

# SPORTSTRAVEL

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 1989

## Home, Home On the Highway

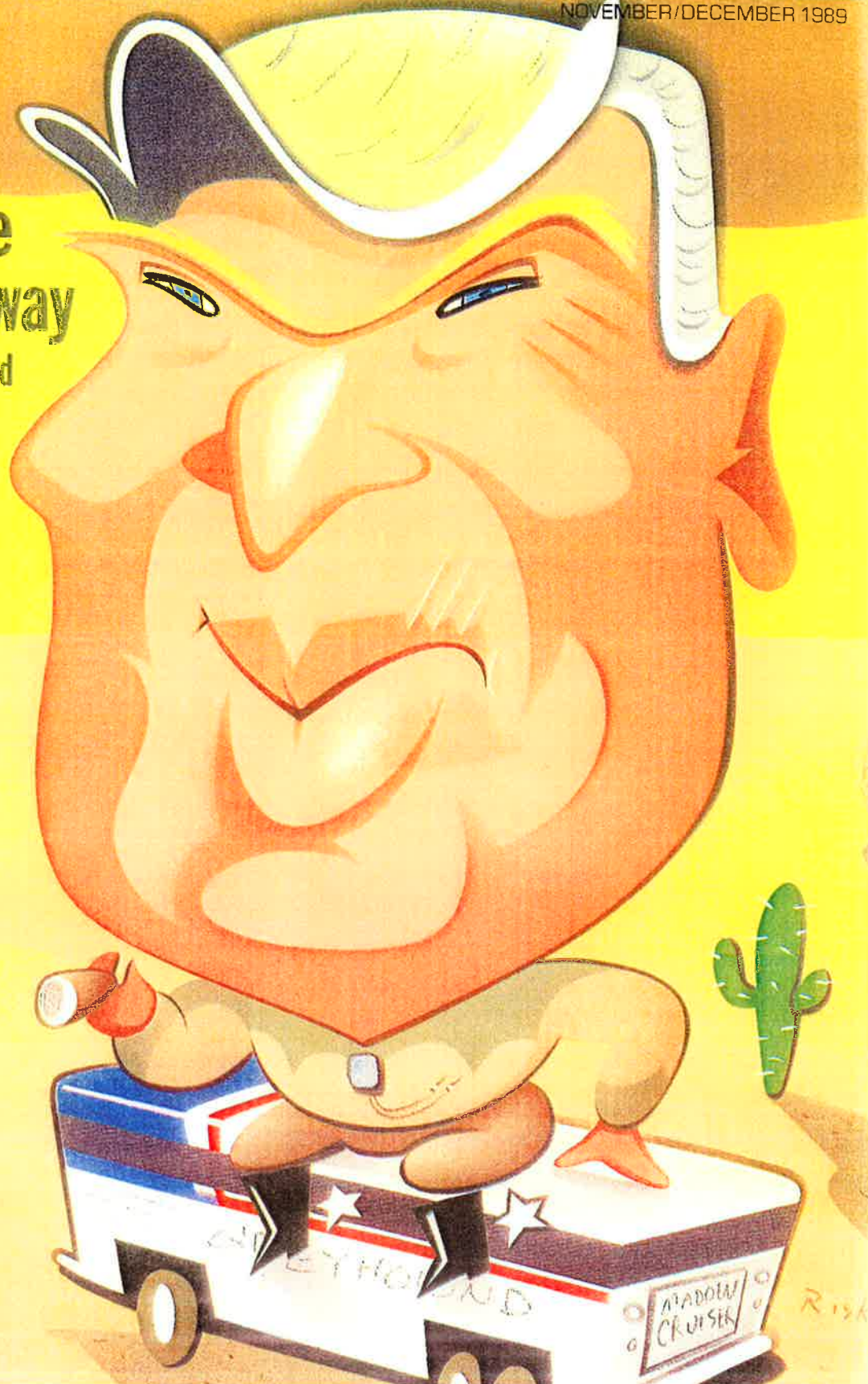
Where Seldom is Heard  
a Discouraging Word  
and John Madden is  
Happy All Day  
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COVER STORY

# BANG, ZOOM TO THE HIGHWAY!!!

BY CHARLES BUTLER

The eight finalists are sitting on a small stage erected in the parking lot of a suburban San Francisco shopping mall. They all appear nervous and tense; scared, even. And well they should be, for they are about to compete in the most important event of their professional careers.

