

DO THE MONSTER SMASH

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDREW WHITTON

Oversized and over here!
How did American-style
truck rallies get so... big?
Simon Usborne and his
six-year-old son grab
a dirt-track-side seat

A Marvel-themed
Amazing Spider-Man
truck takes off at the
London Stadium in July



ON

a summer's day in Stratford, east London, 30,000 people start marching like ants into the former Olympic stadium. More than 4,000 tonnes of dirt cover the hallowed ground where Mo Farah and co inspired delirium in 2012. Today's "Super Saturday" involves a very different spectacle — a clash of mechanical titans.

Parked among giant ramps, eight monster trucks stand as monuments of wonder for an audience of mainly small children. Later they will watch in awe as these five-tonne machines race and take flight, performing wheelies, doughnuts, jumps and backflips as their 1,500-horsepower engines shake the stadium like a drum. This is Monster Jam, an all-American series that has taken Britain and the world by storm, selling 4.2 million tickets a year as it tours the planet — roughly the same number Taylor Swift sold on the 2023 leg of her world tour.

Five hours before any of the stadium's seats are filled, children with additional tickets to the morning "pit party" — where they can get up close to the machines — are spread out across the dirt. Their little necks struggle with the scale of it all as they swarm around the trucks. The balloon-like tyres alone are taller than many men and more than a metre wide.

Most of the kids know the trucks from toys. So many toys. Monster Jam has licensing deals with Lego and Spin Master, the Canadian company behind the Rubik's Cube and Paw Patrol brands. At the official



Above: the JCB Digatron driver, Tristan England, greets young fans in the Monster Jam "pit party". Below: Jim Kramer with Bigfoot, the truck that started it all

merch stand, pressed parents line up to sink £35 on mini Monster Jam trucks (triple the price they sell for in Sainsbury's). Smyths Toys Superstores, an event sponsor, has set up a pen at the pit party for children to test-drive radio-controlled Megalodons.

Queues form at the most popular trucks, where drivers in motor-racing suits oblige fans with autographs and selfies. One of the longest lines forms at a truck making its international debut. JCB Digatron is the love child of a partnership between Monster Jam and the British digger company, which supplies earth movers for track building and truck towing at the event (the trucks break a lot, I soon discover). Otis Bamford, the eight-year-old grandson of the JCB chairman, Lord (Anthony) Bamford, is a monster truck fan, and JCB helped design Digatron's bright-yellow shell. It includes blinking orange lights and a symbolic digger arm.

Digatron's driver is Tristan England, 28, a farm boy from Paris, Texas, who wears a ten-gallon hat when he's not behind the wheel. "My son's gonna be watching me live on YouTube across the Pond, it's gonna be so cool!" England tells me. His parents named him after Tristan Ludlow, the character played by Brad Pitt in the 1994 western *Legends of the Fall*. England's own son, five, is called Crash. "I just named him after what I do for a living," he says.

How did monster trucks get so... well, big?

In 1970s Missouri Jim Kramer ran an off-road car showroom with his friend Bob Chandler. They began adapting a 1974 Ford F-250 pick-up, adding big tyres from a fertiliser spreader and an American flag. The pair started showing off the truck, named Bigfoot, at



OUR BOTTOMS TREMBLE AS THE TRUCKS ENTER THE ARENA LIKE METHANOL-FUELLED OLYMPIC SPRINTERS

motor shows in 1979. Then Chandler had the idea of driving it over the top of old cars. Kramer, who's now 73 and retired, filmed it and the Bigfoot videotape was passed around like moonshine. "We figured it would be a flash in the pan. Everybody would see a monster truck one time and wouldn't be interested any more," Kramer tells me on the phone.

Bigfoot became a 1980s sensation, appearing in Hollywood blockbusters such as the *Police Academy* films and *Road House*. Other enterprising petrolheads began supersizing vehicles and devising events, from drag racing to ramming trucks into flour-filled caravans. It was a wild slice of blue-collar American car culture packaged as family entertainment. Things were simple back then. "You just drove over a couple of cars and you were a hero," Kramer says. "There were no high-flying antics."

