

SPORT-UTES

WHERE'S THE CRISIS?

By Warren Brown

I am an old-fashioned journalist, the kind who believes in balance and using analysis -- tools I find useful in getting at the truth. But I've seen very little balance or analysis in the recent spate of media stories about the harm light trucks can do to passenger car occupants in vehicle-to-vehicle crashes. The media hype on the issue is this: light trucks are big. Passenger cars are small. Light trucks cream passenger cars and their occupants in crashes. The light truck population is growing and, thus, the potential harm to people in passenger cars is growing.

Except, of course, the general media has difficulty grasping the notion of "light truck." For their own purposes, the media has reduced "light trucks" to something instantly understandable -- sport-utility vehicles, but not just any sport-utility vehicle. Big ones are preferred, presumably because they have as much of an impact in the telling of a story as they do in a vehicle-to-vehicle crash.

Never mind that light trucks include full-size vans, minivans, pickup trucks and sport-utility vehicles; and never mind that there are widely varying vehicle sizes, weights and types within these sub-segments.

So, what are the facts? Do light trucks smash smaller cars in crashes? You betcha. And 18-wheel tractor-trailers can smash light trucks. Also, almost any small passenger car or large motorcycle can smash a pedestrian unfortunate enough to cross its path at the wrong moment.

I do not wish to make light of light-truck aggressivity in crashes. Nor would I argue here, or anywhere, that something can't be done to make some light trucks more friendly in smashups. My passion here is perspective.

It is one thing to predict the obvious -- big smashes small. It is quite another to determine how often the obvious occurs, and whether that occurrence constitutes a crisis. According to numbers culled from the government's Fatal Analysis Reporting System, and research done by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety and the University of Michigan's Transportation Research Institute, there is no crisis involving crashes between light trucks and cars.

Light trucks account for 34 percent of all vehicles in operation on U.S. roads and 45.3 percent of all new vehicles sold annually. Yet, in 1996, the last full year of U.S. traffic

fatality reports, light trucks were involved in two percent of all traffic fatalities and four percent of all fatal vehicle-to-vehicle crashes.

In all, 41,907 people died on the nation's roads in 1996. Of that number, 5,259 died in crashes between cars and light trucks, and 4,013 died in car-to-car crashes -- numbers that the media says proves that light trucks are becoming more dangerous as their vehicle population increases.

But the media often overlooks a host of other mitigating numbers, including the tremendous national increase in vehicle miles traveled and the continued growth of all vehicles on U.S. highways. When those numbers are considered, the picture looks quite different. The overall rate of highway deaths is down and continues to fall, they show.

But even more is this: traffic fatalities in 1996 included 5,441 people who were killed just trying to cross the street and 5,126 who died in car crashes with medium and heavy-duty trucks -- those weighing over 10,000 pounds.

That means your chances of dying as a pedestrian were greater than your chances of being smashed by, say, a Ford Explorer; and your chances of being wasted by a Peterbilt 18-wheeler were just as good as being knocked into eternity by a Toyota Land Cruiser.

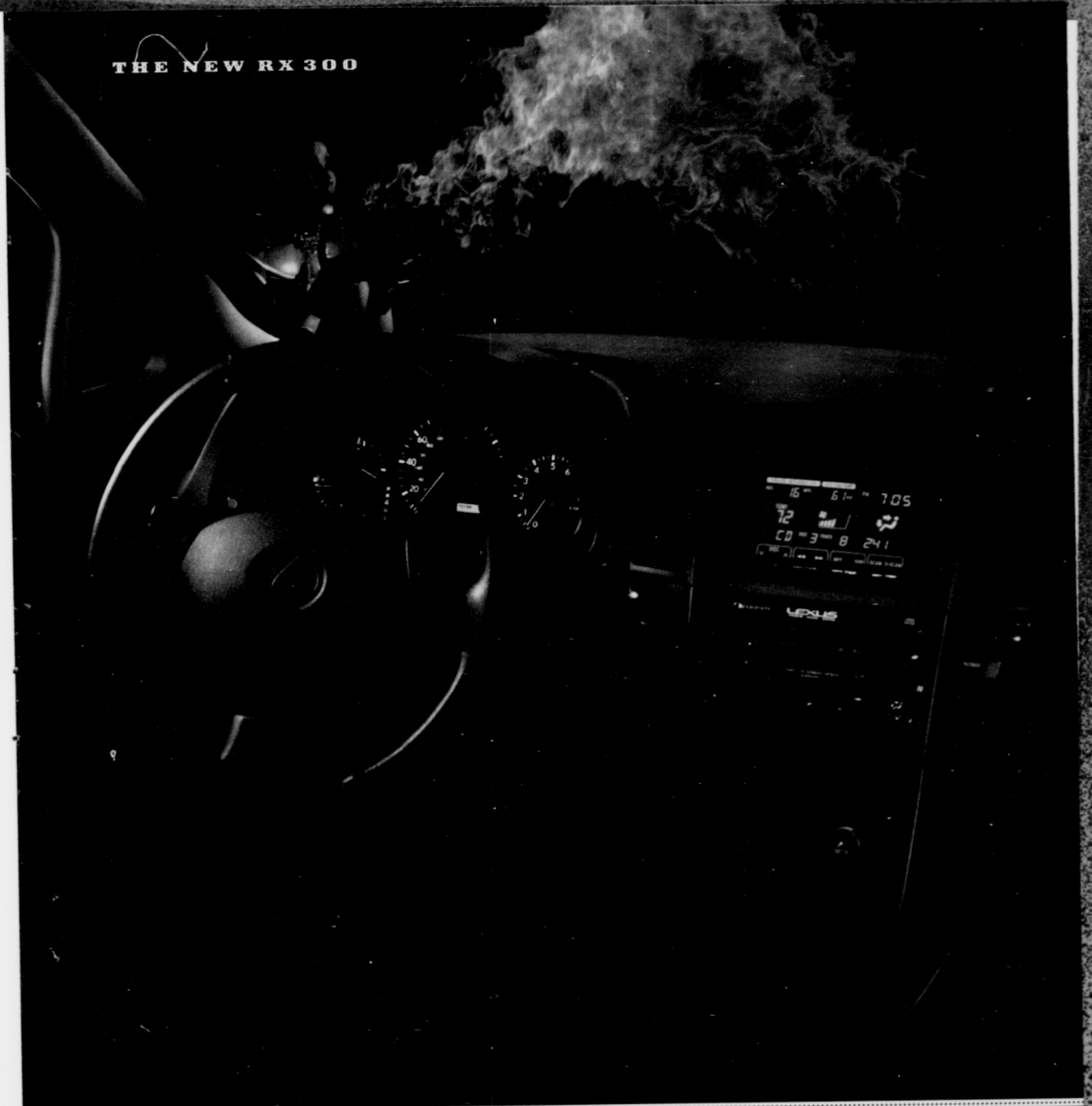
More stunning is the number of people who died in single-vehicle crashes -- running into a wall or tree or telephone pole, or rolling over into a ditch -- 16,663 deaths!

Yet the media thinks that the biggest problem is light trucks; and the politicians and government regulators, despite their own assessment that the light truck-car problem is statistically small, are rushing before the news cameras and microphones offering solutions.

But, ask yourself: is this really a crisis?



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