

Phantom Respect

BMW's new Rolls-Royce Phantom drives like a dream, but does the brand still turn heads? **BY DAVID WELCH**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DONNA TEREK; (LOGO) ROLLS-ROYCE MOTOR CARS/VIA BLOOMBERG NEWS



ROLLS-ROYCE: THE name reeks of wealth, luxury, and excess. For a kid like me growing up in rusted-out Syracuse, N.Y., it stood for something otherworldly and unattainable. It was enough, the vision of this powerful

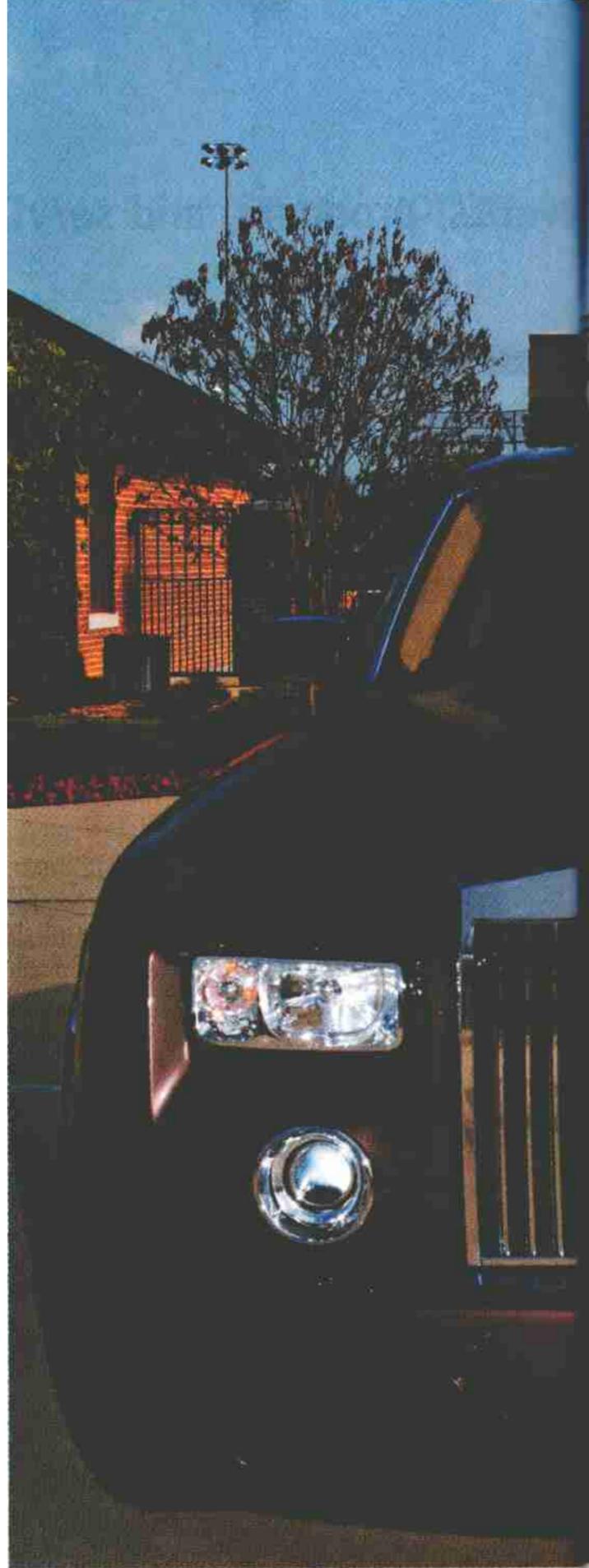
car with its endless front, to once make me pump \$5 into a gumball machine trying to coax out a cheap plastic copy of Rolls's "Spirit of Ecstasy" hood ornament.

Even today, I love the idea of a Roller. So when the company offered me a new \$330,000 Phantom to test drive for the weekend, I grabbed it. This is the first new Rolls since BMW took over the British carmaker in 2003, ending decades of sometimes poorly made yet magnificent-

ly appointed vehicles. I looked forward to driving this beauty proudly through my prosaic world. People would stop me to admire the car and pepper me with questions. What a kick.

Or not. On the first day, I pulled it into the grocery store lot and people stood there gawking. While I got the requisite thumbs up from some, no one stopped me to get the low-down on the car the way people did when I test drove the Lamborghini Murcielago or the Bentley Continental GT. (The sight of the Bentley prompted a fellow to follow me for two miles just to ask what I was driving.) These were more looks of disbelief that a guy wearing Chuck Taylors and long sideburns was behind the wheel of a such a car.

