

By Reed Flickinger

Although four-wheel-drive aficionados may disagree which application is supreme, very few will waste the effort to argue there is a better heavy-duty, serious offroad vehicle than the Jeep CJ-5. It has the shortest wheelbase and the narrowest track of any of the domestic 4x4s, and is shorter than any of the imports brought into the country in significant numbers. Add to this a high ground clearance, and you have 90% of the necessary qualities of a champion offroader.

Knowing this full-well, we decided to contact AMC about getting a CJ-5 for a long-term evaluation, in order to see if it was indeed still king of the hill. Ours was not an investigation into the highway manners of the CJ, but an offroad odyssey. The underlying theme might be found in the form of a question: Hey, look at that, do you think you can make it? And each time we tried.

In order to make this a fair appraisal, we contacted the AMC public relations department and told them just what we had in mind. They said okay and began to set up our "ultimate offroader" for the ultimate challenge.

"Let's see now, V8, air, power steering, automatic...."

We had to stop them before they got to cruise control. And we went on to explain we wanted to set the CJ up as an offroader in the truest sense, not as a Van Nuys Blvd 4x4. So the order went in: 258cid inline-six; four-speed; heavy-duty suspension; rag top; non-power assist steering; no carpeting; Warn locking hubs and an 8000lb Warn electric winch; heavy-duty cooling system and a heavy-duty battery. That was it. Bare-bones, buckboard, back country equipped, it was destined to go through hell...

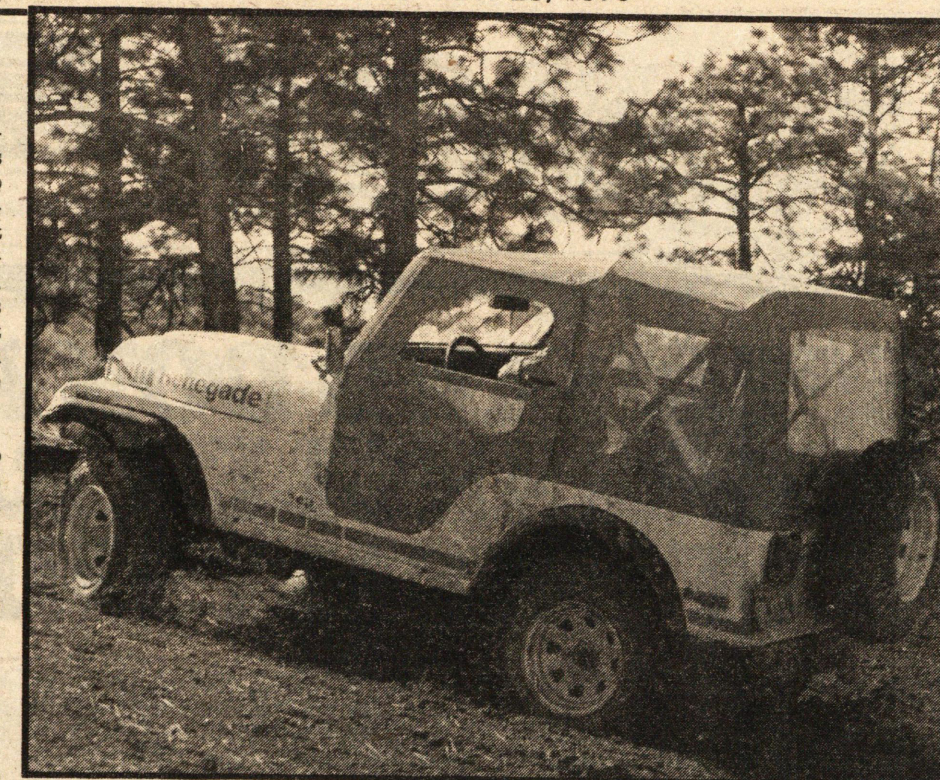
After only a brief wait, we received the call we had been awaiting. The CJ was ready, almost. The winch still had to be installed. No problem, a winch is well worth waiting for. We have had enough experience to know a winch is a priceless accessory that one time you get stuck and it is too far to walk out. After that, you insist on carrying a winch mounted forgivingly on the front of your 4x4. The term "unforgivingly" is used because the winch will bail you out of more bad decisions than most offroaders would care to admit. But then, if the winch gets you out, maybe it wasn't such a bad decision. The bad ones are the ones that nothing can get you out of.

