

Hagerstown Speedway hosts Monster Jam this weekend

By CHRIS COPLEY
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They're big, they're ear-splittingly loud and they're back in Washington County this weekend. Monster trucks return to Hagerstown Speedway Friday through Sunday for Monster Jam. Six trucks are expected, including the Grave Digger driven by Gary Porter.

The Grave Digger team has seven nearly identical trucks competing on the monster truck circuit, according to the team's website, www.gravedigger.com. Porter, who lives with his wife, Penny, on a farm in Wadesboro, N.C., joined the team in 2001. He has been racing monster trucks since 1985. He said he likes coming to Hagerstown.

"I always look forward to it. It's a very nice venue," he said when reached by phone last week. "Most speedways, we do two days of racing. Hagerstown, we do three. And you have to be on your A game."

Typically, each day of monster truck competition is divided into two events — side-by-side racing against the clock, then freestyle. Freestyle is like monster truck ballet — drivers have a couple of minutes to do wheelies, spins, jumps over piles of cars, pretty much anything they can to wow the crowd and judges.

"Freestyle is always the crowd favorite," Porter said.

The trucks are built tough to take their drivers' hard handling. Each truck has a fiberglass body over a heavy, steel frame. Tires are 66 inches tall and 43 inches wide. Grave Digger's suspension has to help the truck survive a 60-foot-long jump reaching 25 feet in height. Or landing on one tire. Or rolling over.



"On the Grave Digger truck there's 30 inches of travel on the rear (suspension) and 26 in front," Porter said. "With the obstacles, getting points depends on how much air we get. We want a lot of travel."

But the big tires and wide open suspension has a downside — it makes the top-heavy truck bounce as if it had beach balls on its corners.

Couple Grave Digger's frame and suspension to a 1,200-horsepower engine, and you've got speed as well as power. Porter said he'll do what he can to please the crowd. Grave Digger can accelerate from a standing start to 50 or 60 miles per hour in just a few seconds. Or crawl over and crush a school bus. Or hold a wheelie from one end of the racetrack to the other.

But that's the point: To put on a good show. To have a good time.

"They're just bigger than life. The tires are so big. Kids are in awe," Porter said. "I look forward to seeing everybody at Hagerstown."