The eight men are all dressed exactly the same. They each wear light-gray uniforms with an array of buttons attached to the breast pockets. Pilot hats sit firmly atop their heads. Their black shoes gleam.

Looking at them, one could easily assume these men were astronauts, with one of them about to be selected to fly the first manned space ship to Mars. But these fellows are far from astronauts. They are, instead, bus drivers—Greyhound bus drivers. They neither possess the right stuff nor the wrong stuff—just the kind of stuff that gets them through their daily job of driving America's highways.

And yet here they are, the elected and the anointed, waiting to see which special man will join the select few at the top, that elite group of bus drivers who have previously won the most coveted assignment in busing circles: that of becoming John Madden's number one chauffeur.



The eight finalists in the Greyhound-Madden Challenge sit, wait, and worry.

Since the summer of 1987, John Madden, the CBS-TV football analyst and the sports world's most famous non-flyer, has used a Greyhound bus known as the Maddencruiser to get from one job to the next. To Washington, D.C., for the broadcast of a Redskins game. To Hollywood for the filming of a Miller-Lite commercial. To the Bay area for a visit with the wife. And joining Madden each year for most of the 70,000-mile odyssey is his trusty Greyhound driver, the man with the most desirable job in the

ranks of the company's 6,000 drivers. For a full year, that driver doesn't have to deal with crabby old ladies going to Atlantic City or noisy school kids on class trips. Yes, sir, once you become John Madden's primary driver you kiss that stuff goodbye and say hello to fun—a lot of fun.

"It is such a great job," says Gerry Knick, who drove the Maddencruiser from August, 1988 to July, '89. "All the drivers get excited about the competition when it comes around each year."

The competition is the Greyhound-Madden Challenge, an event that is becoming as synonymous with early August as two-day drills and roster cuts. During the two-day Challenge, eight Greyhound drivers from four regional

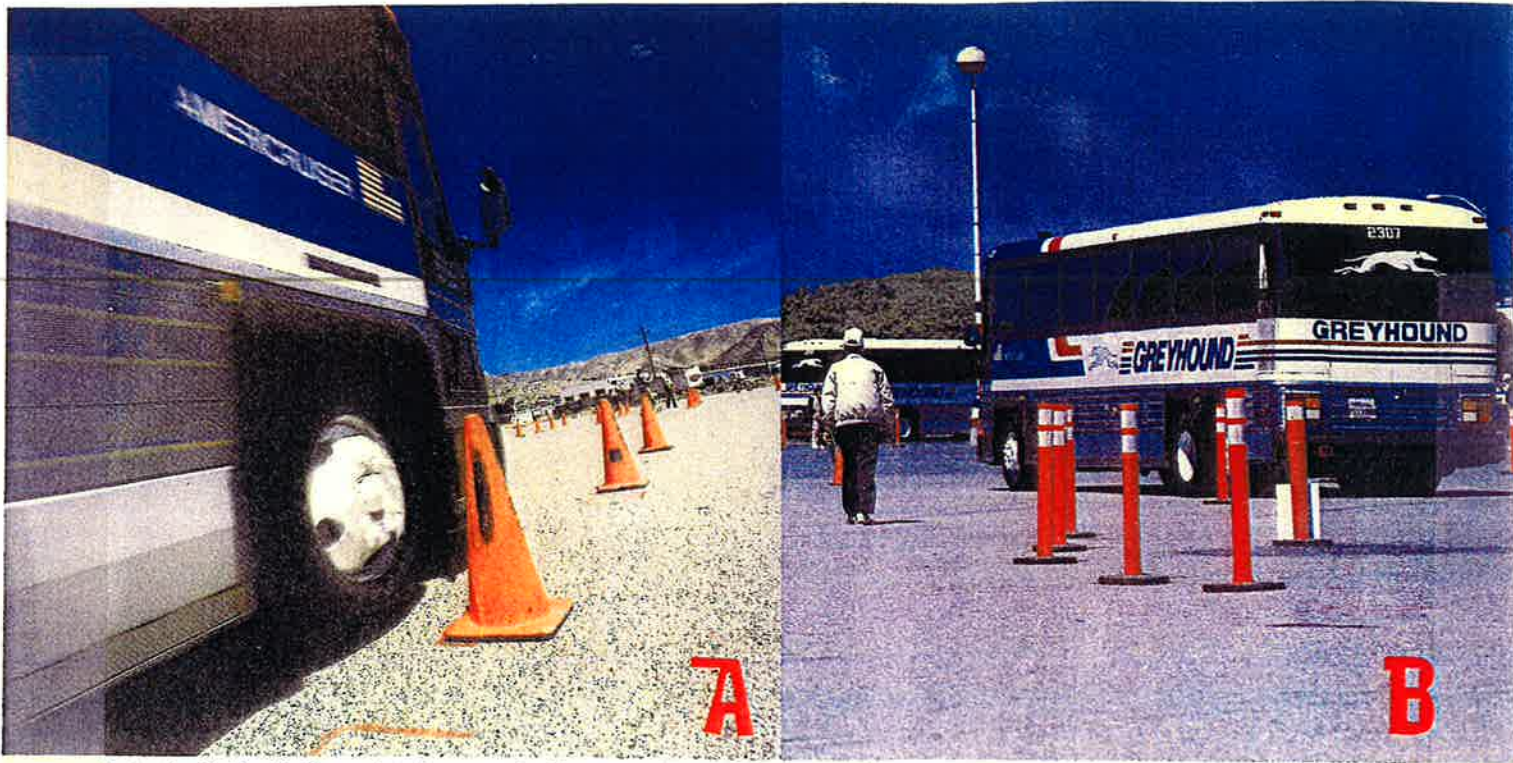
companies battle to see who will be Madden's next best man. The other seven don't go home completely disappointed; they'll take turns as relief drivers when a trip is too long for the primary guy. But being a Madden relief driver is sort of like being third runner-up at The Miss America Pageant. *Gee whiz, you mean I get to keep the sash?*

