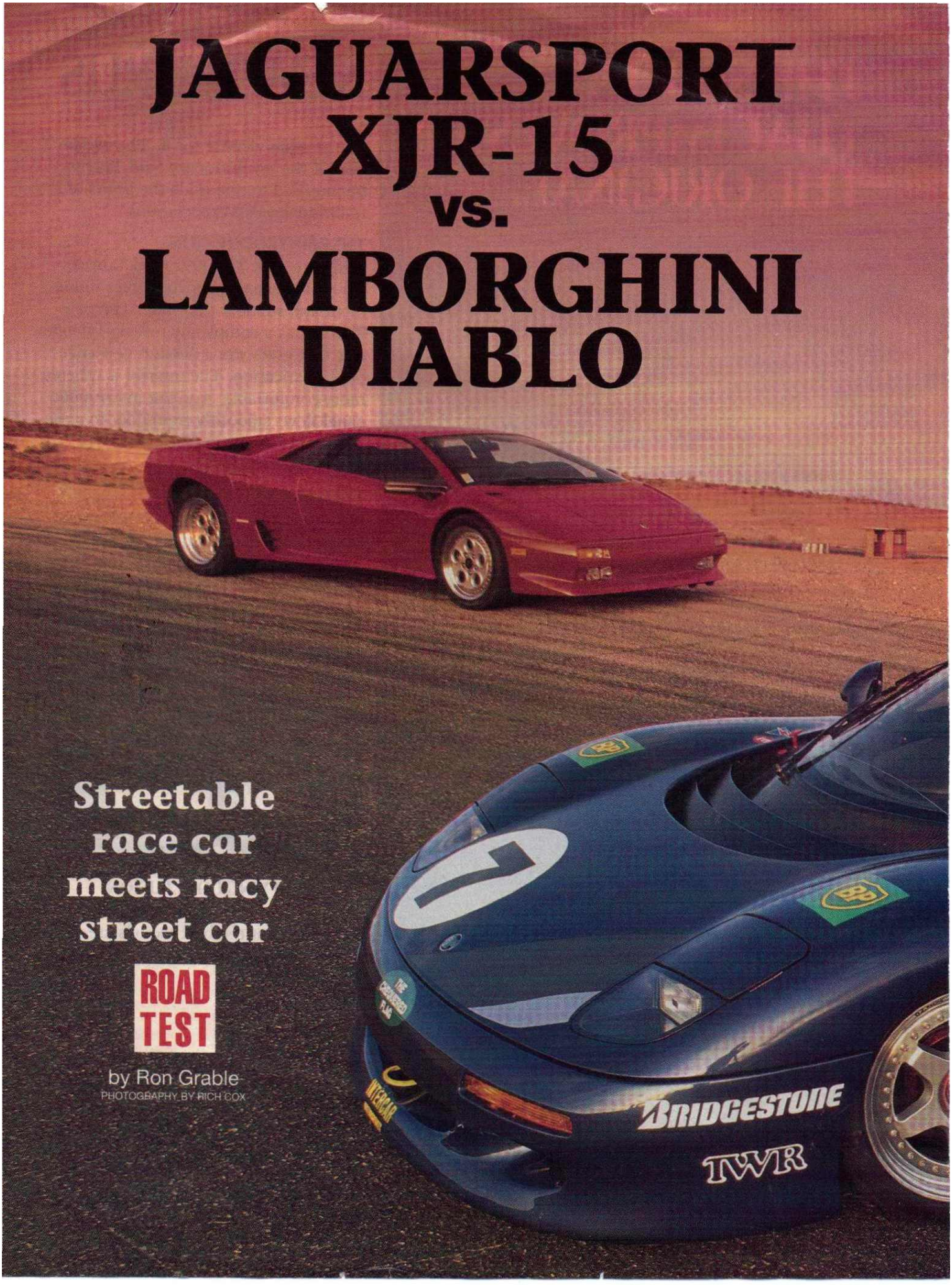
JAGUARSPORT XJR-15 vs. LAMBORGHINI DIABLO



Streetable race car meets racy street car

ROAD TEST

by Ron Grable

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICH COX

Step right this way, Mista, for the deal of a lifetime. Goons put you behind the wheel of that Jag-u-war of your dreams. How much? Just $980,995.95. Sure, it's dollars. Mister, Mister, wait, if that's too much, I've got a Diablo out back that's a paltry 250—uh-huh, thousand.

