

It must be winter - the car won't start

Whether it's snowing or not, high humidity and precipitation will cause starting and stalling trouble this winter for tens of thousands of motorists.

Worn spark plugs, cracked ignition leads, a dirty distributor cap and loose drive belts can all play havoc with a car's ignition system.

Winter starting problems are two-fold. Colder temperatures can decrease the starting power of the battery, and problems in the ignition system cause the battery to run down faster in futile starting attempts. A new or recharged battery tends to hide the problem temporarily, causing starting problems to recur.

Wet ignition system

Many starting problems can almost always be traced to a wet ignition system. Moisture from rain or melting snow often settles in the engine compartment. Salt and road grime can accumulate in the engine compartment and retain moisture. If the moisture doesn't burn off, the unintentional electrical path for the spark may prevent it from reaching the plug.

Spark plugs that have seen too many miles are often the culprit. The spark will jump where there is the last resistance. If the gap is too wide or there's something causing a disruption in the spark's path, the spark will leak through the wire.

Leaking plug wires

Leaking plug wires can often be diagnosed by letting the engine run in a dark area and observing the plug wires for sparks. If sparks are visible, the wire where the spark is leading should be examined for wear and damage and replaced if necessary.

The same holds true for the distributor cap. Moisture on top of the cap can prevent the spark from reaching the plug. Dry off the top and inside of the cap with a towel or hair dryer, and the car should start.

Check distributor cap

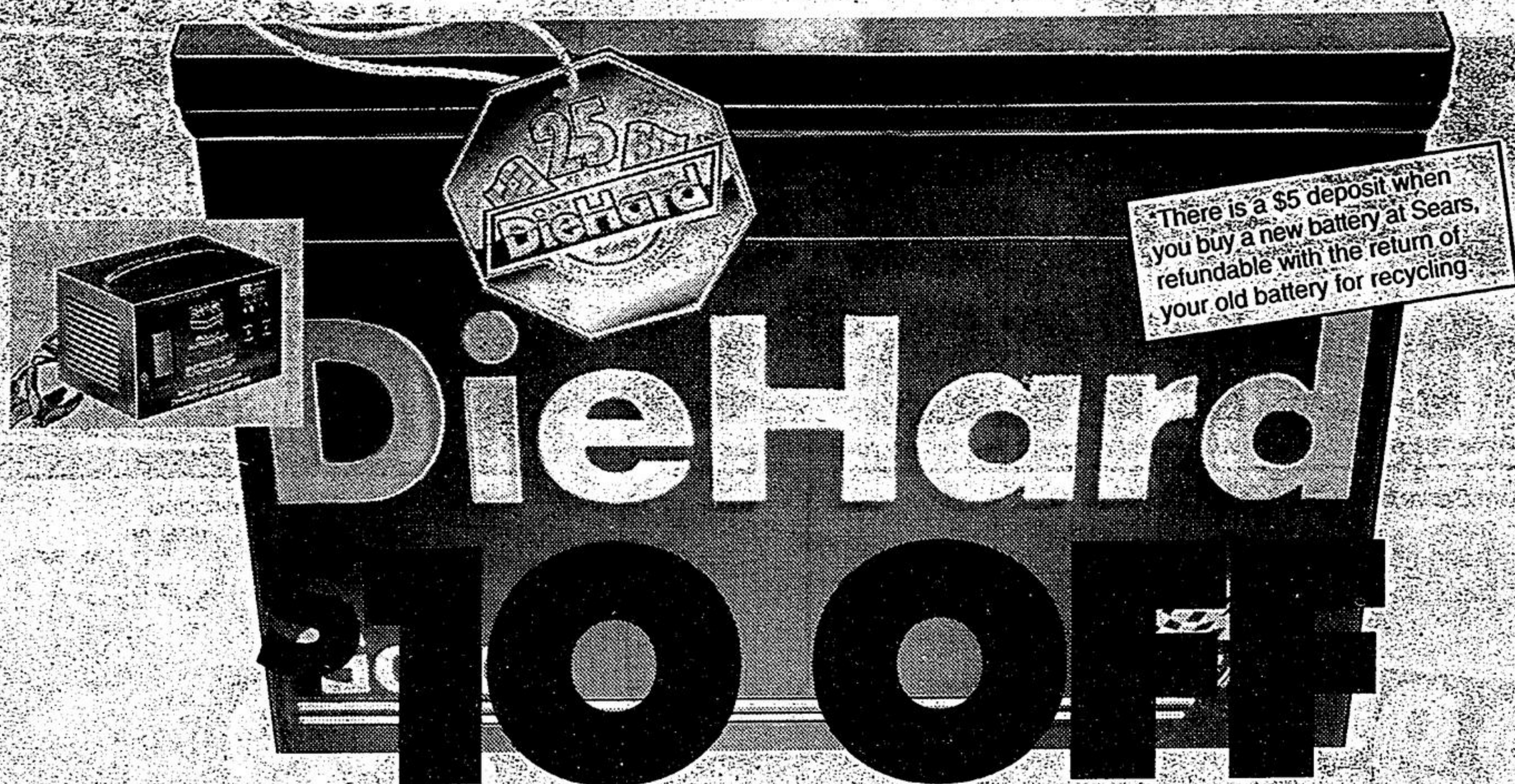
Motorists should also check the distributor cap for signs of electrode wear, cracks that may allow moisture to seep in and carbon tracks that may indicate shorting of the spark.