Today's mega trucks bear only a passing resemblance to Bigfoot, and have fibreglass shells sculpted into toylife forms. Four at the London event are themed as Marvel characters as part of a deal with Disney: Black Panther, the Amazing Spider-Man, Thor and Iron Man.

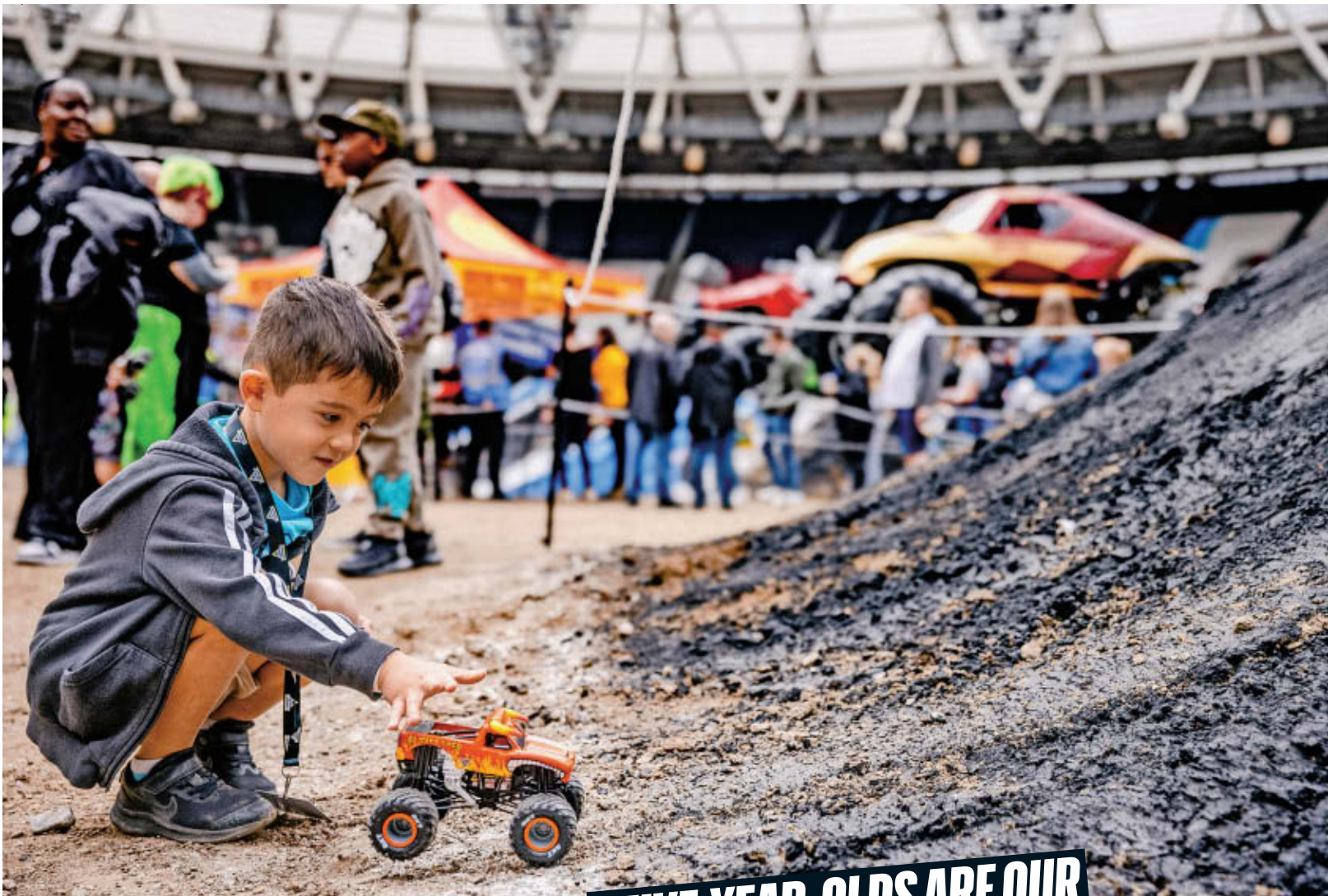
Above: Iron Man and Black Panther trucks compete in the race event

El Toro Loco blasts steam from its nose. Megalodon is an angry shark. Grave Digger is one of more than 40 vehicles to have borne the name since 1982.