There it stood. A white CJ-5 Renegade with a blue "Levi" top and blue accent stripes. It was pristine....It would never look the same again. A "serious" CJ should never look that virginal after it leaves the dealer's lot.

Break-in. The term takes on all different and exciting connotations when used in conjunction with a 4x4. Of course, we were cautious about over-revving the engine for the first couple hundred miles, but aside from that, we ran it like it had been with us for years. The first offroad foray occurred with only 30 miles showing on the odometer.

There is a mountain within gunshot of our office, which bears the odd name of Peavine. At the time of our CJ's delivery—January first—this 8400ft sub-Sierran peak was wearing a glorious mantle of snow. Aha! Can we make it to the summit through three feet of snow? Sure we can, we've got the ultimate offroader. New Jeep, new snow pack and we have to use the winch on the first trip out. We sunk the CJ nearly out of sight in a glacial snow drift mere feet from the zenith of the peak. Luckily, there was a nice pickup point to hook up the cable and we had all of two feet of extra cable after we tied up.

From this ignominious outset we were destined to continue testing the mettle of America's premier offroad vehicle and the courage, foolishness and malfeasance of the driver. We didn't want to break the CJ, because that can be done....any vehicle can be destroyed. We simply acted as though each and every outing was a



The Ultimate Offroader vs. The Ultimate Challenge Jeep CJ-5



The badge of the offroad 4x4 is mud, caked on everywhere. We were quick to make sure our Jeep CJ-5 was properly attired.

challenge.

Our past experience with Jeeps, both privately owned and test vehicles, has given us a pretty good idea of what they can and can't do. For instance, there is a definite limit to the depth of a river which can be forded—you can suck water into the air cleaner, rock the blocks, send

rods, etc. Well, regardless, we pressed on with our test and challenge. Was the '79 model CJ, complete with catalytic converter and different body tooling, indeed as good as its predecessors?

Emphatically, we say yes. It is as good and better. Oh, but for the advantage of disc brakes in those earlier models, and

the preferable electronic ignition system, which does away with points and the like, is far preferable when the water starts coming over the fenders. But one difference we missed was the small swiveling cover over the drain holes in the floor. They have been replaced by a greater number of holes, with crude, hard plastic plugs. The plugs not only break their fastening clips when you choose to remove them, but they will also surprise you by coming free just as you traverse the great muddy divide, sending a spray of ooze through the floor to soil your Tony Lamas.

Yet, the CJ is as good and better and here's more of why.

Flowing picturesquely through the Sierra Nevada mountains is a sometimes tranquil, sometimes turbulent American River. At one point, during one of our excursions through gold country (we have an editor who is obsessed with the idea of making a fortune with a gold pan and shovel, and who never learns he won't) we were forced with the desire to traverse from one bank to corresponding opposite shore. Being as there was no semblance of a bridge or crossing for miles, the only choice was the direct line betwixt two set points—bank A, and the desirable bank B—across the water. Unfortunately, a CJ has not been able to master treading water or traversing its surface, so the logical maneuver was to forge onward, through the river.

A simple movement of the lever controlling the transfer case eased the invincible CJ into low range and into the river. Deeper it forged, pushing ahead of it a bow wave the Bismarck would be proud of. At maximum depth sounding, the CJ didn't even falter. With waves proudly licking over her bow and fenders she defiantly continued for the opposite shore. Another victory, except for the driver, who was wet to the waist.