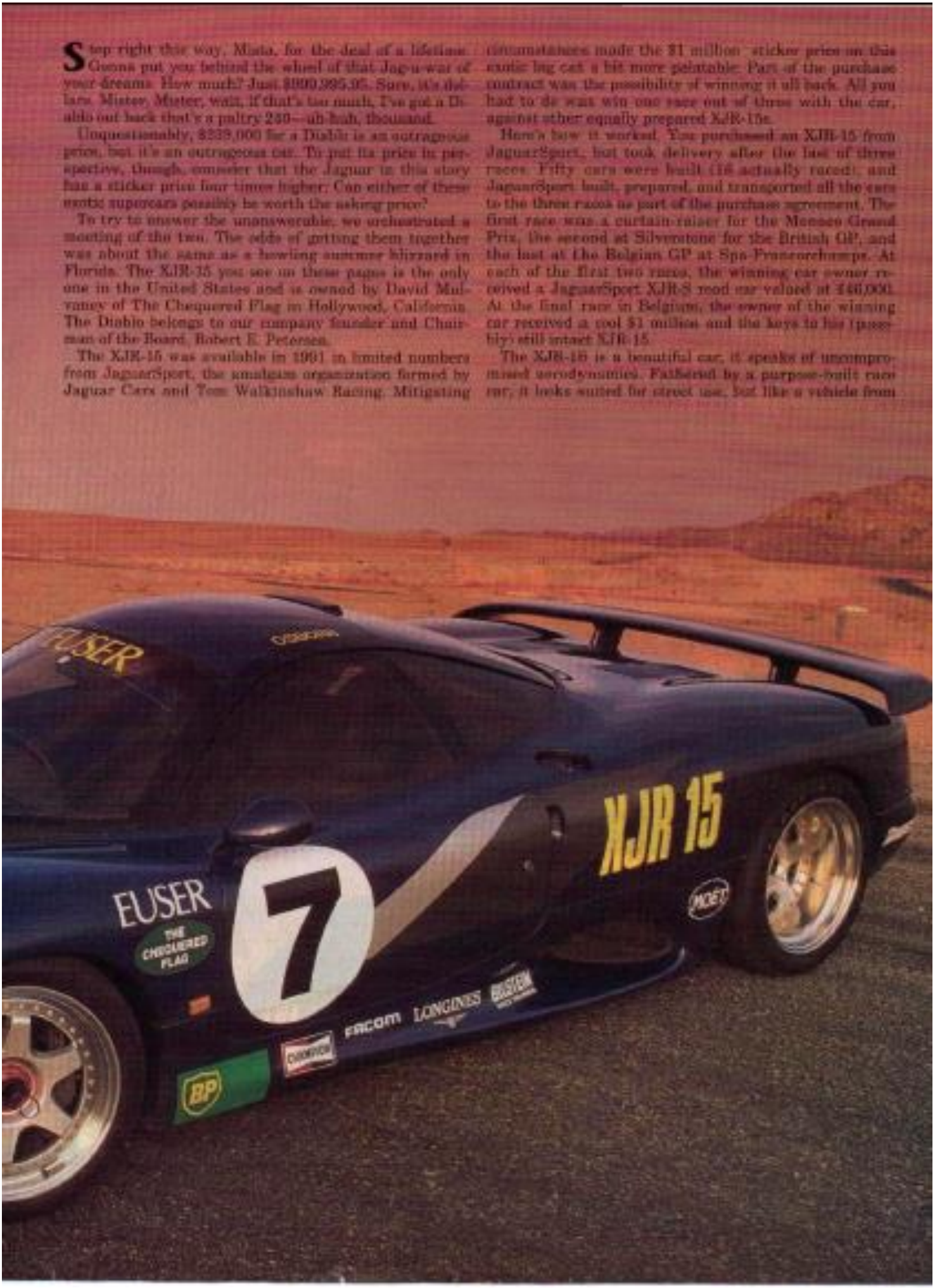
Unquestionably, $239,000 for a Diablo is an outrageous price, but it's an outrageous car. To put its price in perspective, though, consider that the Jaguar in this story has a sticker price four times higher. Can either of these exotic supercars possibly be worth the asking price?

