-top

BETTER HANDLING, IMPROVED COMFORT, AND SERIOUS POWER!



■ The new Viper is far more solid than its predecessor, as a new titanium cowl stiffens the chassis to a level on a par with any other roadster on the market today. Whether cruising down the highway, or race-ready, this translates to a higher level of control than ever.



Photo: Chrysler

by Tim Sharp

About five years ago, I was asked by the Skip Barber Racing School to work as a driving instructor on the Dodge Viper Club Invitational program. Held at the legendary Sebring road race circuit in Florida, it was what we in the high performance driving business call a "ride and drive" program.

The Original Viper R/T Roadster

On a typical ride and drive, the instructor takes the wheel first, drives the track and shows the club drivers the correct racing line, brake points, downshift points, turn-in points, corner apexes and exit lines off each corner. However, this was not your typical ride

and drive program.

Due to time constraints, the Viper owners were subjected to just a one-hour ground school. Then, they were permitted to drive the Vipers with the race driving instructors as their copilots on the Sebring circuit. What we are talking about here is a very long, very fast road race circuit where the Vipers reached a *minimum* of 140 mph on the back straight! We are also talking about NO dual controls and NO safety cutoff switch for the race driving instructors. Or, as the twenty-five Skip Barber Racing School instructors working the program named the first Viper

Invitational, this was "The Ride and Drive Program From Hell!"

Why so harsh? Well, for starters, the early Dodge Viper R/T Roadsters had flexible chassis which allowed them to wind up and unwind at inopportune times. What this meant was that the early Viper R/Ts were unpredictable and often scary to drive at high speeds. They were even scarier from the passenger's seat.

IN THE CORRECT HANDS, THE NEW 500 HP VIPER ROADSTER IS THE NEW BAD BOY OF THE BACK ROADS

The Original Viper GTS Coupe

When the GTS Coupe was released, given a choice, the instructors wanted to co-pilot those over the roadsters. The GTS

Coupe had a much stiffer chassis and handled more predictably. However, the R/T Roadsters outnumbered the GTS Coupes by three-to-one, so an instructor's odds of avoiding riding "second seat" with a Viper R/T driver (who thought he could hang with the GTS Vipers) were quite slim. If he was on top of his game, an instructor could E-brake a driver and take the wheel when the rear end stepped out too far. If not, they ate a wall.

The New 2003 Viper Roadster

Well, the days of the unpredictable, flex-flier Viper R/T Roadsters are long gone. The 2003 Viper is a world-class sports car, with a much stiffer chassis, advanced ABS racing brakes, a very comfortable interior and the most powerful production engine of any American sports car. Dodge has

upped the Viper's output from 450 to 500 hp. Most importantly, the Viper has been improved to handle the increased power.

The new Viper Roadster has every creature comfort one could want in a convertible sports car. Gone is the dated Viper targa top, and in its place is a nifty disappearing soft top. Gone are the plastic side curtains, and in their place are slick electronic windows. Gone is the older Viper R/T's chassis flex, thanks to the new titanium cowl which makes the Viper's chassis as honest and structurally sound as any roadster on the market.

The 2003 Viper Roadster has very comfortable leather sport seats, an adjustable foot pedal cluster, easy-to-read analog gauges and factory mounting

KEEP RIGHT >>



VIPER vs. VIPER

In a head-to-head matchup of tire-shredding horsepower against high-flying afterburner thrust, the new 500 hp Dodge Viper SRT-10 challenged the US Air Force's leading multi-role fighter in acceleration trials at Luke Air Force Base in Glendale, Arizona. The event was held over two days as part of the annual Luke Days air show. "Ripley's Believe It Or Not," TBS Superstation's original reality series hosted by Dean Cain, was on hand to tape the race.

"It was an absolutely awesome ride," said Herb Helbig, Senior Manager, Vehicle Synthesis, Performance Vehicle Operations (PVO) at DaimlerChrysler Corp. "Ripley's got us racing the jet both times—with and without afterburners—using the Dodge Viper SRT-10 and the Competition Coupe. There were almost 140,000 people in attendance, and they were all lining the fences cheering their hearts out for their favorite Viper."

The race pitted car against jet in a side-by-side, standing-start, half-mile drag race on parallel runways. Dodge Vipers raced the F-16—nicknamed the "Viper"—to the speed at which the jet became airborne: approximately 150 mph. The Dodge Viper covered the course in around 15 seconds.