Yes, the configuration of the CJ is great, and it says only one thing—offroad. The total package is unbeatable. With the six-cylinder 258cid engine, the CJ can cruise at post-legal speeds with ease and carry you offroad where that is the optimum setup. The torque and gearing attained with a four-speed transmission is excellent, and superior to the heavier and less economical V8. We strongly urge the combination. The compound low gear can send the vehicle creeping along at a top speed of about 5mph, with enough guts to pull just about anything. The mileage it gives along the highway is a good 17-19mpg, which could easily be improved upon with a few minor changes, both legal and illegal, in the eyes of the EPA.

But for all our special ordering, winches and forethought, we forgot one option which would have made a degree of difference during many of our offroad endeavors—limited slip differentials, front and rear. Much of the time a vehicle spends offroad, it is faced with low traction situations and conditions. There is not a whole lot of difference between mud, snow, loose rocks or sand when the wheels are spinning. On several occasions which necessitated pulling out the trusty winch cable, we probably could have made the grade with the limited slip differentials.

That statement about our saving grace—the winch—brings to mind something we should dwell more upon, i.e., the winch. The Warn unit is rated at a maximum of 8000lbs, depending on the diameter of the braided steel cable chosen for us. Seldom is that thickness required, however. And the thicker the cable, the shorter the length which will fit around the winch drum. The operation of the unit is simple and can even be carried out from inside the vehicle—which is a blessing when the rain is pouring down. It is advisable, however, to keep an eye on the condition of the cable—breakages are no fun.

So far, so great. All this put before it and the CJ hadn't failed us yet. We continually drove it, daily to our offices and almost daily offroad—there is a lot of desert around Reno. And the only malfunction—

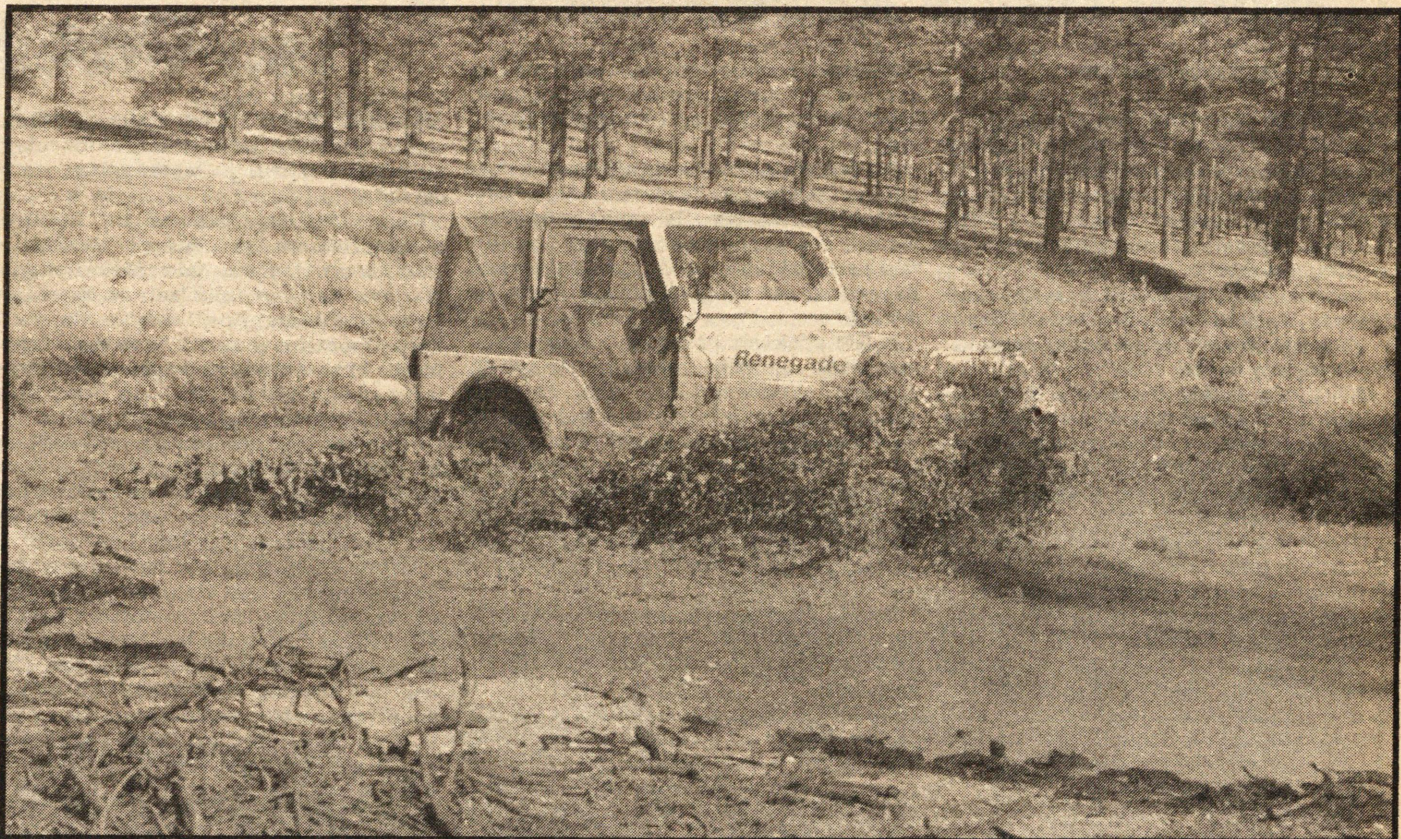
a burnt-out headlamp bulb. Amazing. If the rest of the automotive menagerie were as well constructed and as capable as our CJ, the world would be a lot simpler.

