



# BURN OUT

Hot girls, hot cars, hot tubs – Ivan Smith struggles to keep his cool at the Darwin V8 Supercars

**S**aturday, May 18

MY DARWIN cab driver is an honest guy. Maybe too honest. "I picked up two tourists outside the place they're staying," he says as we head to Darwin's Hidden Valley racetrack. "The place they were going was just next door, but they didn't realise. So I headed off around the block, and after a while one of them says, 'I don't think it's far away.' I said, 'Yeah, we're getting close.'"

After this he starts gibbering on about the government picking on cabbies for tax evasion, and how women keep offering him sex while he's working. I put myself into "uh-huh" auto-response mode and tune out. I'm here for Round 4 of the 2002 V8 Supercar Championship Series and need to go over my background knowledge. That takes all of 20 seconds, so then I just look out the window at a cloud.

"You're at the wrong gate," says the security guard at the Hidden Valley main entrance. "Up there you can find gate four at your own risk." I ask what she means by "own risk". The guard smiles. "There's a good chance of meeting bush life up there," she says. "I'm just covering me arse."

This is clearly a bloke's weekend. There are women here, but it's mostly guys with huge beards, and huge guys with no beards. And kids who are probably considering beards at a later date. A lot of the girls on view are promo girls, like the Ford Patrol girls – who have big cop-shades and handcuffs, but a sexy cleavage real cops never seem to have. And more thigh.

The tight, 2.5km, coat-hanger-shaped track is set in 500 dusty, sun-baked acres, 5km out of Darwin. Rows of awnings shelter racing vehicles: some are brand new, others look ready for

the wreckers. Backed up to the pit lane garages, enormous V8 team-trucks point to where the big money is.

In the garages, pristine V8 Supercars sit on their air jacks. Mechanics wearing massive headphones take tyres off the cars and roll them away to racks, or take them off racks and bolt them on.

When the security guard on the sponsors' stand looks the other way, I sprint up the steps and past marquees full of people having lunch. According to my program, the Formula Holden cars are due on the track for qualifying.

Formula Holdens are retired Formula One-style cars with the old engines pulled out and 3.8L V6 Commodore engines dropped in. At 675kg each, half the weight of a V8 Supercar, they shoot past like jet fighters on a strafing run.

The pit lane is surprisingly small. When the cars stop, fat blokes run out and hold umbrellas over the drivers to

shade them. This is a real let-down – I always thought smiling women in lycra held up the umbrellas. Other guys lean in and chat to the driver. The helmets nod up and down, the fat guys take away their umbrellas, and the Holdens set off on another bombing mission. After a few laps of this I'm bored. No-one misses a bend, crashes through a fence, or anything.

On the far side of the track is the drag strip, and beyond that is the main drag marquee. As I head over there, I pass a girl with "Ford" written on each breast. Even the Holden fans are caught admiring their rival's endorsement.

On the hill inside the track, people sit on the grass in the shade, drinking beer. I pass the Hidden Valley branch of Darwin's Old Vic [Victoria Hotel]. I think about downing a VB, and after that, another one. I could spend the rest of the afternoon sitting on the grass