No, you want to be Madden's top gun, the one who not only knows Madden but lives with him on the road in a bus filled with the amenities

**One thing's for sure: John Madden's bus driver has a helluva lot better time than Ralph Kramden ever did**



John Madden with his second-year driver Gerry Knick.



During the Madden Challenge obstacle course, the driver must: a) instantly react to a judge's steering commands; b) zig-zag through a slalom course;

of a four-star hotel suite. You want to be the main man who hangs out with Madden when he entertains Mike Ditka and Sugar Ray Leonard and Roberta Flack. You want to party with senators in Washington, D.C. You want to eat at greasy roadside diners in Georgia. You want, most of all, to be in the company of a real nice man—a “regular guy” whom drivers fondly call Coach, never Mr. Madden.

The traveling escapades of John Madden have been well documented in the three books he's co-written over the past decade—books that detail his traveling likes and dislikes. Since Thanksgiving weekend 1979, when he stepped off a plane in Houston, Madden has not boarded another aircraft. The reason: claustrophobia.

So, throughout the eighties, as his careers as a broadcaster and commercial spokesman have skyrocketed, Madden has stayed anchored to the ground. During most of the decade, while CBS partner Pat Summerall and the producers made one-day air trips to their next assignment, Madden boarded one overnight train after the other—and loved every minute of the journeys. He could shoot the breeze with salesmen and priests and tourists and other assorted rail roadies, and still be on time for his next broadcast. Sure, train travel was slow, but jolly John Madden made it work for himself.

But traveling by train had its limitations, and one night in 1987 during an interview on *The MacNeill/Lehrer Newshour*, Madden made them known. Trains, he said, have inflexible schedules and there is a dearth of

sleeper cars. In an Arizona hotel a Greyhound executive listened to Madden's complaints and then passed them on to Fred Currey, who had just purchased Greyhound Lines. Currey had a brainstorm. Let's give Madden a Greyhound bus outfitted with everything a man in his position (and with his size) needs: a queen-size bed, two TV sets, two VHS and two Beta videocassette recorders, a refrigerator, a range, a microwave, five pullout beds for guests, a stereo system, shower, closet space, three cellular phones, and a blender to mix his diet chocolate milk shakes. Madden liked the idea, and inked a three-year deal, which runs through next July.

For all its unusual comforts, though, the Cruiser isn't any wider than a bus that commuters straphang to every day. You would think the Coach might feel just as confined as he did on airplanes. “Yeah,” Madden admits, “but I have control. I know I can get out when I want to.”

