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Weather: Once summer finally arrives in Nebraska the forecasts begin to get a little boring! Summer-like conditions are expected to continue today as it will be mostly sunny and warm with a high of 90 (32C). Continued warm and sunny for the weekend with highs expected in the lower 90s (32C) and lows in the mid to upper 60s (19C).

Barb Brandt/The Nebraskan

'Brel' examines reality with satire...Page 6

Granny seeks meaning in health craze...Page 7



Mark Davis/The Nebraskan

Fans cheer on Tim Chitwood and crew in their 4th of July celebration in Lincoln, Wednesday night.

Stunt show crashes its way to top

By Mike Reilley
Sports Editor

Most people consider flipping a car upside down or crashing into a wall of fire a horrible experience. But for the members of the Joie Chitwood Thrill Show, it's a way of life.

The auto show's Western Unit made its first stop in Lincoln in almost three decades Wednesday at Midwest Speedway.

Tim Chitwood, son of the show's creator, Joie Chitwood Sr., owns, operates and drives in the stunt show. He started traveling with the show at 5 and began stunt driving when he was 14.

"Dad has taught me a lot of what I know," Chitwood said. "But I've learned a lot on my own."

Tim Chitwood is currently ranked as the number one stunt driver in the nation. He won the title at the First International Auto Stunt Contest in 1980 and has not been challenged since. Chitwood also set the world record for driving a car on two wheels when he piloted a Chevrolet Chevette 5.9 miles on

two wheels at the State Fair of Virginia in 1981.

Chitwood Sr. began his driving career in the sprint car division in the late 1930s. He also raced in the Indianapolis 500 10 times.

"Dad was a very good race driver," Chitwood said. "But he thought the stunt business was much more fun."

It was for that reason that Chitwood Sr. started the traveling show in 1943. It's the oldest traveling auto stunt show in the world.

"There were a couple of other shows that started before Dad's but both of the promoters died before 1952," Chitwood said.

For six years Chitwood Sr. traveled all over the country, performing at state and county fairs. In 1949, Chitwood Sr. got his first Hollywood stunt job. He did the driving stunts for the movie "To Please a Lady," which starred Clark Gable and Barbara Stanwyck.

However, Chitwood Sr. enjoyed performing in front of live audiences rather than on the screen and returned to the stunt circuit. He continued to travel across the country until 1964, when he retired.

Tim and Joie Chitwood Jr. took over the show when their father retired. Chitwood Sr. stayed on as the show's chairman of the board and made a brief return to stunt driving in 1983.

The Chitwood brothers made some changes in the show's structure but left the name intact.

"We think the name is just too good to change," Chitwood said.

The Chitwoods divided the program into two shows. Tim Chitwood manages the Western Unit, which performs in 80 cities over a four-month period each year. Joie Chitwood Jr. takes the Eastern Unit to 90 cities each year.

"Most of our shows work through local promoters," Chitwood said. "About seventy percent of all of our shows are at state fairs."

Chitwood's stunt crew has also made several appearances on television and in movies in the last 20 years. They did stunts on several episodes of television's "CHIPS" series and Joie Chitwood Jr. does the stunt driving on "Miami Vice."

My brother and I have tried to develop the television and movie deals," Chitwood said.

Each live program consists of 21 "acts," including six clown stunts and a "cannon jump," where Tim Chitwood drives a Chevrolet IROC Camaro off of a ramp. Another popular stunt is the "human battering ram," where a car crashes through a wall of fire with a crew member hanging onto the hood.

Despite the high risk involved with the stunts, Chitwood said injuries are few.

"We haven't had very many injuries," he said. "We've had only one fatality in 42 years and only about 10 injuries I would classify as serious."

Chitwood makes few safety modifications in his Chevrolet Chevette, S-10 Blazer and four IROC Camaros he uses in the show. The windows and windshields are removed from each vehicle and fire extinguishers and extra-strength seat belts are installed. Each driver wears a helmet also.

"We don't need to do much modifying," Chitwood said. "The trick is to know the limitations of the cars and yourself."