Races featured a pre-production 2003 Dodge Viper SRT-10 convertible, driven by Helbig, against the Lockheed Martin F-16 Fighting Falcon, flown at military power by Captain Glen "Nugget" Richards of the 309th Fighter Squadron (the "Wild Ducks") based at Luke AFB.

Each day then pitted a prototype 2003 Dodge Viper Competition Coupe against another F-16 Viper flown by Captain Dan Potas—call sign "Scrappy"—also from the Wild Ducks. For the second showdown, DaimlerChrysler's PVO team would tap more horsepower and make their runs on racing slicks, while the USAF countered with a takeoff run at full afterburner.

In the "tale of the tape," the F-16 boasts approximately 25,000 pounds of thrust in a compact, 19,000-pound package capable of more than 1,500 mph. By comparison, the Dodge Viper's 500-plus pound-feet of torque, 3,357-pound curb weight and 190 mph top speed earn it the honor of being America's Ultimate Sports Car.

"It was a chance for us to have a little fun," added Helbig. "We're proud of the Dodge Viper's performance capabilities, and this was a chance to race for bragging rights against one of the few things capable of matching the Viper's acceleration. We're also very proud to have been invited here to support Luke Air Force Base and our nation's military." ■



Photo: Chrysler

■ The 2003 Dodge Viper Competition Coupe squared off against the US Air Force's F-16 "Viper" at Luke Air Force Base in Glendale, Arizona, for a recent broadcast of "Ripley's Believe It or Not." (Are you wondering which Viper won? See sidebar.)

points for a five-point competition harness, should you choose to install racing belts for track use. The Viper's exterior styling makes the new roadster look much less bulky. In fact, it looks quite trim.

The 2003 Viper in Motion

In a recent Dodge test program in Auburn Hills, Michigan, this author had a chance to drive the new 500 hp, six-speed manual transmission Viper at speed on an autocross course. Okay, let's forget about the Viper's awesome new styling and greatly improved interior creature comforts for just a minute and get down to the important stuff—performance and handling!

Shod with ultra-wide, low-profile Michelin run-flat tires (on 18x10 front wheels, 19x13 rear), the 2003 Viper Roadster accelerated off the starting line like a missile. The big surprise, however, came when I went to "set the front end" under heavy trail braking and turned into the first corner. The Viper slowed down, turned in and rotated its rear end as if the feat were choreographed by the Barishnikov. No understeer. No steering correction. No oversteer. Just perfect balance. Dodge has managed to synthesize the Viper's power, braking and handling to achieve the promise of performance which we hoped would be possible in the original R/Ts.

Not only does the new 2003 Viper Roadster look more svelte and more

athletic, it *IS* more svelte and more athletic! The 405 hp Corvette Z06 used to be my favorite "back road racer" of choice. However, in the correct hands, the new 500 hp Viper Roadster is the new bad boy of the back roads—and autocross courses. Could it use a little more rear tire? Perhaps so, but that is all. The new 2003 Viper has more power and better handling capabilities than most sports car drivers will ever utilize.

Considering a Ferrari 360 Modena? Forget it. *This* is the car you really need! Buy this machine and you could have a genuine chance to smoke that guy who occasionally shows up in the black Cobra roadster at The Pavilions on Saturday night. When it comes to performance, the 2003 Viper is the real deal, and it is civilized enough for everyday driving. ■

With a Bachelor of Science from USC and a minor in Business Communication, **TIM SHARP** became a professional road racer of 25 years. He has ten SCCA and IMSA racing championships, set 30 lap records, and is a former Bondurant and Skip Barber race driving instructor. He has been a works driver for VW, McKnight, Autodynamics, Porsche, Ralt, Toyota/TRD and TOM's/Toyota. He and his son Spencer currently race a Factory Five NASA Spec Roadster, which posted seven class wins in seven races in 2002.

Sharp's latest project? Restoring a 1956 Chris-Craft speed boat which he and his wife Kristin recently purchased while at the Monterey Historic races. Is it powered by the original 6-cylinder Grey Marine engine? No way... the Sharps have a Chevy 350 ready to drop into the little mahogany woody once the hull restoration is complete!