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Living

Posted on Thu, May. 22, 2003

THE KANSAS CITY STAR.

Volkswagen and other car enthusiasts find plenty of ways to play decades-old game

By JENEE' OSTERHELDT
The Kansas City Star

On the East Coast they play Punch Buggy. On the West Coast and here in the Midwest, it's Slug Bug.

Some kids call it Beetle Bop; the hippies called it Love Bug.

But no matter where you live or how you play it, when you see a Volkswagen Bug or Beetle, look out.

For the uninitiated, the game goes like this: The first person in the car to spot a VW gets to arm-punch everyone in reach, shouting "Slug bug!"(or Punch buggy!)

For decades people have played games involving the rounded, colorful car, but no one really knows when it all began.

"I would say it started with some college kids back when there were lots of Bugs in the late '60s," said Scott Sportsman, a Kansas City firefighter, Bug owner and Slug Bug player.

"They were just kids looking for a reason to have fun," said Sportsman, who drives a '71 baby blue Bug.

Assorted tales of how the fun started, the various names and the rules of the game are online by the dozens. There's a book, *The Complete Rules of Punch Buggy*, by Michael Lockhart and Ian Finlayson. They've even written a satirical history of the game, dating it to ancient Egypt.

The truth is, there is no recorded origin of the game, but the Bug has had an interesting life.

"It's an icon in pop culture," said Michael Marsden, a popular culture


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expert and professor of English and Cultural Studies at Eastern Kentucky University in Richmond.

The Bug started out ignominiously as Adolf Hitler's people car, Marsden said. But when the car was introduced to America in 1949, it was transformed into a universally appreciated icon.

In 1969, when Disney made "The Love Bug" movie featuring Herbie the Volkswagen Bug with a mind of his own, research showed people had a special reaction to Bugs compared to other cars, Marsden said.

"People like the Bug beyond the reality of any other relationship to a car. It's past cuteness and convenience," said Marsden, who teaches a course on automobiles in American culture.

"There's a super-affectionate nature when people spot them, even in its reincarnation."

Some would disagree.

Mike Kersten, president of the Mo-Kan Volkswagen Club, says Slug Bug is a historical thing and the new Beetle isn't a Bug.

To clarify, the Bug is a pre-1971 Volkswagen. The Super Beetle came out in 1971, with a more bulbous hood, more luggage space and large round tail lights. The new retro-style Beetle was introduced in 1999. Most Volkswagen fans consider all models before the new one a Bug.

"You don't get the same response from a new Beetle driver that you get from a classic Beetle driver," said Kersten, who has a '71 Super Beetle painted an iris mist/metallic color.

People with the original Bugs have a sense of Volkswagen camaraderie, he said. "New Beetle drivers see their cars as a form of transportation; classic drivers look at it as a way of life."

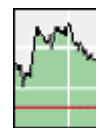
For most Slug Bug players, a Bug is a Beetle is a Bug. They just make sure they see it first.

"It doesn't matter if it's a Bug or a Beetle," said Jennifer Wieman, 26, of Kansas City, a Slug Bug fanatic.

Wieman doesn't just stop at Slug Bug, she plays a variety of car games, from (PT) Cruiser Bruiser to (Volkswagen) Jetta Jabs to (Toyota) Camry Compliments.

"It's something to do on road trips instead of '100 Bottles of Beer on the Wall,' " Wieman said. "It makes the time pass quickly...."

The Bug's consistency in style has given the Slug Bug game longevity, Sportsman said.



"Beetles look like nothing else," he said. "From far away, if you see a Honda Accord and a Toyota Camry, they look alike. When you see a Beetle, you know it."

Or it could be infatuation.

"It's silly and fun," Wieman said. "Even when I am by myself, I search for them. It's addictive."

To reach Jenee' Osterheldt, New Beetle driver and Punch Buggy player, call **(816) 234-4380** or e-mail josterheldt@kcstar.com.

Punch Buggy rules

- When you spot a Bug or a Beetle, yell Punch Buggy and the color of the car. For example, if you see a blue Bug, you yell "Punch Buggy blue."
- If you don't want to get hit back, you have to say "No punch back," as you sock the other player.

Variations of the game

- **Beetle Bop:** A family-friendly, G-rated version of the original game. If you see a Beetle or Bug, just holler "Beetle Bop." You don't hit the other player. It's all about who spots it first.
- **Love Bug:** For the hippies or touchy-feely types, if you see a Bug or Beetle say "Love Bug" and give a hug or kiss to the other player.
- **Cruiser Bruiser:** The PT Cruiser, another uniquely shaped and easily recognized car, has its own version of Slug Bug. You see a PT Cruiser, call "Cruiser Bruiser" and punch the other player.
- **Camry Compliments:** A game for ego-boosting. If you see a Toyota Camry, you have to compliment the other player.

VW Bug Blitz/Bus Blast

The Missouri-Kansas Volkswagen Club has its annual Bug Blitz/Bus Blast this weekend in Lawrence at the Douglas County Fairgrounds.

The camp-out starts at noon Friday and ends at noon Sunday. There will be a car show at noon Saturday, as well as a taco bar and live band. Gates open at 7 a.m. Admission is free. Go to www.mokanvwclub.org.



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