During most of the National Football League season Madden works, sleeps, travels—basically lives—inside the 40-foot machine valued at about \$500,000. Outwardly, the bus looks like any of the company's other ones. It is painted red-white-and-blue, with the familiar streaking greyhound on the side. The tire spokes shine like doorknobs at Buckingham Palace. But where other Greyhound buses have AMERICRUISER stenciled near the front door, this one has MADDENCRUISER.

And the bus *is* Madden's cruiser. He has free use of it whenever he

wants. All he has to do is show up at promotional appearances for the bus company. Obviously, the Greyhound-Madden Challenge is the company's show of shows—a three-day fest where top executives can mingle with union heads, mechanics, and, of course, the eight competing drivers. During the Challenge, the company tries to keep the focus of attention on the drivers—eight men all with at least ten years of driving without having caused an accident and who exhibit the skills expected of all Greyhound drivers.

But when Madden arrives at noon of the event's final day, he takes over the spotlight. He steps off the Maddencruiser, looking unusually trim after a year of dieting (he's lost 80 pounds) and chomping on an unlit cigar. Immediately, a crowd collapses on him. Autograph seekers. Shutterbugs. Newspaper reporters. Even *Entertainment Tonight* is on hand to get an interview. Madden, squinting from the bright sun, accommodates all of them.

Nearby, sitting under a tent, the eight drivers eat hot dogs and french fries. And worry. They patiently wait for their turn to meet the man who hopefully will be their next boss. Madden will personally interview each driver, then pick the man he wants to travel America with. Eight men want the job, seven can't have it.

When Gerry Knick hears the term reverse play, he thinks of a split-second gear shift to avoid a wayward truck on the Washington, D.C., Beltway—not a football maneuver. Under-



c) accelerate to 20 mph, brake, and stop within six inches of a pylon; and d) keep the bus' right-side wheels aligned between two rows of tennis balls.

stand this, Knick is not a big sports fan, which would seem odd when you consider he has just finished spending a year with one of America's leading sports analysts. But Madden, a college and pro football coach for 18 years and broadcaster for ten, says he doesn't need a driver "who can tell me when someone goes off-tackle." He needs someone who can transport him from his Danville, California home to Giants Stadium in New Jersey on time and in one piece. (The non-stop trip, by the way, takes 53 hours and almost 500 gallons of gas.)

So, if it wasn't sports that attracted Knick to the Greyhound-Madden Challenge in 1988, what did? In his deliberate Virginia accent, Knick says, "It was a chance for me to compete." Put another way: To show off. Bus driving is basically a job, but that doesn't mean the men and women who do it daily are in it just for the paycheck. "Most of us guys try real hard to do a good job," Knick claims, "but you wonder every day, 'Does anybody really notice that I am trying real hard?' The Madden Challenge is just a chance for you to come out and show what you can do and what you've developed over the years."

As it turned out, Knick went out and won last year's contest. Selected as Madden's driver at 4 p.m. on a Wednesday, he picked up the Coach for their first trip together at 6 a.m. the next morning. It was the start of a wild year for the 37-year-old driver. He made eight cross-country trips; met the likes of Tom Landry, Bob Uecker, and Randy "Macho Man" Savage; enjoyed 50-yard-line, pressbox

seats at every stadium he traveled to; and had his face plastered on posters in Greyhound offices throughout the country. What a time!

Of course, there is one problem with being Madden's primary driver—while you're out roaming America, someone else is at home paying the bills. Putting band-aids on the kids. Worrying if you're all right.

On the day before he gives his Maddencruiser keys to a new driver, Knick recalls a scene that took place one year earlier. "When they announced I had won, I could see my wife Patty's face turn pale because as far as we knew I would never see her for a year. She wasn't very excited about having to go home alone." During his year with Madden, Knick went a stretch of six weeks without making it back to his Woodbridge, Virginia home. He spent Christmas day in California without Patty and the kids. His longest stay at home between August 1, 1988, and July 31, 1989, was nine days. "I have two boys, ages nine and four. Patty was great about taking care of them. Plus the car, the house, her job. She developed as a person as much or more than I have this year."

