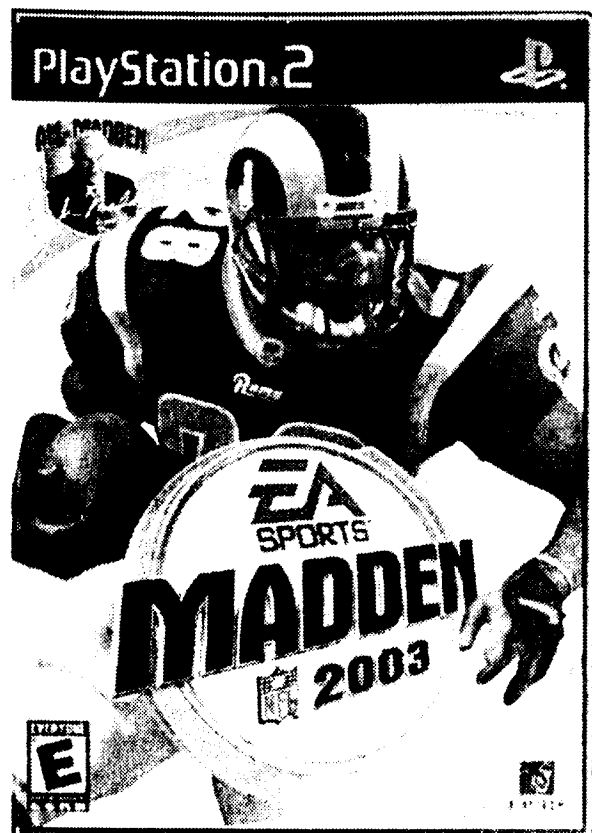


For those who would rather play than...play



Pro Bowler Marshall Faulk graces the cover of Madden 2003.

By Billy O' Keefe

Knight Ridder Newspapers

"Madden" style, you will keep loving it this year.

MADDEN FOOTBALL 2003

Available: Now for PlayStation2, Xbox, GameCube, PC and PSX
From: EA Sports

NFL FEVER 2003

Available: Now for Xbox
From: Microsoft

The big news concerning "NFL Fever 2003" is the addition of franchise play, a feature that nicely complements the excellent team and playbook editors and online play and gives the game an edge over "Madden," for now.

"Fever" otherwise remains similar to last year's game, for better or worse. It looks great, but not much better than before, and the gameplay still loosens the laws of physics when it comes to making insane plays on both sides of the ball. That doesn't mean "Fever" isn't challenging or fun; the looser game may be just your thing if "Madden" is too serious for your taste. Just don't expect an accurate football simulation if you pick this one up.

NFL BLITZ 20-03

Available: Now for PlayStation2, Xbox and GameCube
From: Midway Sports

"NFL Blitz 20-03"'s gameplay tweaks and new create-a-player mode doesn't warrant a purchase if you just picked up "Blitz 20-02" six months ago. But if that's not the case, then this is the best "Blitz" out there, featuring the strongest combination yet of the NFL license and no-rules, eight-on-eight arcade football. The controls are a breeze to pick up, the games blaze by, and "Blitz" is perhaps the best-looking football game out there, including "Madden." It's still a blast to play with friends, but the much-improved A.I. adds meat to the solo experience as well. It's not the deepest football game in town, but it doesn't aspire to be, and it arguably gives you the most fun for your buck.

NFL GAMEDAY 2003

NCAA GAMEBREAKER 2003
Available: Now for PlayStation 2 (also available for PSX)
From: 989 Sports

"NFL Gameday 2003" and "NCAA Gamebreaker 2003" have come a long way in terms of feature set, gameplay and aesthetics. The wonky A.I. and extreme imbalance between the offense and defense - in a nutshell, you'll score a LOT - keep the games off of "Madden"'s turf when it comes to realism, and the dynasty and other modes aren't as deep. But casual gamers who don't want to spend hours sorting through all those bells and whistles may find refuge with the more relaxed style, and "Gameday"'s online capabilities outstrip the competition. 989 is still in business for a reason, and if these games did it for you in the past, they certainly have improved enough to satisfy you now.