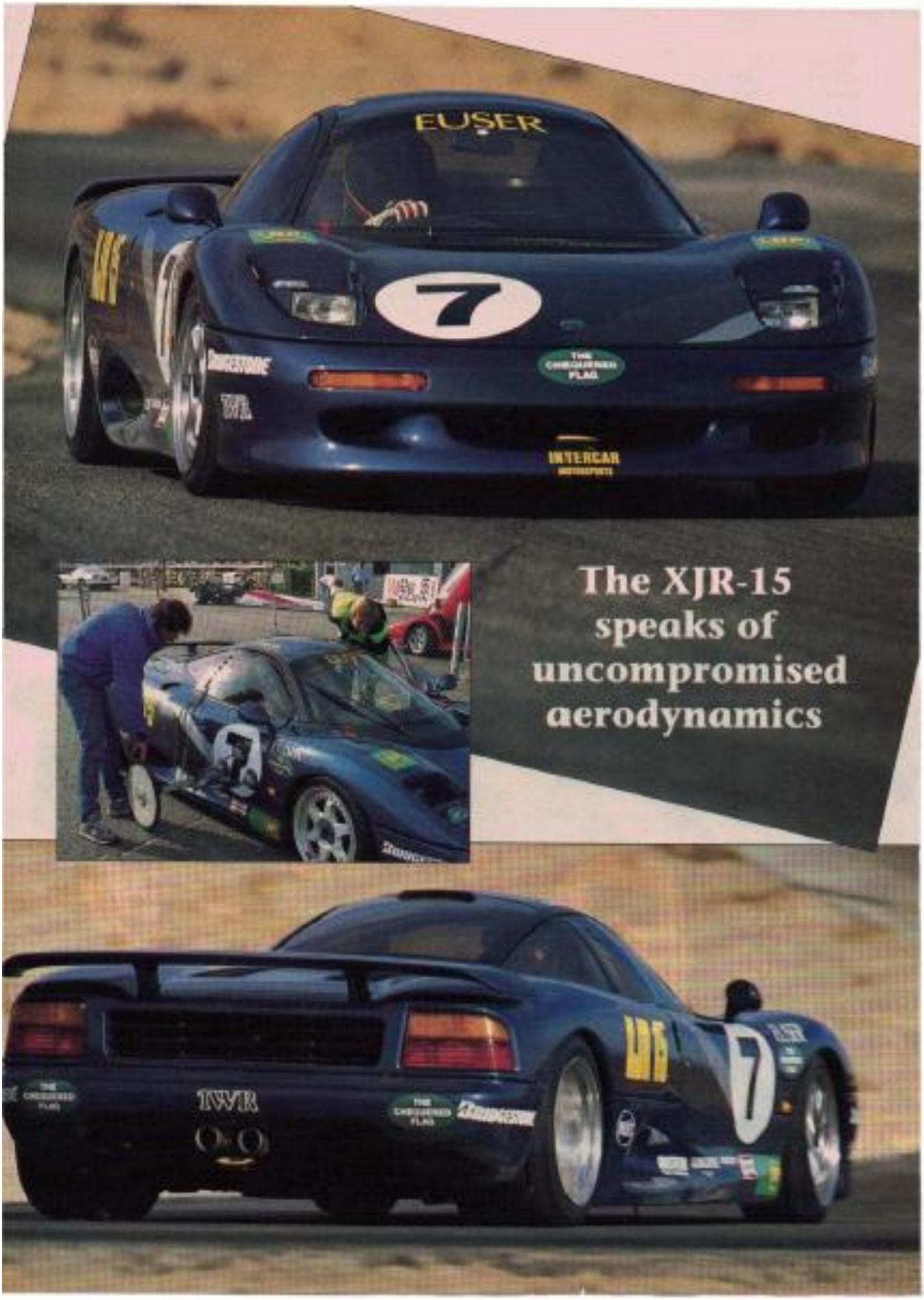
To try to answer the unanswerable, we orchestrated a meeting of the two. The odds of getting them together was about the same as a howling summer blizzard in Florida. The XJR-15 you see on these pages is the only one in the United States and is owned by David Mulvaney of The Chequered Flag in Hollywood, California. The Diablo belongs to our company founder and Chairman of the Board, Robert E. Petersen.

