

ARIZONA DRIVER

THE ENTHUSIAST'S GUIDE TO LIFE BEHIND THE WHEEL

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Fuel of Dreams

Convert one classic Mercedes-Benz...

add plenty of used grease...

stir in lots of baseball...

The Bionic Gloves

Veggie Power

Ballpark Tour

launches its

nationwide tour

in Arizona



And we test drive the
Honda Civic Hybrid

... which seems downright
conventional by comparison

Going green: The Bionic Gloves Veggie Power Ballpark Tour

by Joe Connor
Photos by Joe Sage

What do you get when you take a 1984 Mercedes 300 D Turbo Diesel whose owner is a baseball traveling diehard living on a lowly, freelance writer budget? With the ridiculously high gas prices, you get innovative, especially if you want to crisscross the country all season long and visit all of the Spring Training ballparks in the Grand Canyon State, too.

Matter of fact, you convert your 1984 Mercedes to run on vegetable oil. Vegetable oil? Yep, you got it—grease is the word.

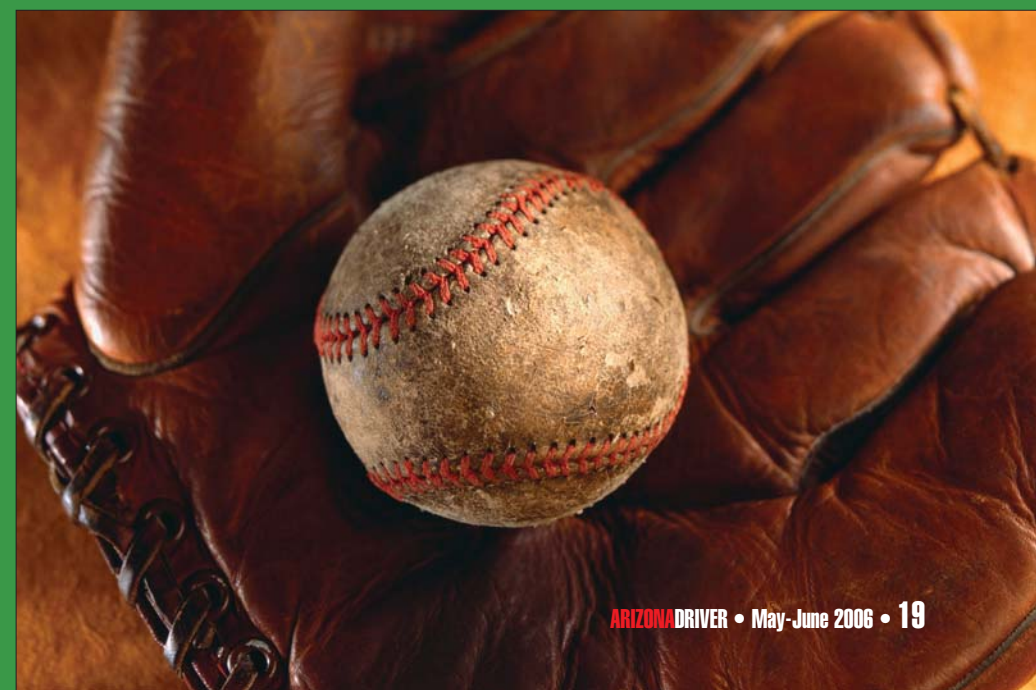
On March 1, I left my home in San Diego, California at 4 am, to embark on the ultimate baseball fan's trip of a lifetime: seven months of baseball, at least one game in every different state in the lower 48 of the fruited plain. And the first nine days would be in Arizona, beginning March 1 in Tucson and ending March 9 in Peoria. And the car's exhaust would smell a lot like French fries.

About six months prior to departure, I was at home one night, abusing my television remote control, when a story on a channel I still don't remember caught my fancy. But I do vividly remember the content—it was about how diesel-fueled vehicles can be converted to run on used frying oil, the same oil most restaurants must pay to dispose of. I was immediately hooked, and then the light bulb really went off in my head—what if I could drive a car around the country promoting this alternative fuel while at the same realizing one of my dreams?

Ever since I was a little boy growing up in West Hartford, Connecticut as a fan of the Boston Red Sox, I had always dreamed of visiting every professional ballpark. My parents had married in the 1960s and were free spirits, encouraging me and my younger brother to see the country and the world. My late father had been a pilot in the US Air Force and traveled all over, and he would share stories, not to mention his boyhood fascination with baseball Hall-of-Famer Mickey Mantle.

