

Riding in STYLE

TINY Speedster

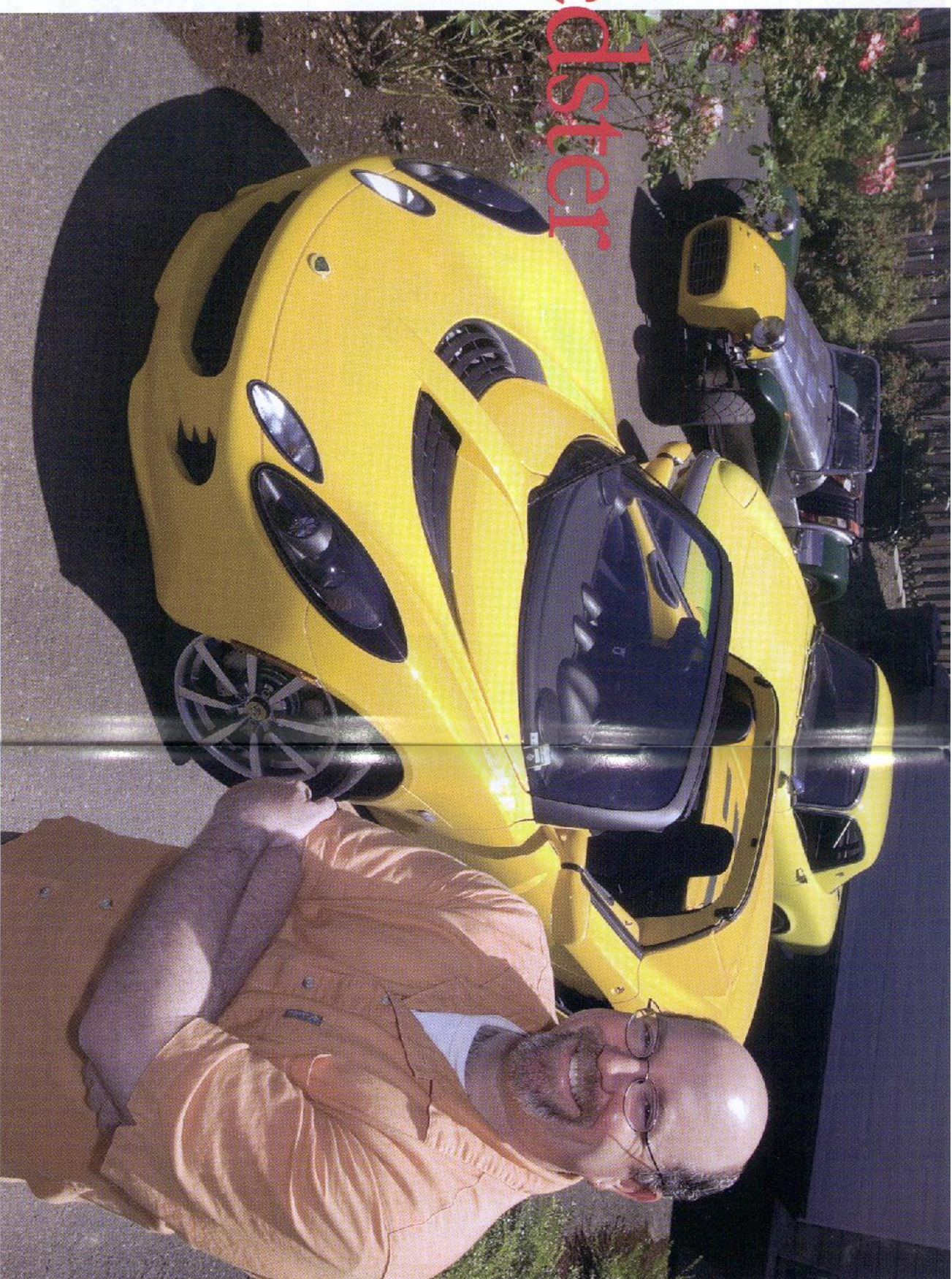
By JEFF KUECHLE
Special Writer

It is without a doubt one of the least-practical cars on the planet. Its seats are austere-ly-padded, racecar-style swoops of composite. There's no back seat, no cupholders, and very little shoulder or head room for anyone 6 foot 3 or over. There is nowhere to put children or dogs. It has a 4-cubic-foot trunk. There is no dignified way to get in and out. Air conditioning and a fine Blaupunkt stereo are the only concessions to aesthetic comfort.