The XJR-15 was available in 1991 in limited numbers from JaguarSport, the amalgam organization formed by Jaguar Cars and Tom Walkinshaw Racing. Mitigating circumstances made the $1 million sticker price on this exotic big cat a bit more palatable. Part of the purchase contract was the possibility of winning it all back. All you had to do was win one race out of three with the car, against other equally prepared XJR-15s.

Here's how it worked. You purchased an XJR-15 from JaguarSport, but took delivery after the last of three races. Fifty cars were built (16 actually raced), and JaguarSport built, prepared, and transported all the cars to the three races as part of the purchase agreement. The first race was a curtain-raiser for the Monaco Grand Prix, the second at Silverstone for the British GP, and the last at the Belgian GP at Spa-Francorchamps. At each of the first two races, the winning car owner received a JaguarSport XJR-S road car valued at $440,000. At the final race in Belgium, the owner of the winning car received a cool $1 million and the keys to his (passably) still intact XJR-15.

The XJR-15 is a beautiful car, it speaks of uncompromised aerodynamics. Fathered by a purpose-built race car, it looks suited for street use, but like a vehicle from





The XJR-15 speaks of uncompromised aerodynamics

25 years in our future that's traveled backward in time to us. The one you see here finished third at the million-dollar Spa race and then was shipped directly to its owner. It's not street legal (nor can it ever be) here, but some XJR-15s have been converted to highway-legal status in Europe, where vehicle standards are less stringent.

The XJR-15 was developed at Tom Walkinshaw Racing and uses the tub and componentry from the '88 LeMans-winning XJR-9. The cars were originally intended to be street-legal versions of the LeMans winner, but along the way metamorphosed into the Million Dollar Challenge Series machine you see here. JaguarSport's initial philosophy was "to offer LeMans performance to seriously rich customers used to roadgoing supercars."

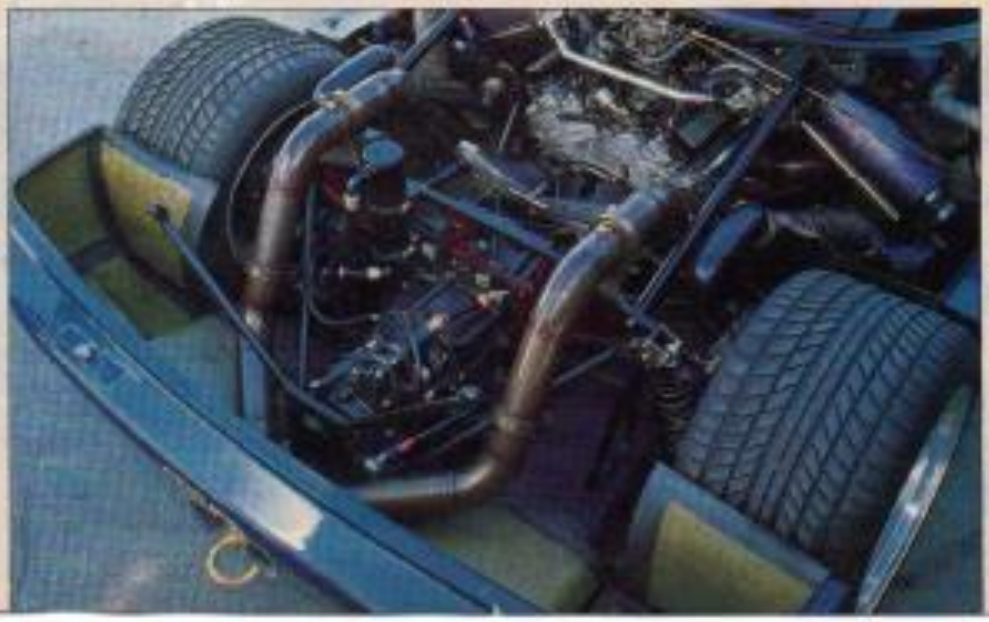
The major design changes to separate the streetable XJR-15 from the XJR-9 were to provide more head and shoulder room for the driver and a viable space for the passenger (in Group C cars, the passenger space is vestigial at best and packed with electronics). In addition, the suspension had to be modified to provide streetable compliance and adequate ground clearance. A real windshield replaced the clip-in race unit, and the doors were fitted to the body and weather sealed.