Through the looking glass

by Mike Pingree, KRT Campus

An Australian man gained the sympathy of his nation when he told of being beset by thugs who stole his wheelchair and hung him upside down on a fencepost in Sydney where he dangled helplessly for two hours. This sparked a flood of gifts, money and a new wheelchair. He was charged with fraud for making the whole thing up - including that he is a paraplegic, which became apparent when he bounded up the steps of the courthouse.

WE DON'T WANT YOUR KIND IN HERE

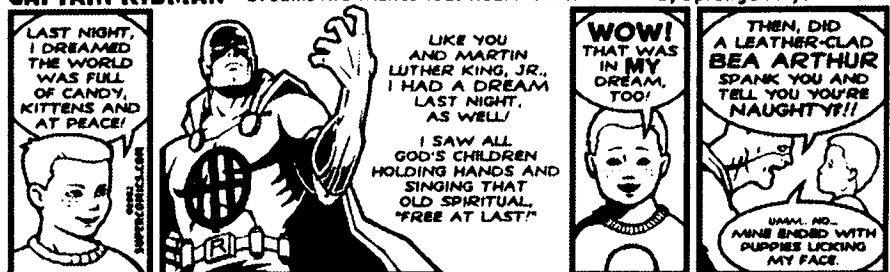
Guards spotted a 43-year-old female lawyer having sex in a visiting room of the Seattle jail with a 26-year-old man she was representing on murder charges. She was meeting with the suspect to discuss his upcoming trial when one thing apparently led to another. She has been removed from the case and, adding insult to injury, barred from the jail.

IT WILL MAKE A NICE MUG SHOT

Two men stole a mail truck in Stavanger, Germany, and one of them took a Polaroid picture of the other behind the wheel flashing a V for Victory sign. Police recovered the vehicle and found the photograph on the seat. They recognized him because he is an ex-convict.

CAPTAIN RIBMAN - Dreams Are Wishes Your Heart Makes

by Sprengelmeyer & Davis



"I can't take full credit for these ultra-mod hairstyles ... the salon is furnished with old electric chairs."

Fans lament the demise of fabled Camaro, Firebird

by Brian Aberback

The Record (Bergen County, N.J.)

Everyone who was anyone at Bergenfield High School in the late eighties and early nineties drove a Chevy Camaro or Pontiac Firebird.

Sleek, fast, and powerful, they were the perfect cars for cruising the main drag or jetting to the shore, said Krista Merschrod, who could be seen around town back then in her bright red 1988 Firebird.

"It's a total adrenaline rush," said Merschrod, who today owns a 1967 black Camaro Super Sport. "When you're driving it you just feel the power. Everything else around you doesn't matter anymore."

For Merschrod and other enthusiasts, it's the end of the line. The last of these wild ponies, once among America's most beloved vehicles, rolled off the assembly line last week at a plant in Quebec.

It brings an end to two models that became part of the essence of Jersey, and an end to the T-Tops with the removable glass panels that sold so well to the "Saturday Night Fever" set.

The Camaro roared onto the market in September 1966, and the Firebird followed five months later. They were Chevrolet and Pontiac's respective answers to the wildly popular Ford Mustang.

The cars' combined sales peaked in the late seventies, a time when the Firebird was especially cool and was featured in the "Smokey and the Bandit" movies and the "Rockford Files" television show.

Although aficionados here lament General Motors' decision to halt production, for them the era isn't ending. Not when there are so many early model Camaros and Firebirds to polish and shine and take

on a cruise down the parkway.

These are people like Dan Deutschman of Metuchen, who loves taking his 1976 "carousel red" Firebird Trans Am to car shows, darting into open spaces on crowded highways along the way. And Wayne resident David Fiorina, who said it's the mix of nostalgia and pride that makes riding in a '68 Firebird special. As the speedometer races forward and his stereo blasts The Doors and Led Zeppelin, the clock turns back to his favorite years, 1965-1975, a time when muscle cars ruled the road.