But to owners such as Jim Boone, who waited two years to take delivery after putting down his initial deposit, that is the essence of the Lotus Elise's charm.

"To me, the simplicity is very appealing," he roared over the howl of his saffron-yellow 2005 Elise's 4-cylinder, 1.8-liter Toyota engine and the rush of wind as he whips through the curves along Skyline Boulevard. "It's just a car. There's nothing you don't need. There's no satellite navigation system, no cupholders. It's just pure fun to drive."

Granted, Boone, 40, the Unix system engineering manager at Columbia Sportswear in Southwest Portland, is a confirmed Lotus fanatic. He owns two other Lotuses — an Elan and a Seven, the latter of which he describes as even less prac-



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taking a relatively minimalist approach to engine size and power. The Elise, powered by a 190-horsepower Toyota engine, weighs only 1,950 pounds. The result is facc-tor-toring acceleration — 0-60 mph in 4.7 seconds — coupled with the curve-bug-ging nimbleness of a panicked gazelle.

"The people who buy the Elise just want to enjoy life and have fun," Sharma said. "It just puts a big smile on your face."

Boone became fixated on Lotuses at an early age. "I grew up in San Diego," he said.

"There was a Lotus dealership along the freeway, and once in awhile, my dad and I would stop in to look. My dad loved fast cars and Lotuses in particular, but he could never have one — with his income and two kids, it just wasn't practical."

Boone bought his first Lotus in 1997. "They just get into your blood," he said. "One isn't enough — you need more. Each model has its own personality." He adds that he and his wife, who have no children, negotiated a special arrangement when he decided he had to buy an Elise. "We agreed that I could have the car, and she could have anything she wants." Boone says the Elise "definitely

tical than the Elise. "The Seven is a tiny roadster — it doesn't even have doors," he says. "It's noisy, it's oily, and it makes this car look huge."

Although the Elise has been available in Europe since 1995, it wasn't imported to the U.S. until this year. Lotus' only Portland-area outlet, Lotus of Portland on Southwest Canyon Road, operates out of MotoCorza, a high-performance motorcycle dealership owned by the Tonkin family. MotoCorza began parking the eye-catching Elise out front, next to its main stock in trade, top-of-the-line Ducati and

Aprilia motorcycles, in February. The response, according to general manager Arun Sharma, was immediate. "Our customers are everyone from total Lotus nuts to people who didn't even know they wanted one before they walked through the door," he said. "I've had two customers who came in to buy a motorcycle, and drove out in an Elise."

There aren't many motorcycle dealerships that also sell cars. But to Sharma, this seeming contradiction makes sense. "Our original thought was that we would sell the Lotus through Tonkin Gran Turismo," he

said. "Then the people from Lotus Cars USA came through on a tour, and suggested that we sell them here at MotoCorza. The logic was that there are more similarities between a Lotus and a performance motorcycle than there are between a Lotus and other cars. Lotus owners are interested in track days, performance seminars, all the things we do for our motorcycle customers, but that car dealerships just don't offer."

Clamber behind the wheel, and the difference between the Elise and other cars is immediately obvious. The Lotus philosophy is simple: keep weight to a minimum to yield world-class agility and handling, while

isn't for everyone. You do get a lot of attention." Not, however, from the sources you might expect. "Most women, to be honest, don't seem to notice it that much," he says. "It does seem to have a magnetic effect on teenaged boys, however." On the day he took delivery, Boone parked his Elise in the Columbia Sportswear lot, which is adjacent to Sunset High School. "The entire Sunset baseball team came running over, asking me what it was," he says. "I just wish I would've had a camera."

Much as he loves his Elise, Boone recognizes that it simply isn't a practical car. His sport of choice is trap shooting, but he can't fit his shotgun in the car without breaking it down first. However, the Elise does have its pragmatic side. At 60 mph, it will stop in just 105 feet, a new record, according to Road & Track magazine. It gets surprisingly good gas mileage — 26 mpg city, 38 highway, and with a base MSRP of about \$40,000, you could buy two Elises for the price of a Dodge Viper or Porsche 911 GT3.

Still, according to Sharma, the Lotus Elise isn't for the pragmatist — it's for the dreamer. "If you take this car for a drive in the hills, it's like a form of meditation," he says. "It's like a minivacation. And the great thing is, if you own one, you can do it again tomorrow, and the day after that, and the day after that." ■

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