The tub and body construction of the XJR-15 carry over the pure Kevlar/carbon fiber from the race car, but the team unanimously decided the high downforce racing body was too ugly for a street car, and almost completely redesigned it. The shape is now more rounded, especially the nose, which is less shovel-like. The rear wing is better integrated with the bodywork, making it more impervious to damage. The new bodywork also incorporates pop-up headlights, turn signals, and much improved visibility.

The downsized Jaguar's single-cam two-valve all-aluminum V-12 (6.0 compared with 7.0 liters for the racers) powerplant is mounted longitudinally as a fully stressed member, and distributes the rear suspension loads into the tub. A six-speed Hewland transaxle delivers power to the 17-inch wheels and tires. Dry weight of the XJR-15 is 2314 pounds. Zytec and Lucas fuel injection (sequential) and digital electronic ignition produce a civil 450 horsepower, with 430 pound-feet of torque.

While the XJR-15 is a streetable version of a pure racing car, the Diablo was conceived and executed as a street car. The Countach first appeared in 1972, and wasn't retired until 1990—a long-lived design by any standard. Its striking shape came to epitomize the supercar image, and it appeared in countless movies and television shows. It was all angles, planes, scoops, and strakes, and none too aerodynamic. The Diablo by contrast seems smooth and rounded, a shape at peace with the air it moves through. Nonetheless, both the Countach and the Diablo are visceral, exciting machines.

A Diablo is as much the antithesis of conventionality as was its predecessor. Its posture suggests defiance, even insolence. Driving a blood-red Diablo is to watch



Considering the Jaguar's race-bred, there's an amazing amount of room even for drivers over six-feet tall. Inside, the layout is as beautiful as it is functional; even the weave of the Kevlar is matched panel to panel. The instruments, steering wheel, gear lever, and pedals are perfectly arranged strictly for business—and that's a pleasure. As with the rest of the XJR-15, the detail work in the 6.0-liter V-12 powerplant is impeccable; it looks crowded, but it's all in there in a logical placement.

the traffic magically part, leaving a trail of bewildered commuters behind, each lost in his own reverent fantasy—just one of the peripheral benefits of Diablomanship. Naturally, such a blatantly voluptuous ride attracts the protectors of our highways like a huge electromagnet. Mostly, they just want to look and talk about the car, and seem to assume anyone who drives such a car somehow should be above due process.

The Diablo clearly identifies Italian thinking on what a cost-no-object GT car should be. Its 5.7-liter twin-cam four-valve V-12 sits longitudinally in the chassis, just aft of the passenger compartment. The number two cylinder is mere inches from the driver's right shoulder. The V-12 has enough camshafts and valves to build a fleet of Hyundais. Imagine setting the clearances on 48 valves—better bring some cheese and a bottle of wine. The V-12 sits backward in the conventional sense, with power from the crankshaft going forward up the central tunnel to the five-speed gearbox, then making a 180-degree turn back alongside the engine crankcase to drive the rear wheels.

This drivetrain layout is easily adaptable to all-wheel drive, and engineers at Lamborghini have been working for some time on such a system for the Diablo. The 335/35ZR17 P Zero Pirelli rear tires do a commendable job of dealing with the axle-twisting 428 pound-feet of torque, but the need to distribute the torque more efficiently is still an engineering priority. All-wheel drive would offer that increased efficiency and improve the safety envelope for the car on slick surfaces.