Merschrod so loves these cars, she even opted for her Camaro over a limo to whisk her away from her wedding two years ago.

Like many classic car owners, she doesn't use her Camaro for everyday transportation. It sits safely in the garage, taken out for rides on warm summer days or breezy fall afternoons.

Fiorina also plans to use sparingly the 1968 Firebird he just purchased. He can't imagine risking the chance of a scratch or dent at a parking lot.

"Who would want to take a car like that to Willowbrook (Mall)?" he asked. With excitement in his voice, Fiorina described his new Firebird, a convertible that boasts an eight-cylinder engine. His old Firebird had a six-cylinder, and on the mean streets of North Jersey, that didn't cut it.

"It was kind of cheesy with the six-cylinder," he said. "It's depressing when you have a car like that and you can't keep up with a Ford Probe."

Fiorina first saw his dream when he was a teenager growing up in Riverdale. It was parked across the street at a neighbor's house. It was, of course, a red 1968 Firebird.

"When I saw it I just wanted it," Fiorina

said. "I was 14 or 15. I just said, 'Wow, someday I want to have one.'"

Two years ago, he got his dream car. "I drove it all last summer. I went down to Belmar [in it] every weekend," said Fiorina, 32.

"I feel pride when driving something that's American-made," he said. These days, he said, you never know where parts on American cars were manufactured. But with a '68 Firebird, there's no question.

Deutschman loves speed and handling

other hand, (GM) priced them so far out of the range of the market they were aiming for," he said.

The prices of most newer-model Camaros and Firebirds start at around \$25,000. And then there's the hefty insurance premium that comes with owning a sports car in the state with the highest auto insurance rates in the nation.

Twenty years ago, 182,848 Camaros were sold nationwide, according to statistics provided by Autodata, a Woodcliff



A beautiful 1967 Camaro poses with fall's foliage

of his 1976 Firebird Trans Am. "When you step on the gas, it doesn't ask you when, where, or why. It just goes," he explains.

He's put more than \$15,000 of work into his dream car, though he admits he "stopped counting for health reasons."

Deutschman said he had mixed emotions when GM announced it would stop producing Firebirds and Camaros.

"It was a shame to hear it, but on the

Lake company that tracks automotive information. Through July, only 20,063 Camaros had been sold this year. Firebird experienced a similar free fall: 105,686 sold in 1982, 21,501 in 1992; 14,567 through July.

"The decision (to discontinue production) was pretty sad," said Larry Webster, technical editor of Car and Driver magazine. But "everybody's known it was coming for a while."

Webster noted that GM hasn't re-designed the Camaro in nearly a decade, choosing to put its resources into trucks and sport-utility vehicles. Today's SUVs, like yesterday's muscle cars, embody youth and sportiness, he said. They're also more practical.

"People think, 'I can be cool in this and fit all my junk in it,'" he said.

Some car dealers say it may be premature to mourn the death of the dynamic duo of pony cars. After all, Ford recently reintroduced its Thunderbird line, and Pontiac plans to bring back its classic GTO in 2004.

"I think they'll be back with a new car in the future," said Ron Barna, general manager of Chevrolet Hummer in Paramus, where four Camaros remain on the sales floor.

Die-hard Camaro and Firebird lovers say they realize their cars may rise in value now that no new models are coming out. But don't expect a "for sale" sign to appear in their windshields anytime soon.

"This one's a keeper," Fiorina said of his new Firebird.

Merschrod, who now lives in New Milford, also has no plans to sell her Camaro. And, in 17 years, she hopes the next generation will share in the special excitement that comes from sliding into a pony car, hitting the gas, and taking control of the road ahead.

"I'll let her take it for a spin one day with her mommy," Merschrod says of her 7-week-old daughter, Amber Rose. "People will know those Merschrod girls know how to drive."