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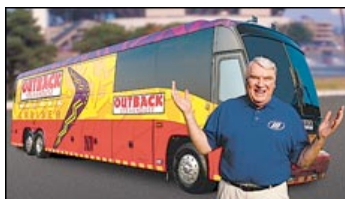
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Madden's ride made in Manitoba Flying phobia rules out plane, so football guru rides MCI bus

Sat Jun 3 2006

By Larry Kusch



Supplied photo

Football analyst John Madden, who has a flying phobia, criss-crosses the U.S. in a bus made by Motor Coach Industries.

WHEN NFL great John Madden treks from his home in California to Canton, Ohio, this summer to be inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame, he'll be taking a piece of Winnipeg with him.

Actually, a very big piece.

He'll be riding there in his brand-new 45-foot bus, made at the Motor Coach Industries plant in Fort Garry.

Madden, who has flight anxiety and hasn't flown since 1979, is taking delivery of his fifth MCI bus in July.

It is being customized in Tennessee and filled with all the latest communications gadgets that will allow him to watch football games, do his radio show and bone up for his Sunday Night telecasts on NBC, the fourth network he has worked with.

The \$800,000 US bus's inaugural trip will be to Canton.

"You can't beat that," he said in an interview this week. "(The first ride) on the new bus is going to the hall of fame in August."

Madden, 70, a former head coach with the Oakland Raiders and a popular analyst on NFL telecasts since 1979, is one of many sports and entertainment celebrities and business tycoons who have owned an MCI bus.

He said he keeps riding in them because they're "strong" and reliable.

"I just think they have the best vehicle."

The list of rich and famous who have been MCI customers include Bob Dylan, Brooks & Dunn, Merle Haggard, Loretta Lynn, race car legend Roger Penske, daredevil Evel Knievel, and the late Ray Charles, Ray Kroc (founder of McDonald's) and Johnny Cash, according to MCI.

Cash's old band, the Tennessee Three, is touring North America in the same 1979 MC-9 coach that the Man in Black used until 1997. It's been restored by a collector and lent to the group.

In April, when the band came to Winnipeg to play a gig at Silverados, the group also played a 75-minute set of Johnny Cash tunes before an appreciative crowd of 1,000 workers at the MCI plant on Clarence Avenue.

Rudy Lutzer, a 32-year MCI employee who made parts for the 1979 bus Cash purchased, said the concert, organized by MCI for its workers, was a big hit.



MIKE APORIUS / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS
Rudy Lutzer, a 32-year Motor Coach

"The people really enjoyed it and so did I because I was a fan of Johnny Cash, and I remember seeing him here live at Red River Exhibition when it used to be held at Polo Park," Lutzer said.

Bob Wootton, the Tennessee Three lead singer and guitarist who played with Cash for nearly three decades, said he has a lot of fond memories of the Winnipeg-made bus named JC Unit 1.

"Sometimes when we're driving at night (touring now) it's almost like you can feel John in the bus with you," he said in an interview from Nashville.

Wootton said the bus, which had visits from the likes of Bill Clinton, Farah Fawcett and a host of legendary musicians while Johnny was alive, was a

Now that's a bus

John Madden is taking delivery of his fifth Motor Coach Industries bus, the top-of-the-line E4500, next month.

Customized in Tennessee, the \$800,000 US bus will feature:

- * Four or five high-definition plasma TVs plus satellite Internet and telephone communications;
 - * Two bathrooms, with a large glass steam shower in the master bathroom;
 - * A bedroom-office suite with a queen-sized bed;
 - * Granite flooring and countertops in the galley kitchen.
- Other features of the bus:
- * It is 45 feet long, 8 1/2 feet wide, 13 feet tall and weighs 45,000 pounds;
 - * The fuel tank holds 800 litres, allowing the bus to run at least 1,600 kilometres between

fill-ups.

Sources: *Motor Coach Industries/Sandy Montag, Madden's agent*

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MIKE MCINTYRE
ON CALL

Ruby Lutzer, a 55-year motor coach veteran, helped build Johnny Cash's touring bus.

sanctuary for Cash and his wife, June Carter Cash.

"It was their home that they enjoyed more than they did their actual home because they could get away from everything and all their problems," he said.

And they refused to replace the bus when it got old, Wootton said.

"They loved their bus. People tried to get them to get a new bus. But they said, "This is exactly what we want. Why get rid of it?" "

Madden has been criss-crossing the country on customized MCI buses for two decades, riding as many as 160,000 kilometres each year.

Before that he took the train for several years, but the Amtrak schedules didn't always fit with his. He got his first taste of riding in a luxury bus when CBS hired one for him so he could make it to a Sunday afternoon game on time.

"It had just come off tour with Dolly Parton," Madden said with a chuckle. "That poor bus went from Dolly Parton to me. That wasn't fair."

Later, a Greyhound official heard him on television musing about obtaining a bus to travel to games. And in 1987, Madden got his first MCI-built bus.

Since then, the popular football commentator -- sought after by many companies for endorsements, including Outback Steakhouse, whose name adorns his bus -- has done some promotional work for MCI.

Madden said he needs a solid vehicle for his Trans-American journeys, which can be as long as 50 hours. (Two drivers, one of whom has been with Madden for nearly 20 years, spell each other off on the long hauls.)

"The MCI, to me, is like the offensive lineman in football. They're the big strong guys that, without them, you couldn't do what you do," he said.

One advantage of taking the bus instead of the plane, Madden said, is he gets to meet his viewers when his bus pulls into Main Street U.S.A.

"I've always felt that there's been an advantage for me because I kind of know who I'm talking to because I've seen them.

"You know what a person from Wyoming is, you know what a person from Iowa is and Tennessee and Georgia and Florida and all over because I've been in all those states... I didn't fly over them. I went through them." When he was the analyst on Sunday afternoon football games -- and before satellite technology allowed him to watch games on his bus -- he regularly stopped his bus at a bar or restaurant to watch a Monday Night Football game as he travelled to his next destination.

His agent, Sandy Montag, who has been with Madden for 21 years, recalls one evening when the Madden Cruiser caused a stir as it rumbled down the streets of Sidney, Neb., pop. 6,400.

"He was spotted and pretty much the whole town came out and watched Monday Night Football with him on television," Montag said from his office in New York.

"It's been a unique way to travel and it's been a very important part of his life."

But the man with the best lifetime winning percentage among NFL coaches with at least 100 victories is savouring one particular bus trip, come early August, when he heads to Ohio, where his bust will join those of the other gridiron greats in the Hall of Fame.

"I'm looking forward to that (going to Canton). I think it's going to be the greatest day of my life."

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Hop on the bus

Motor Coach Industries has been making buses in Winnipeg since 1933.

Other facts:

- * Its first model was an 11-seat body on a Packard chassis.
- * More MCI D-Series coaches have been sold than any other inter-city bus in Canada and the United States.
- * The company's J4500, launched in 2001, is the top selling coach in North America.
- * MCI makes about 20 shells (no seats) a year that are customized elsewhere for the rich and famous.
- * Greyhound is a big MCI customer, buying 36 coaches in March.
- * The E4500 deluxe model, favoured by John Madden, and the top-selling J4500 model are made entirely in Winnipeg.
- * Another model, the D4505, preferred by Greyhound, is made in Winnipeg but finished in Pembina, N.D.

Source: Motor Coach Industries

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