The Monster Jam series emerged in the mid-1990s, when media and events corporations began to get interested. After a series of buyouts it was sold in 2008 to Feld Entertainment, which had started in 1967 when the Maryland-born entrepreneur Irvin Feld bought the old Ringling Bros travelling circus. Irvin's granddaughter Juliette Feld Grossman, who this year became CEO of the family firm, was at business school in Atlanta when her father, Kenneth, bought Monster Jam. She had never seen any motorsports before her first event. "You could smell the dirt in the air and feel the rumble in your chest," she tells me at the London Stadium, shortly before her children, aged nine, eight and two, arrive. "It felt like I'd stepped into something that was just so electric and thrilling."

The Felds produced Siegfried and Roy's magic show in Las Vegas until a tiger mauled Roy Horn on stage in 2003, leaving him with life-changing injuries. They signed a deal in 2008 to produce live shows for Disney Live and Disney on Ice and today the family are worth \$2.7 billion, according to Forbes.

Feld Grossman, who is 41 and wears jeans and a denim shirt, has led the evolution of Monster Jam into an era of lucrative brand partnerships and world tours. The show has visited cities on six continents, including Beijing, Sydney and Johannesburg. The weekend before the London event this July, thousands of fans flocked to the Principality Stadium in Cardiff. There are smaller arena shows too, including one in Glasgow this Friday. ▶



"FIVE-YEAR-OLDS ARE OUR BIGGEST FANS. IT REMINDS ME OF BEING A KID IN A SANDBOX. IT'S LARGER THAN LIFE FOR THEM"

To fit inside the shipping containers that make up Monster Jam's travelling caravans, the trucks have to be fitted with much smaller transport wheels, looking as dignified as King Kong on rollerskates.

This summer Monster Jam released a computer game and Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson announced a live-action Disney movie to be set in the Monster Jam universe. Meanwhile the company goes up against Mattel in a battle for the infant dollar: the Barbie maker also owns Hot Wheels, which runs smaller monster truck tours that feature the latest version of Bigfoot.

Feld Grossman's kids have all the merch but she and her husband, Andrew Grossman, ban radio-controlled trucks in their home in Florida. "I like my baseboards [skirting boards] too much," she says.

By 3pm everyone has taken their seats. My own son, Jake, who's six, has arrived with his uncle Sam. Jake has a couple of Monster Jam toys, as most kids we know do, but he had no idea they were based on larger-than-life machines. His eyes widen as a countdown starts and our bottoms tremble: we're sitting above the stadium entrance as the trucks are introduced like methanol-fuelled Olympic sprinters.

I can barely make out Tristan England as he sits, 7ft aloft, in Digatron's cabin. The new truck roars on to the dirt for the biggest welcome as an original rock anthem plays out. Written and performed by the Eagles singer and guitarist Joe Walsh, who is a friend of the Bamfords, it features Walsh's brother-in-law



ANDREW WHITTON FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE

Ringo Starr on drums. (Sample lyric: "It's monster time/ It's a monster truck/ Digatron!")

The big screens cut to a live interview outside the stadium with England and the Bamfords, including Otis and his mother, Alice. In Cotswolds tones that contrast gloriously with England's Texan drawl, Lord Bamford, 78, who is decked out in full Monster Jam merch, declares: "This is really quite something."

This is an event rather than a show, Monster Jam is at pains to point out. Its roster of more than 60 drivers, who include some of the great American names (I'd like to have a beer with Chad Tingler), compete for points on the US and international tours. Today's event has three parts, starting with a knockout racing competition over two laps of the track, including big jumps. In the skills challenge drivers take turns to show off their two best tricks, including wheelies and moonwalks (a rolling front wheelie performed with the truck balanced on its nose).