Driving in the rain and through slush can also drown out an ignition system. Water can slip under a loose-fitting insulator boot and short out the spark plug. Check the spark plug boots for snugness. Loose-fitting boots should be replaced.

Water can also cause drive belts to slip, resulting in a loss of the charging system's voltage to the battery.

Check the alternator belt for tension and wear. If the belt does not show signs of wear, simply adjust to the proper tension.

An annual tuneup is still the best insurance for a sure start.



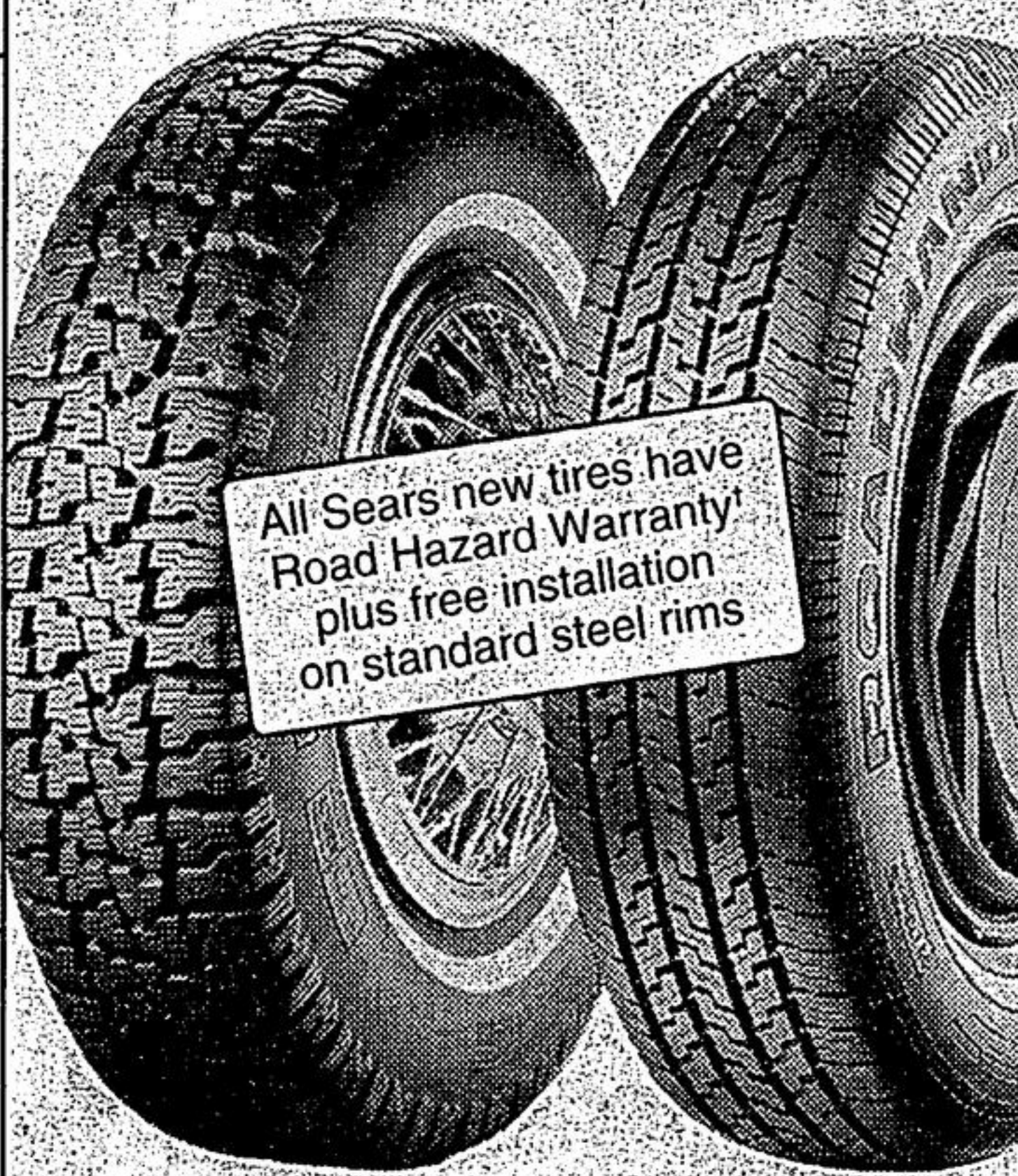
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