At 34 years old, living the single life as a freelance writer in San Diego with no mortgage payment or personal or financial obligations that would tie me

KEEP RIGHT >>





Louisville Slugger, Arizona Driver Magazine, groups like that—plenty of key entities were happy to sign on as sponsors for the Tour.

>> CONT'D

down, I decided to make my dreams since boyhood reality. I logged on the Internet to learn more about what I had seen on TV, and I also realized I would need to secure sponsorships. That's because you don't become a freelance baseball writer for the money—you become a freelance baseball writer because you know how to write and love the game, and want to be as close to the game as possible if you can't actually be on the field.

Fortunately, I can also be a pretty good salesman. I convinced a small Massachusetts-based company to lend me a 13-gallon tank in exchange for a logo on my car, and paid a local mechanic to install it in the trunk where the spare tire usually goes. Hoses are run from the car's radiator to the trunk tank to heat the vegetable oil via a heat exchanger. At start-up, the car runs on diesel while the radiator fluid does its work heating up the vegetable oil tank. By the time the internal temperature of the car is between 80-100 degrees, the viscosity of the vegetable oil has been reduced to the point where it can run as a fuel. The mechanic installed a switch underneath

my car stereo, so I could go from running on diesel to running on fryer fat.

So as the sun rose over Yuma as I crossed into Arizona on Interstate 8 on the first day of March, I was burning vegetable oil—and feeling like a king. Some three hours later, I was seated at Tucson Electric Park, Spring Training home of the Arizona Diamondbacks and Chicago White Sox. On an overcast day, I witnessed Chicago lose to the visiting Colorado Rockies, but I felt like a winner—or shall I say, on cloud nine. In just six months, I had gone from being uninformed about alternative fuels to being an unofficial spokesperson. Despite countless rejections, I had managed to secure close to \$25,000 in sponsorship for my journey, and I wasn't going to let a few obstacles get in my way.

Obstacles? There are two key notes about running a car on vegetable oil I soon learned. Number one, it isn't always a picnic securing used frying oil from restaurants, and number two, no matter how you slice and dice it, your arms, clothes and your car's body are going to get greasy—literally. Translation: sometimes very time consuming and prepare to get messy. Both can be primarily avoided if you go to your neighborhood Costco or Sam's Club and purchase five-gallon drums of straight vegetable oil. But since you have to pay at least \$30.00 to do, financially you'd just be better off sticking exclusively with diesel.

Used vegetable oil is the way to go. And that's the choice I made. Following my tour's inaugural game, I went hunting for grease.

Restaurants that use a non-hydrogenated oil, such as straight vegetable oil, soybean oil, canola oil, peanut oil or corn oil, are best because they have a lower gel point. On the other hand, restaurants that cook their food using shortening or partially-hydrogenated oil results in thicker grease, and that's not good.

In addition to a tank, I also had a filter installed in my trunk to block bacon bits from going into my engine. This filter gets heated with the radiator fluid, too, and is a lifesaver but it also clogs easily, which means I learned I had to get my hands dirty and clean it out. And that meant drips of grease here, there and everywhere—from my clothes to my journalist notebooks.

After striking out at a few Tucson restaurants that either didn't use the right oil I was looking for or wouldn't let me take any, I hit a home run after about 30 minutes of hunting, just before happy hour, when I walked into Famous Sam's, an Arizona sports bar institution since the early 1960s. The manager of the famous Grand Canyon State franchise was happy to help, and my timing couldn't have better. Later that night, he was going to be cleaning out his fryers, and he told me to come back the next day when he would have at least five to 10 gallons ready to go. Bingo.

I headed off to my hotel for some rest, and "flushed" my vegetable oil, which is to say I ran diesel back through the lines, making sure the vegetable oil was purged from the fuel line and injectors so it wouldn't become clogged at the next start-up when the engine is cold. The same switch the mechanic installed was all I needed to do the 30 second trick.

The next morning, I went to Yokohama Rice Bowl in Tucson and filled up my tank with at least five gallons before heading over to the city's historic Hi-Corbett Field, the Rockies Spring Training home. The Yokohama oil was needed because my plan was to hit the road for Phoenix post-game, after stopping by and filling up at Famous Sam's. The young and exciting Rockies put another whooping on the White Sox at the oldest ballpark in Arizona on a glorious sunny desert after-

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This gig meant a lot of late nights for the author, in search of used veggie oil, and a lot of early mornings to wow 'em on local TV.