Later, at the public ball field where my baseball team had a game, I was unpack-



Check Out My Ride

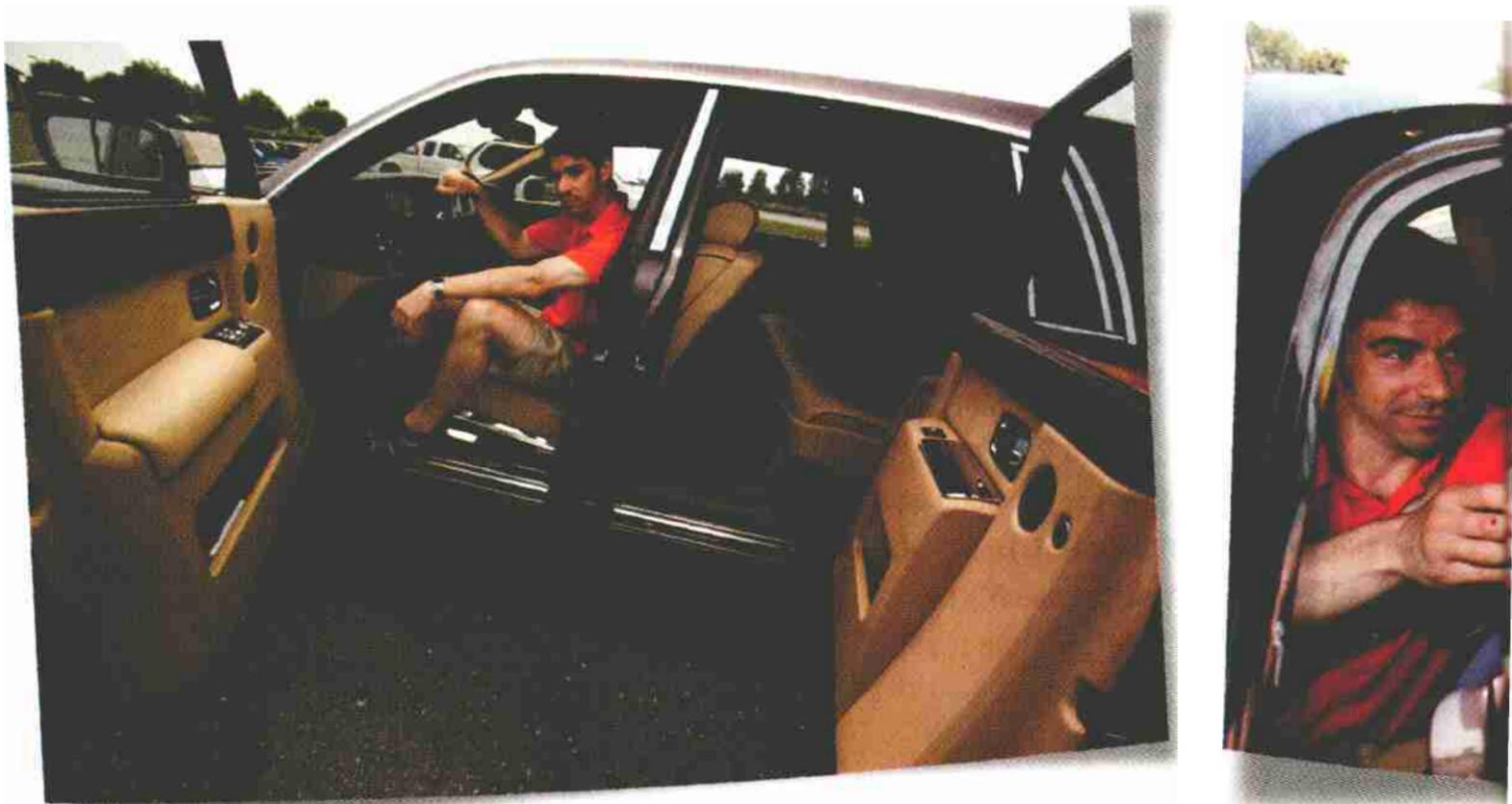
OUT TO THE BALL GAME

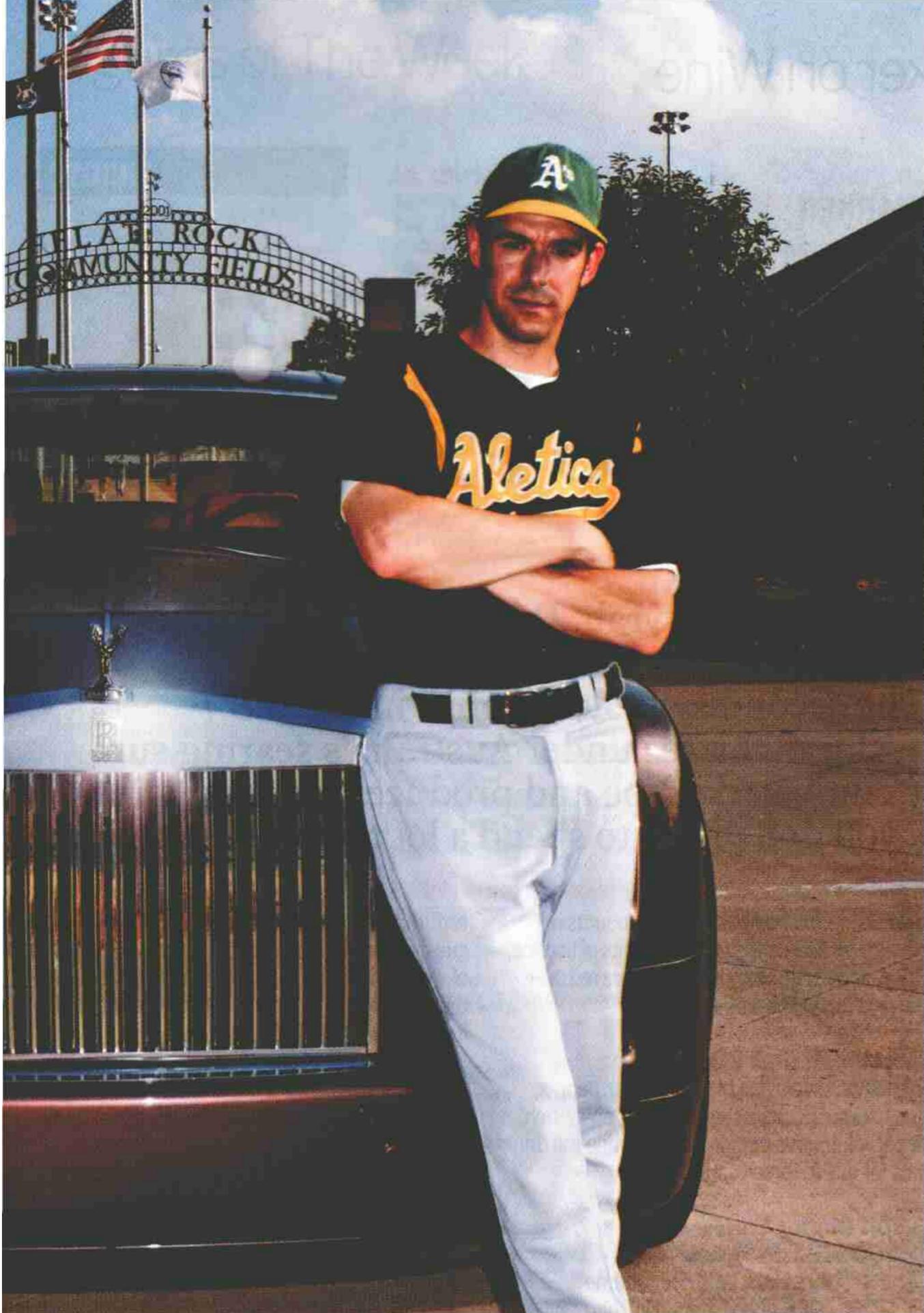
Writer Welch drives the Phantom to the ballpark—and takes a ribbing from teammates

EASY ACCESS Coach doors will swing shut at the press of a button

NOT FAST ENOUGH While this pick-up window photo was being snapped, other customers were more annoyed with the delay than impressed with the car

DIGNITY INTACT Bringing back that new-car shine





ing bats from the "boot" when my teammates started ribbing me. One quipped that the next time I get an opportunity to drive one of these cars might be if some millionaire hires me to take it to a car wash. By the way, I did take it to the car wash. My garage was too small for this 20-foot beast, and some local blue jays splattered up the hood while it was parked in the driveway.

Don't get me wrong. I thoroughly enjoyed driving this car. It floated over speed bumps as if they didn't exist, and despite its 6,600-pound bulk, the car handled like a Honda. Its V-12 engine can get from 0 to 60 mph in 5.7 seconds.

Still, people were not in awe of the car, as I expected. On Sunday, I figured holding up the line at a McDonald's drive-through while our photographer took pictures would be no problem. Who wouldn't wait a few more minutes to get a Big Mac when they could get a close-up look at the rear end of a new Rolls? Instead, the guy in the pickup behind me started blaring death metal and screamed for us to move.

Why didn't the Phantom, with its massive presence and majestic chrome grill, get the respect of other exclusive rides? My theory: The flowing sensuality that has been a hallmark of classic Rollsies has been replaced by a squared-off, almost austere Teutonic design. It doesn't have the princely presence of the Rolls of old.

BMW did a masterful job of engineering this car, and the craftsmanship is Rolls-worthy. But it seems like an anachronism. While car buffs still revere the name, they'd rather drive the sporty new-age Bentleys and high-end Porsches. Can you imagine the Google guys tooling around in a Rolls?