The system under development at Lambo will split the power at the transmission output, directing up to 15 percent forward through a viscous coupling and carbon-fiber driveshaft to the front wheels. Initial plans were to have the all-wheel-drive variant in model year '91, but development problems have caused that date to slip. An interesting feature of the all-wheel-drive car will be a clutchless

TECH DATA

Jaguar XJR-15

GENERAL/POWERTRAIN	
Body style	2-door, 2-passenger
Vehicle configuration	Mid-engine, rear drive
Engine configuration	60° V-12, SOHC, 2 valves/cylinder
Engine displacement, ci/cc	366/5995
Horsepower, hp @ rpm, SAE net	450 @ 6250
Torque, lb-ft @ rpm, SAE net	430 @ 4500
Transmission	6-speed man.
Axle ratio	N/A

DIMENSIONS	
Wheelbase, in./mm	N/A
Length, in./mm	189.0/4800
Curb weight, lb	2314
Fuel capacity, gal	N/A

CHASSIS	
Suspension, f/r	Independent/independent
Steering	Rack and pinion
Brakes, f/r	Vented discs/vented discs
Wheels	17 x 9.5/17 x 13.0
Tires	245/40ZR17/335/35ZR17 Bridgestone RE71

PERFORMANCE	
Acceleration, 0-60, sec	4.5
Quarter mile, sec/mph	12.6/117.2
Skidpad, 200-ft, lateral g	0.95

PRICE	
Base price	$1,000,000

TECH DATA

Lamborghini Diablo

GENERAL/POWERTRAIN	
Body style	2-door, 2-passenger
Vehicle configuration	Mid-engine, rear drive
Engine configuration	V-12, DOHC, 4 valves/cylinder
Engine displacement, ci/cc	348/5707
Horsepower, hp @ rpm, SAE net	485 @ 7000
Torque, lb-ft @ rpm, SAE net	428 @ 5200
Transmission	5-speed man.
Axle ratio	2.41:1

DIMENSIONS	
Wheelbase, in./mm	104.3/2650
Length, in./mm	175.6/4460
Curb weight, lb	3640
Fuel capacity, gal	26.4

CHASSIS	
Suspension, f/r	Independent/independent
Steering	Rack and pinion
Brakes, f/r	Vented discs/vented discs
Wheels	17 x 8.5/17 x 13.0
Tires	245/40ZR17/335/35ZR17 Pirelli P Zero

PERFORMANCE	
Acceleration, 0-60, sec	4.4
Quarter mile, sec/mph	13.2/109.6
Skidpad, 200-ft, lateral g	0.91

PRICE	
Base price	$239,000

manual shifting system, which will trigger clutch activation by a squeeze of the shift lever. It'll even be possible to alter shift "firmness" to suit driver preferences.

The Diablo is a bigger car than the Countach: 6 inches longer, 1.5 inches wider, and 1.5 inches higher. It's also some 300 pounds heavier. Some of the increased weight is just because it's a bigger car, but the Diablo has a much higher standard-equipment content than does the Countach. Some of the upgrades include automatic air conditioning, electric windows, and a killer stereo (the subwoofer alone accounts for 26 pounds). The Countach had always been criticized for its stark, no-frills persona; Lamborghini and parent company Chrysler made sure to change that image with the Diablo.

It's general chassis layout is the same, but most of the Diablo's components are new. The chassis is a tubular space frame made up of square and rectangular section tubing, with classic double wishbone suspension front and rear. The body shell floor is a composite material for added chassis rigidity, and a thin carbon-fiber material is used for the bumpers, deck, and hood. The body shell is still aluminum, but a tougher alloy than that used on the Countach.

No ABS is fitted, unusual for a car of this potential, but the braking hardware is absolutely first-class. Steering is by a manual rack and pinion for that truly Italian race-car steering feel, but since 40 percent of the vehicle's weight is on the front axle, steering effort in the dreaded parallel parking maneuver is high.