Dave Hahn and J.D. Bowling, two of the finalists vying to become John Madden's next driver, don't have the same concerns that Gerry Knick did. They are more than eight years older than Knick, and their children are all grown. Their wives want them to win the Challenge, if for no other reason than they'll get the Coach out of their systems. Both are, to be sure, big sports fans. Bowling, a Greyhound

driver for 21 years from Jacksonville, Florida, loves auto racing and raises catfish; Hahn is a 26-year driving veteran from Aurora, Colorado, and a Denver Broncos season-ticket holder since the mid-seventies.

The two are also runner-ups in past Challenges. Bowling is back for a second turn; Hahn, of the eight drivers, is the only three-time competitor. As runner-ups, though, they've worked as Maddencruiser relief drivers, which means they've gulped a six-pack of the Coach's special brew. Tastes great. Now they want the whole case.

Late Monday afternoon, with the first day of competition done, Bowling and Hahn sit across a dining/poker table in the Maddencruiser and swap stories about being with the Coach. Bowling lounges in Madden's favorite seat: a wide bench that offers a right-side window view. Hahn sits on the opposite-side bench, fidgeting with his clip-on tie.

Bowling gets the laughs rolling. "To me the Coach is real quiet, extremely quiet. For the most part he sits and watches tapes and spends a lot of time readin' *USA Today*. That's one of the main objectives in the mornin'—make sure the paper's in the bus... and I screwed that up one time I drove with him." Telling his story, J.D. sounds like a DJ on a country-western station. "I was drivin' about five o'clock in the mornin' and Gerry Knick comes over and says, 'I'm gonna lay down and get a nap. Be sure to get the paper.' So we were drivin' along and I saw a truck stop—I think it was near Albuquerque. So I swung in there, and sure enough there was a big *USA Today* rack. I said,

# When It's Freezing on The Bus

'Oh, great!' and I flipped my quarters in there and got me a paper and dropped it down here on the table. I said, 'Ah, well, that's taken care of,' and got back behind the wheel. Well, a little while later the Coach comes out from his bedroom and is sittin' here for a few minutes readin' the paper. All of the sudden he yells, 'Hell, I read this paper yesterday!' I didn't check to see what the date was before I bought it."

Bowling and Hahn crack up.

Madden isn't a very demanding boss, but he does have some peculiar requests of his drivers—like keeping the bus cold, meat-locker cold. If the inside temperature of the Cruiser rises above 62 degrees, an alarm connected to the thermostat starts ringing. Madden explains that "it's not that I like it cold as much as if you don't have any air the bus gets tight and stuffy." Remember the claustrophobia. Hahn recalls the time when he and first-year Madden driver Willie Yarbrough were driving the Coach through Wyoming on a bitter-cold winter night. "It was below zero when we were going across the state and there's no heat on the bus," Hahn says. So what does Madden do? "He turns his air conditioning on in the back room and goes to sleep."

More laughs throughout the bus.

Hahn then tells his favorite story, about the time last May when the Madencruiser made an unannounced stop in Beaver Crossing, Nebraska. It seems that Madden, who does a morning radio spot for a San Francisco station, was driving on Interstate-80 in Nebraska trying to place his call to the station. But for some reason, the bus' cellular phone wouldn't work. So Madden needed to find a pay phone—fast, which he finally did in tiny Lloyd's Lounge in Beaver Crossing.

There's really not much in Beaver Crossing, Nebraska—just one main intersection where a bank, a post office, a gas station, and City Hall occupy each corner. But the town does have plenty of friendly folk, even if there are only about 480 of them. "We come up the main street," remembers Hahn, "and park in front of the post office. All of the sudden everybody sees this bus, and they start coming out of the post office, out of the bank, out of the clerk's office. They have no idea who it is until they see John Madden step out. And everybody knows John Madden."

A gas station attendant ran over to the bus while cleaning his greasy hands. "Hello," he said to Madden, "I'm the mayor of Beaver Crossing." A

woman came out and handed the Coach a rhubarb pie. Someone gave him a baseball cap that read "Of Course There's a Beaver Crossing, Neb." Madden even found out how much a three-bedroom house goes for in the town—\$6,500.

"All these people get on their phones and call their relatives and neighbors and everyone else," Hahn goes on. "We were there probably about an hour, but we attracted quite a crowd. We left Beaver Crossing with a whole bunch of smiling faces. They were glad we pulled in."