In the final freestyle competition drivers get two minutes to perform the biggest jumps and tricks including backflips, which monster trucks first pulled in 2010 by speeding into ramps with high vertical lips (the top drivers are now trying to nail double backflips). Fans in the crowd judge this and the skills challenge using their phones to award scores out of ten via a dedicated web page.

With their huge tyres and 30in-long oil and nitrogen-filled shock absorbers, the trucks spring off jumps, bouncing heavily as they land after clearing the length of a tennis court. Something about their scale seems to bend time: like running giraffes, they look as if they somehow move in slow motion.

England is the driver to beat. He dominates the racing, beating Megalodon in the final. The shark is driven by Charlie Pauken, a 57-year-old from Ohio with a black moustache. He walks with the slightly creaky bearing of a man who has spent 37 years rattling around inside monster trucks.

During the skills challenge Pauken drives along on two wheels, adjusting his front and rear steering to create a porpoising motion. He takes the lead. Then comes England with a wheelie masterclass; he balances his throttle and brakes to flip his truck from front to rear wheels with the precision of Simone Biles on the beam. Edging ahead of Pauken, England sets himself up as the favourite in a final clash of generations.

The international tour first came to the UK in 2019, starting in Manchester. London made the schedule in 2022 and Feld Grossman says there are plans for more venues after Glasgow. Such is the growth that, in 2014, Monster Jam opened a "university" for rookies — a training track in Illinois to help produce more drivers.

Many, including England, are the children of monster truck aces. Some transition from other motorsports; others are fans living the dream.

Bari Musawwir, who today is driving Black Panther, was six when he saw his first Monster Jam event in Michigan. "I knew this is what I wanted to do, I just didn't know how," he says. He collected toys and later got into radio-controlled monster truck racing. A Monster Jam official spotted him and saw potential in his dexterity and head for tricks. Musawwir made his debut in 2010 in Panama City. "I could barely eat before the event, it was just incredible," he says.

Meanwhile Monster Jam engineers refined truck technology and safety, with more power, less weight,



Above: Charlie Pauken celebrates his win in Megalodon; the truck in Lego form. Opposite page: hands-on fun in the pit party before the main event; the fibreglass shell of El Toro Loco is dismantled during repairs backstage

finely controlled brakes, precise, all-wheel steering and unbreakable cockpits. "I never thought we'd be doing backflips and driving away from it," says Pauken, who has driven 18 machines since the late 1980s. "You can take one of these trucks out there and make it dance."

Monster Jam is capturing a ripe new market: children who were monster truck fans in the Eighties glory days are now parents. Kryztof, a landscaper from north London, remembers watching VHS tapes of Bigfoot and Grave Digger in Poland, where he grew up. He went to the first Cardiff show and is here with Tedi, his seven-year-old son. Both are wearing Grave Digger T-shirts. "You just don't see this kind of thing every day," Kryztof says. "Everything is big and people like big things, I guess. The sound of the engines, the jumps... it's all so cool."

Not everyone here has kids. When I ask Graham Byford, 62, a frozen chicken dispatch manager from Ipswich, how big a fan he is, he whips off his vest to reveal two tattoos on his back of Taz, a Tasmanian Devil-themed truck that Monster Jam ran when it had access to Looney Tunes characters. One is signed by the truck's former driver, the marker pen overlaid with tattoo ink. "It's just brilliant," Graham's wife, Linda, says. "We soak it up."

Michael and Kirsty Clark have come from Canterbury with their children, Richard, Scarlett, George and little Lucifer, who is sleeping soundly in a beach cart next to Megalodon. George, who's six, has autism and suffered from fits as a toddler. His speech development was delayed. But when he caught sight of a Monster Jam truck on YouTube, Kirsty says it calmed him down: "It just intrigued him and it has become his passion." When George started speaking at the age of four, Kirsty says his first words were "Grave Digger".