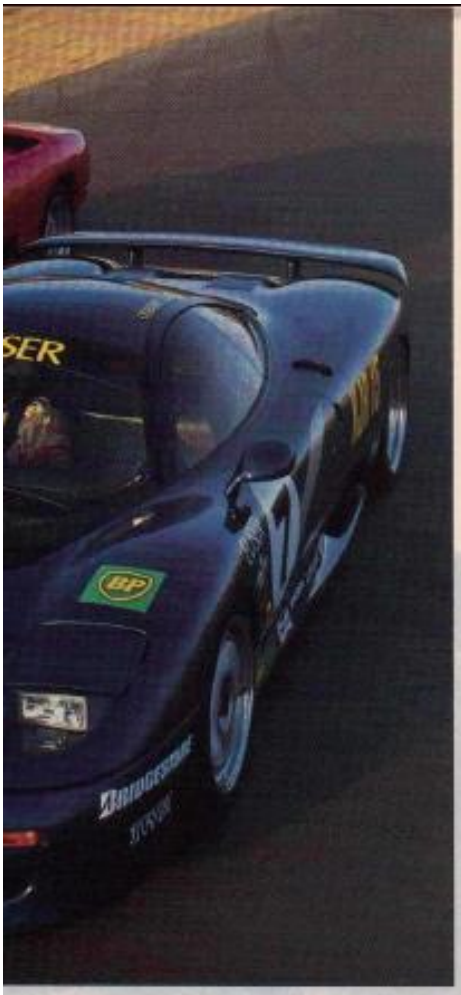
The Diablo is definitely a sports car as only Italians can make them. Clutch pedal effort is high enough to bring tears to your eyes, and pushing on the throttle makes you wonder if maybe you hit the brake pedal by mistake. If you can bench-press 400 pounds, you should have no trouble driving this car.

At the appointed time, both cars materialized at Willow Springs Raceway. The XJR-15 was hidden away in a huge semi trailer, while the Diablo rolled into the pit area after an uneventful trip from Los Angeles (if you call fielding all those admiring glances and outright offers to race uneventful).

Having driven a number of GTP cars, I found the amount of room inside the XJR-15 was a real surprise. In competition GTP cars, my helmet usually interferes with the door, rollcage, top, windshield, or all of the above, but in the this Jag, there not only was enough clearance to wear a helmet, but even plenty of room for long legs. The passenger side was equally spacious, with no clutter of instrumentation or black boxes.

Aesthetically, the XJR-15's interior is breathtaking. Expanses of shiny black carbon fiber woven with dull-yellow Kevlar are everywhere, all fitting together with meticulous precision. Instrumentation is detailed and legibly analog. The shift lever is less than 3 inches from the small steering wheel, and the motion between gears is almost imperceptible. The reclined seating position provides excellent forward visibility—over the top of the instrument panel you see only racetrack.

In anticipation of sitting inches in front of an open-exhaust racing V-12, I intentionally left my earplugs in the helmet bag. The music of such a big, potent V-12 at full song is a rare pleasure, and I was determined to soak up every decibel. As the engine sprang to life and settled into a muted rumbling idle, it was impossible to keep from grinning. Easing the unsynchronized six-speed into gear, I accelerated onto the front straight. Many race cars are dia-

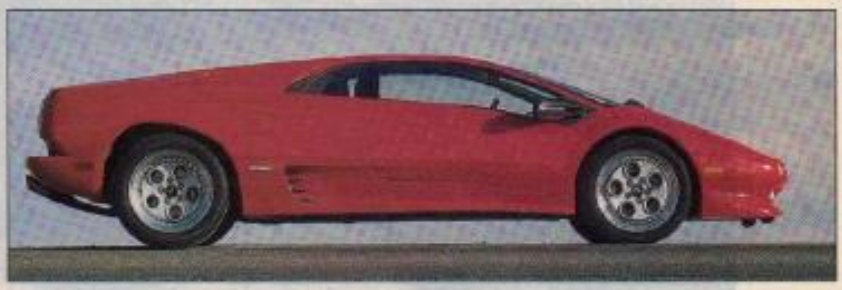


There's no doubt the Lambo is of Italian descent

tant to savor the moment.