Bowling and Hahn again start laughing. They could sit here all night talking about the Coach. But that's enough storytelling for this afternoon. Tomorrow—the day a new Madden driver is chosen—is almost here. Still smiling, the two step off the Cruiser and head for their hotel rooms. Neither will sleep well tonight, and neither may be smiling this time tomorrow.

Tuesday morning. A big, bright sun is set against a cloudless San Francisco sky. Ideal conditions for a bus-driving contest. Five Greyhound buses are scattered throughout the Tanforan Park Shopping Mall parking lot. By 10 a.m. small clusters of people, mostly wives and children and friends of the drivers, begin to fill temporary bleachers. The eight drivers roam around the parking lot trying to look relaxed. The act doesn't work.

In the Challenge, a total of 1,200 points can be won by the competitors in five different test categories: a written exam and a pre-trip inspection, which were both given on Monday; interviews with Greyhound and Department of Transportation officials; a driving-skills test; and, finally, a one-on-one interview with Madden.

The mood of driver Ralph Spangler matches the weather. Spangler's the only driver who carries a briefcase, but maybe something magical is enclosed because he leads the Challenge by eight points heading into the final day of competition. Spangler, from Roanoke, Virginia, was the only driver to achieve perfect scores both on the written exam and pre-trip inspection, where five defects—ranging from a broken windshield wiper to an air leak in the front brake—are placed on a bus and each driver has 20 minutes to locate them. A year ago, when Spangler finished in second place behind Gerry Knick by six points, not finding a flat inside tire cost him 20 points. The mistake haunted him throughout Knick's reign. "It just kills me, ya know, to

think that somethin' simple and stupid is what I missed," Spangler says.

Tony Martinez, a San Francisco transit driver and hometown favorite, holds second place. Dave Hahn and J.D. Bowling are in the middle of the pack. The four other drivers—Jack Caldwell of Nashville, Tennessee; Tony Pisula of Rochester, New York; Joe Gibson of Detroit, Michigan; and Bob Rodriguez of Springfield, Oregon—are all rookies in the competition. If Vegas was posting odds on the Madden Challenge, those four would be off the boards.

Although worth 300 points, the interview portion with Greyhound and DOT officials doesn't worry the drivers. Just talk politely and precisely, then scram. The critical juncture in the Challenge comes with the driving-skills test—a ten-stage obstacle course to be completed within six minutes and worth 550 points. Under normal circumstances these drivers could whip through the course blindfolded: parallel parking a bus and then driving it through a slalom course of orange pylons isn't *that* difficult for these guys. But nerves get edgy and points get lost when the drivers have wives, reporters, co-workers watching their every move. They choke—and not on the clutch.

"All the drivers can drive the course," says Bowling, "but there are little picky things where they deduct points—not blowin' the horn right or not usin' the turn signal. Little picky things that cost the most."

Bowling is the third man on the course. During his Greyhound career, Bowling has caused only one accident—rear-ending a car in his second year. He shows off his experience through most of the skills course, until he comes to the final obstacle, where he must go at least 20 mph through a set of five barrels, then stop within six inches of a pylon. Bowling plows into the pylon—a costly mistake. "The brakes just wouldn't stop me when I mashed on them," he explains later. "But I'm not using that as an excuse."

Up next, Dave Hahn. His six minutes behind the wheel are nearly perfect ones. When he steps off the bus, his wife Su-Zann and daughter Paula are beaming and clapping. Even Hahn can't hide a small smile. "I think I was a little bit more relaxed than I was last year," he says. "I felt good about it."

Ralph Spangler can't say the same. While parallel parking he drives a back wheel up on the curb—minus 30 points. Later, he hits a cone, losing

# MaDDen TuRNs ON The AiR CoNDiTiONer.

more points. Has he ruined his chance of winning the Challenge? "I really don't know. I guess it's still possible to win. It's probably going to be real close. Too early to call."

John Madden sits in his bus waiting for the contestants to come in for the interview—a word maybe too strong to describe the ten minutes each driver spends with the Coach. It's more like a chat they would have if stopped at a gas station.