"Five-year-olds are our biggest fans," Pauken, the Megalodon driver, tells me at the pit party. "It reminds me of being a kid in a sandbox. It's just larger than life for them." Around us, children make their new toys do flips and wheelies in the dirt. The shows came first and inspired the toys, but now, in a kind of merchandising feedback loop, the trucks have evolved to look like giant toys. When I show my son an old photo of the first Bigfoot, I naively expect him to admire — as I do — its blue paint job and retro styling. "Oh my goodness," Jake says. "That is such a rubbish monster truck!" ▶



One thing that doesn't evolve is dirt. Three days before the show I'm dressed in hi-viz as Monster Jam's ten-man "dirt crew" uses a fleet of earth movers to mix and spread the contents of a line of tipper trucks. West Ham has rented London Stadium since 2016 but in mid-May their turf gets rolled up to make way for a roster of events that this summer also included a Foo Fighters concert and two baseball games.

If you ever need 4,200 tonnes of dirt for a day in the London area, Jon Nash is your man. As head of logistics at Sivy Group, a construction waste management company based in Greenwich, a few miles from Stratford, he gets 36 hours to do the Monster Jam job, using 18 lorries on rotation to deliver 225 loads through the Blackwall Tunnel. Half the trucks contain clay, while the other half are filled with Class 1A, a gravelly aggregate. The dirt crew blends them on site, making a 6in-thick driving surface and ramps up to 10ft high. The goal is to let the big wheels grip but also drift. In some cities Monster Jam stores a mountain of dirt on nearby land. "The best places are where they have clay," which is good for grip, says Bobby Hayes, a member of the dirt crew from North Carolina. "The worst is anywhere that's sandy."

Some of the blue-grey clay in London this year has come from a 32ft basement dig under a new skyscraper in London Bridge. After the show Sivy will truck the dirt east to Rainham Marshes, where it will be used to expand an RSPB nature reserve.

At the pit party Philip Aransibia, who is 42 and works in a hospital, is stunned to see what they've done with the place. He's wearing a Digatron cap with his West Ham shirt, and was last here to watch his team play on pristine grass. He just about remembers the monster trucks of the 1980s, but only became a fan recently when his brother-in-law shared YouTube clips. "It's the hype, the flips... it just gets my adrenaline going," he says.

Philip, who lives and grew up round the corner, is clutching bags of new toys for his daughters, Alexis and Delilah. He is worried that he's fuelling their demands for bigger tyres for the family's Nissan Juke. "They say it could look like Black Panther," he says, laughing.

Less than an hour before the show I bump into Pauken near the West Ham dressing rooms. He tells me the crashes hit harder these days. "But you're



THE ROSTER OF DRIVERS INCLUDES SOME GREAT AMERICAN NAMES. I'D LOVE TO HAVE A BEER WITH CHAD TINGLER

Left: the West Ham fan Philip Aransibia and family, laden with merch. Right: Graham Byford from Ipswich shows off his monster truck tattoos

constantly trying to improve yourself. If you're not moving forward, you're falling behind."

In the climactic freestyle competition, some of the drivers with low scores go all out. Myranda Cozad, who drives Thor and is one of 12 women in Monster Jam's global line-up, attempts a backflip. The crowd gasps as she takes flight from the ramp but she over-rotates, scrapping the rear suspension as she lands on her tail.

Digatron has the penultimate run, as Pauken looks on. England tears around the track. But, with a good chunk of his time still on the clock, he lands on a small ramp that bounces his rear wheels skywards, flipping him onto his new roof. Fire briefly shoots out from his chassis, much to Jake's delight. But England scores poorly.

It's Pauken's time. Bouncing up on to his rear tyres after one jump, he feathers the throttle to hold a wheelie. Megalodon then devours the course in a two-minute rampage, seeming to hang in the air over the jumps. After a backflip he shoots sideways off a ramp and lands on his right wheels, blowing out a tyre just as the clock stops.

"That is what 37 years behind the wheel look like, right there!" the trackside commentator shouts as Pauken pulls himself out of his cab and stands on one of his tyres. His score flashes up on the big screen: 9.719. Pauken is declared the day's overall winner. He clambors on to the roof of his giant shark, being careful not to tweak his knees as he pumps his arms and whoops. Thousands of children scream back at him ■