

A Father's Worry

By Ken Testorff,
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I received the following e-mail from Lyle Beck, a civilian employee at Naval Air Depot, Jacksonville, Fla.:

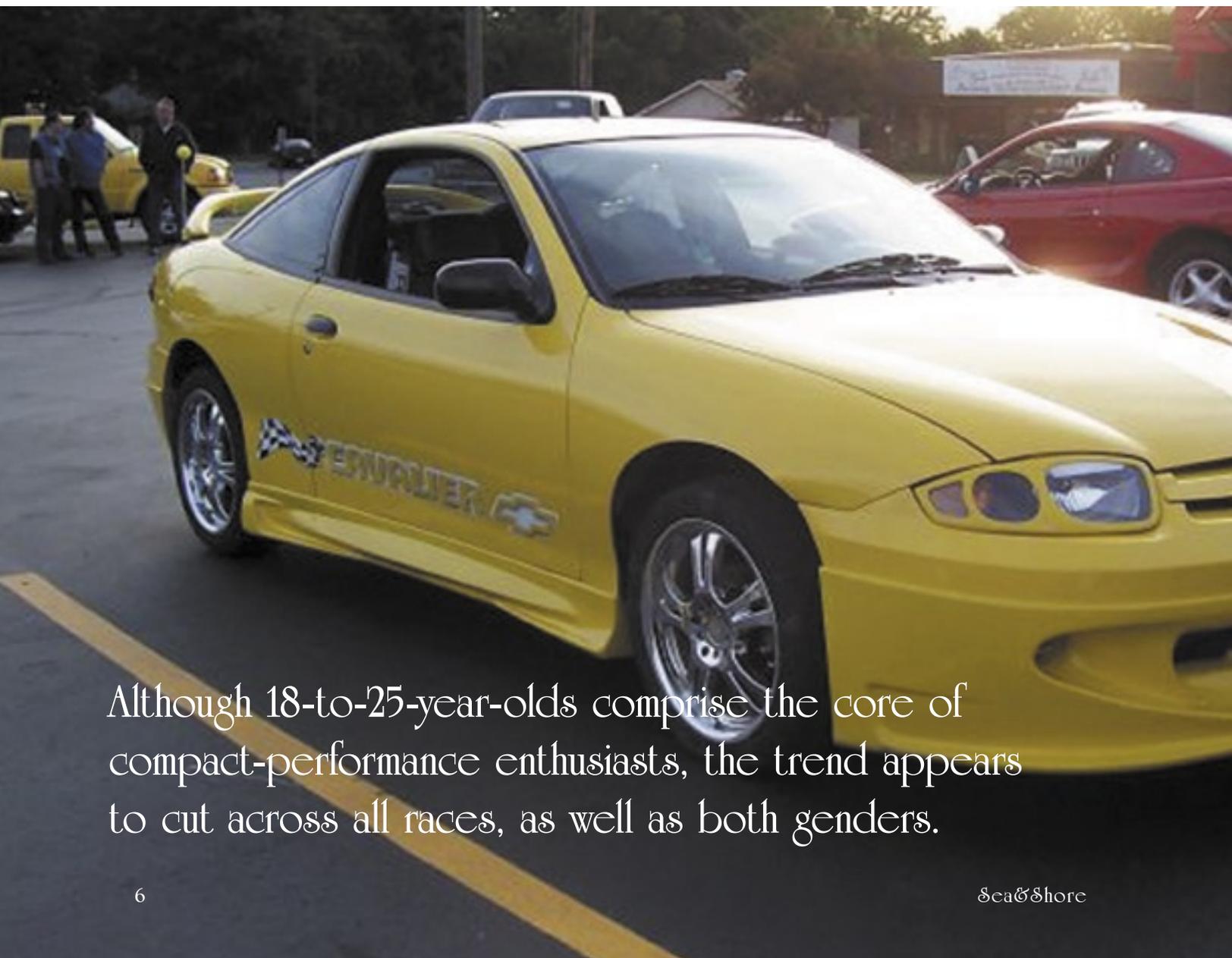
As more young people living on bases around the world turn their four-cylinder cars into racing machines, the need arises for some sort of command focus on real vs. imaginary driving skills.

My son, a Marine lance corporal, took a perfectly good '96 Chevy Cavalier with a top speed of 85 mph and added a turbo, racing seat with four-point harness, bigger brakes, a braaap-braaap muffler, and a thump-thump stereo system.