Normally, racetrack laps in a Lamborghini Diablo would make anyone's day, but our perception was skewed by having just driven the Jaguar XJR-15. By contrast, the Diablo seemed almost ordinary and certainly a little idiosyncratic. The 5.7-liter Italian V-12 also makes wonderful engine music, but of an entirely different nature. Since the car is EPA legal, there's little exhaust noise, but the engine breathes through intake openings just behind the B-pillar close to the driver's left ear. Full-throttle work produces a multifaceted moaning sound as air is sucked into the big engine. As engine speed rises, so does the sound level, until it drowns out all rational thought near the 7000-rpm redline. Wonder how long it'll be before the EPA becomes concerned about intake noise?

The ergonomics of the Diablo are much improved over the Countach's. There's actually enough room to sit up straight without banging into the headliner, and although the steering wheel blocks part of the instrument cluster, the tach and speedo are front-and-center legible. My biggest gripe is with the narrow space for the driver's throttle foot between the brake pedal and central tunnel—I had to remove my shoe to operate the throttle.



bolical to get moving from a dead stop. Their engines are tuned to make power at such high rpm that at low speeds, they cough and stumble and make almost zero torque. Not so the Jag—the smooth V-12 pulled cleanly away, nearly as docile as a street car.

On the track, the XJR-15 is truly a wonderful ride, the perfect compromise between racing and street. You can say the savage edge of a pure race car has been softened slightly, or conversely, that it's the best-handling street car you can imagine. Being 100-percent composite, it's so light that every aspect of performance is enhanced. Relatively low spring and roll rates are enough to keep it stable in pitch and roll, as well as deliver a high level of ride compliance. The brakes are phenomenal and the acceleration fierce. And always there's that V-12, a medley of mechanical noises superimposed over the raucous rise and fall of the exhaust sound.

The Jag had just arrived from Europe—on rain tires—and the race rubber hadn't yet shown up. In short order, the left front tire was history, but even without the race tires, the handling dynamics were outstanding. The XJR-15 goes exactly where you ask it, with cornering force directly proportional to steering input. Cornering balance is a slight understeer on trailing throttle, with a predictable transition to neutral as the power comes on. The gearing was ideal for Willow Springs; the Jag engine reaching 6000 rpm in sixth gear just at the end of the long pit straightaway. In deference to the tires, I eventually pulled off the track.

Before surrendering this truly "super" car, I remained in the cockpit for a minute with the door closed, just listening to the clicks and pops as the XJR-15 cooled. It had been an incomparable experience, and it seemed impor-

The Diablo's handling is brutal. Lots of steering force, lots of oversteer, and lots of adrenaline. The big Pirelli tires produce some awesome cornering power, but the Diablo never seems completely comfortable with the whole process of hard cornering. It's best at hard, straight acceleration, where it quickly goes 100 mph while sounding like 200. Its high final-drive ratio and good torque characteristics demand little shifting, which is good because the gate requires concentration and determination.

Our instrumented test data was affected by two factors, rain tires on the Jag and the boss owning the Diablo. The rain tires hampered the XJR-15 in both acceleration and skidpad. We expected it to generate at least 1.5 g with race tires and chop at least a half second off its 0-60 time. Similarly, we didn't hammer the last tenth of a second out of the Diablo's performance. After all, how would you explain to the owner of the company that you had just handgrenaded his quarter-million dollar car? Even so, the performance of both cars hint at their potential.

These two supercars have many similarities. They're both mid-engined with longitudinal V-12s, both cabin-forward layouts, both rear drive, and both exceedingly rare. They differ radically in other ways. The Jag uses the most innovative possible construction for chassis and body, the Diablo gets by with steel tubing. The Jag was conceived as a pure competition car and adapted to a quasi-street vehicle, while the Diablo has been detoxed to meet all U.S. requirements.

Which is the best? If you can afford either, price obviously isn't a concern. Owning the XJR-15 in the U.S. is a moot point anyway, but in the abstract, consider this: The Diablo is the ultimate in street image, the XJR the ultimate in street performance. Either way, you can't lose. MT