"I don't want to ask these guys too much. I just want them to know what they are getting into. Driving this bus is so different than anything they do." Madden punctuates his point by waving his big right hand, which holds the unlit cigar. "Driving is driving, I know that. But the most important thing is that they have a wife and family who understand what this job is about. There can be times when they can be away from home for a month, and if a guy doesn't understand that or doesn't have the cooperation of his family, that can be tough."

Sure the points the drivers accumulate during the written test, interviews, and the skills course are important. But ultimately Madden will pick the man best suited for him and the job. A guy who enjoys the fringe, not the center, of attention. A guy who is neither too loud nor too quiet. A guy who can take direction, but likes getting lost once in a while.

There is something comically strange to this whole selection process. Here's John Madden—famous, wealthy, and enormously popular, yet genuinely considered by everyone to be a regular Joe. One of the boys who made good. Then there are these eight drivers who, no doubt about it, are just part of the masses. Each knew when he entered the busing business that the riches would never come fast. And have you ever heard of a famous bus driver besides old Ralph Kramden? Let's face it—bus driving is work. You travel a lot and meet a lot of people, but still it's a job like so many others.

Winning the Madden Challenge, just think, would change everything for one of these men. Put a lot of pizzazz into the job. Jump start a career about to enter its final stage. Even though you are basically at the beck

and call of some man who got the breaks, some regular Joe like yourself, you don't mind. It's different.

Dave Hahn must be that driver. *Has to be.* And maybe he deserves to be. C'mon, the man's had ties to Greyhound for nearly 50 years since his dad drove for the company in the forties. His wife, brother, and son have all worked for the company. But



Dave Hahn beams after winning the Greyhound-Madden Challenge.

Hahn knows loyalty doesn't bring royalty in the busing business, and there may not be too many more chances for him to exchange his regular Denver-to-Albuquerque route for the plum Madden shuttle. A two-time runner-up at the Challenge, finishing behind Willie Yarbrough in 1987 and Gerry Knick last year, Hahn is a 49-year-old grandfather with streaks of grey whispering through his short, black hair. "If I don't win it this year," Hahn admits minutes before Madden's choice is announced, "I won't be back. I've been here three times—it's about time to give someone else from our region a chance."

Now seated on the stage waiting for the decision, Hahn looks nauseous, anxious, downright ugly. Certainly not happy. Only about 50 people stand in front of him, but even if there were 50,000 Hahn would not notice them. He is in a different world—a twilight zone of fear. And he isn't alone. The three drivers on his right and four drivers on his left have equally dark stares. The master of ceremonies for the Challenge makes some remarks to the small crowd. Madden stands stage left talking to reporters and

signing autographs. Gerry Knick comes up to receive a model Maddencruiser as a reward for his year of service. Everyone is smiling, laughing—except the eight drivers sitting there with knotted stomachs.

Finally, the master of ceremonies quiets the crowd. He's ready to deliver the verdict. "The next Greyhound driver for John Madden is... Dave Hahn."

The big news does strange things to the winner's face. His eyes bulge, but his mouth barely moves. *This can't be.* The crowd starts to clap, but he hardly notices. *Did he say Dave Hahn?* Finally, he manages to stand and walk across the stage to shake hands with his competitors. And yes, he's beginning to smile.

*I'm the man!*

With his job done, John Madden quickly heads back to the Cruiser for a lift home. "It was easier this year," the Coach says of the Challenge, "because we've been through it two years and Dave's been with me two years as a relief driver."

Standing near the Maddencruiser now, Hahn is being photographed and talking to reporters. He looks more relaxed and happy. He's won the prize, and he can't wait to call his mom and dad at their home in Nebraska to tell them that he's now the talk of the terminals.

"This is the highlight of my career. It's the top driving position in Greyhound," Hahn says. "Naturally, I am going to miss my family. But being around 25 years with the Greyhound bus business makes it easier for my wife and children. And you're not away from them, you're within reaching distance."

The Coach is in a rush to leave, so Hahn hurries over to Su-Zann and Paula to give them each a quick kiss. Then he climbs the Maddencruiser steps, where Gerry Knick hands him a set of keys. Hahn straps himself into the driver seat, closes the door, honks the horn, and pulls out.

The Coach has his new driver, the driver has his new coach.

The Maddencruiser cruises on.

*Senior editor Charles Butler recently received an "Of Course There's a Beaver Crossing, Neb." baseball cap.*