>> CONT'D

noon. Hi-Corbett has been hosting baseball since the 1920s, and even was featured in the movie *Major League*, starring Charlie Sheen.

With two games in the books and plenty of vegetable oil in the car, the early evening drive up to the Valley of the Sun was a pleasant one. On the morning of March 3, I rose at the crack of dawn to be a guest on live local television, showcasing the Veggie Power Mobile. I was nervous but the interview went off without a hitch, and a few hours later I was on the fresh cut grass of Chase Field, aka, The BOB (named after its former namesake, Bank One Ballpark). Team USA was on the field for its first practice in preparation for the World Baseball Classic, an inaugural, 16-country tournament featuring Major League players representing their nations.

I had secured a media credential for the tournament because I was writing a story about the event for *Padres Magazine*, the San Diego Padres game program. I had also written team profiles of the 16 countries participating in the World Baseball Classic for ESPN.com.

I felt like a kid in a candy store. Derek Jeter was warming up in front of me along the first base line. Alex Rodriguez was

posing for pictures in the dugout. One of my favorite Red Sox, Jason Varitek, was kind enough to grant me a one-on-one interview.

I was in heaven.

Actually, I was soon off to Tempe, where the baseball gods apparently were with me. I saw the home-team Angels whoop the Padres silly at Tempe Diablo Stadium, and not only that, I caught a foul ball! Would you believe it was the first foul ball I had ever caught, even though I had probably been to literally thousands of games?

Believe it.

The Padres' Khalil Greene swung late on a Jared Weaver pitch and the ball sailed down the first base line, bounced off a couple of fans' hands—and right into mine. Later that night, I saw the Arizona State Sun Devils whoop the Auburn Tigers silly at Packard Stadium in Tempe. It was 13-0 Sun Devils by the seventh inning!

My final six days in the Phoenix area would be even better than my first three in the Grand Canyon State. From Maryvale Ballpark in West Phoenix, Spring Training home of the Brewers, to HoHoKam Park in Mesa in the East Valley, Spring Training home of the Chicago Cubs, I had yet to get off cloud nine.

Sure, there were times over the next week when I got frustrated, especially when I'd visit multiple restaurants in the Valley to secure used vegetable oil and get rejected because the manager was only looking to time out, not to help someone. And there were times when I got

frustrated changing my filter, especially in the hot Arizona sun of March.

But running on vegetable oil certainly did wonders to my wallet—like keep more money in it! During my time in the Valley of the Sun, I tried to keep a quarter of a tank of diesel (for start-up) and the rest of my weight dedicated to burning vegetable oil. I got about the same fuel economy on the vegetable oil as I did on the diesel, only I wasn't getting great mileage overall because I had packed up the car pretty good with clothing for the seven-month jaunt. Most folks also have a filtration system set up in their garage, not trunk.

The highlight of the last week in the Phoenix area, though, was definitely the World Baseball Classic, and the enthusiasm and energy from the crowds at Chase Field and Scottsdale Stadium.

By March 10, I was out of the state—and still completely out my mind to most folks. Six months and three weeks later—on October 1—I made it back home to San Diego. I had crisscrossed the country and driven more than 50,000 veggie miles, seeing 272 games in 215 days (yep, a lot of double-headers).

It was the trip of a lifetime. But as one of my sponsors recommended, "Now, Joe, get some rest!" I retired to the couch and watched the baseball playoffs on television through October. And during the commercials that ran between innings, I couldn't help but think back to the first great days of the trip, which all started in the baseball heaven of Arizona. ■

Designed by an orthopedic hand surgeon, patented **BIONIC GLOVES** are ergonomically designed for maximum comfort and performance.

No journalist in the world has witnessed more baseball in more places than **JOE CONNOR**. Since 2001, the baseball writer has annually updated his easy-to-use electronic travel guides, *A Fan's Guide To The Ultimate Spring Training Experience*; *A Fan's Guide To The Ultimate Ballpark Tour: Fully Loaded!* about MLB, Minor League and Independent League parks; *A Fan's Guide To The Ultimate Japanese Ballpark Experience*; and *A Fan's Guide To The Ultimate Dominican Ballpark Experience*. In November 2005, *The World in a Ballpark: Baseball Goes Global* was added, and in 2007, *A Fan's Guide To The Ultimate College Ballpark Experience* will debut. All guides are available for purchase at www.modernerabaseball.com