This Jeep lost its virginity in the first 30 miles.

The CJ itself is quite simple. Should something like a wiper system decide to malfunction, it is a simple matter to lower the windshield and view the problem directly, no crawling under dash complexes and peering through miles of wiring or pondering aimlessly underneath a darkened engine compartment, it is all right there. That same servicing ease is carried over throughout the vehicle for complete ease of maintenance.

So, where do we stand at this point? Actually, we have logged 5500+ miles on our mechanical marvel, and it hasn't let us down yet. We shall endeavor to keep taxing its limits and ours, hoping to gauge the capacity of man and machine. As yet, our inference is that we shall fail long before the CJ-5 meets its match. It is still proving to be the offroad king.

When you're looking for challenges in a Jeep, you just might find yourself in up to the axles. When all else fails (below), a winch saves the day.



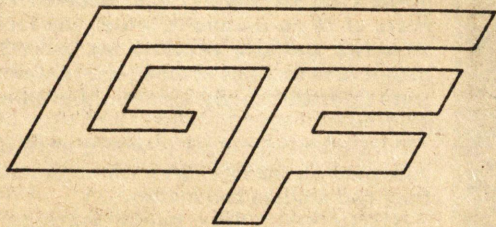
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Gene Felton and Lyn St. James finished 1-2 in Atlanta. Gene Felton of Atlanta, Ga. won the inaugural Kellygirl Challenge race at Road Atlanta in a Bilstein-equipped Buick Skylark; while Lyn St. James also carried the Bilstein banner to a second place finish. Bilstein-equipped Porsches driven by Peter Gregg (GTX Class) and Howard Meister (GTO Class) were also winners in the IMSA Winston GT Challenge event.

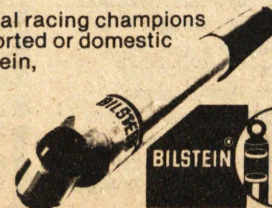
Results - IMSA Winston GT Challenge - Road Atlanta

GT Class		
1—Peter Gregg	Porsche Turbo	on BILSTEIN
2—Jim Busby	BMW 320i Turbo	on BILSTEIN
3—Don Whittington	Porsche Turbo	on BILSTEIN
4—Gianpiero Moretti	Porsche Turbo	on BILSTEIN
GTO Class		
1—Howard Meister	Porsche Turbo	on BILSTEIN
2—Mauricio deNarvaez	Porsche Turbo	on BILSTEIN
Kellygirl Challenge		
1—Gene Felton	Buick Skylark	on BILSTEIN

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