Now he has a car that can do 100-plus mph.

Unfortunately, he's convinced his driving skills somehow have evolved along with the modifications to his car. Of course, no one can change the mind of this 21-year-old Marine, especially anyone from home. He ignores warnings that insurance companies don't pay off if the insured is racing. Likewise, he blows off reminders that insurance companies expect a complete car after a "totaled" settlement (you can't keep your special racing parts after a crash).

I work on board NAS Jacksonville, Fla., and travel to many bases nationwide. I see these modified cars at each



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site—some even have nitrous cylinders visible in the rear windows! Out in San Diego, the Coronado Bridge looks like a miniature Indy 500 every afternoon as the “rice rockets” braaap their way through traffic at extremely high rates of speed. Jacksonville’s Buckman Bridge looks like a game of automotive dodge ball. I get a good view—I drive a VW bug.

“Souped up” or “tricked out”—I guess the preferred terminology depends on when you were born—imports are the current vehicle of choice for a multicultural audience of speed-loving, style-conscious teenagers and young adults alike. You find these cars everywhere—from suburban high-school parking lots to small-town drive-through restaurants. Modified imports were so popular at the University of California, Irvine campus in 2002 that some were nicknaming the college the “University of Civics and Integras.”

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study showed that, nationally, whites make up 42 percent of the so-called “import tuners,” with Asians accounting for 29 percent, Latinos 16 percent, and African Americans 8 percent. The study showed 17 percent are females.

This diversity has transformed a \$295-million market in 1997 into a multibillion-dollar market today for exotic-looking spoilers, side panels, fenders, fancy gear knobs, Indiglo-lit gauges, and the latest DVD systems. When you consider the average “import tuner” spends about \$5,000 annually to customize his compact car, it’s easy to see why such growth has occurred. Meanwhile, performance-enhancing engine parts allow these humble four-cylinders to take on V-8s at stoplights—and win.

Anyone who doubts that imports are the “in” thing needs only to visit one of the spots where young car buffs gather regularly for cruise nights. The sounds of revving engines and squealing tires fill the air, as the youths bend over open hoods and rear hatches. It’s a scene straight out of “American Graffiti,” with one distinct exception: Japanese-designed imports

outnumber domestic vehicles by at least a 2-to-1 ratio.

What draws youths to imports? “Affordability, reliability and potential for creative expression,” said one compact tuner. “I like the fact we are using a small-displacement engine and can beat a Camaro V-8 with a little time and money. You get all that, plus the girls are looking for the imports, too. They know it’s the thing to do now.”

As with any cultural phenomenon that has gone from cult status to mass appeal in a short time, “rice rocket” styles keep evolving at warp speed as trendsetters try to stay on the cutting edge. Imports tricked out with big rear wings, black wheel rims, and neon-lighted underbodies—the type of things that appeared in the movie “The Fast and the Furious”—already are considered passe. The favored current look, fashioned after the latest models domestically produced in Japan, is cleaner, with fewer exterior frills.

Does the fad’s popularity signal its ultimate demise? Its pioneers insist it doesn’t. They argue that, as Generation Y ages, today’s Civic and Integra owners will continue to funnel their energy and disposable income into more expensive imports and higher-end parts. Only time will tell.

In the meantime, parents worried about the driving skills of their adolescents certainly can’t be encouraged by the results of an ongoing National Institutes of Health (NIH) study. Led by Jay Giedd, a pediatric psychiatrist, the researchers have found that the highest levels of physical and brain maturity aren’t reached at age 18, as they had thought. One instead usually doesn’t reach maturity until about age 25, a finding with implications for a host of policies, including the nation’s driving laws.

The findings, according to Giedd, imply that many life choices—college and career, marriage, and military service—often are made before the brain’s decision-making center comes fully online. But for young adults, “dying on a highway is the biggest risk out there,” he said. ■

Modifying smaller cars with turbo kits or dual turbo kits is very popular right now—you see a lot of it when you visit auto hobby shops on military bases. From a traffic-safety perspective, this is bad news because speed is a leading factor in many of our fatal crashes. And, smaller cars—many of the ones being modified—don’t offer the crash protection provided by larger vehicles. Couple this problem with the thrill-seeking mindset noted in this article and you have a recipe for disaster.—Chuck Roberts, traffic & off-duty recreation safety division head

