

Ave Maria

If science says that an object in motion stays in motion, then the object of our affections, **Maria Menounos**, won't slow down anytime soon. | JON LIEBER

On a cool, crisp fall morning Maria Menounos hurdes down the back roads of Wilmington, Delaware, ready to tackle her latest assignment. But this week, the 26-year-old *Entertainment Tonight* correspondent isn't following celebrity lives as usual. Instead, she's ready for one of four special guest spots on the WB's hit show *One Tree Hill*. "I am loving it here!" Menounos chirps from her morning commute. "Wilmington is gorgeous and it has been the most positive experience."

Not wanting to spoil her character's twist in the show's second season, Menounos is only willing to divulge that she plays the love interest of Craig Sheffer (best remembered as Brad Pitt's older brother in *A River Runs Through It*). But Sheffer is 18 years her senior, isn't that a stretch? "We had such great chemistry. Plus, I like older men anyway," she says matter-of-factly. "So it's not odd for me to be playing a character involved with an older man."

This should come as no surprise since Menounos has been shooting arrows in the hearts of men for years. As a contestant in the 1996 Miss USA pageant, when asked by host (and *ET* talking head) Bob Goen what she wanted to do in the real world, she said, "I want to work with you at *ET*, Bob!" Six years later, the job was hers.

Yet before she set her sights on TV and LA, Boston's Emerson College came first. She double-majored in broadcast journalism and film, rocked out in the chick band Omega Girl Incorporated, and worked the late-night pizza scene to turn the routine "freshman 15" weight gain into the frosh 40. "Taco Bell was my best friend, and McDonald's was my partner in crime," she says of her former fast-food fetish. "I've been drive-through sober for the last three months. I've finally quit!"

It was her turn as an international correspondent on Channel One News, reaching more than 8 million students through interviews with celebs and dignitaries (including President George W. Bush), that opened up a new chapter in her life. After covering the AIDS epidem-



ic in South Africa and the fallout of the 2001 earthquake in El Salvador, Menounos was spurred on to do more than just report on distant world regions. "The things I saw in other parts of the world had me because you could see it, feel it, and touch it. When I'd get back to LA I'd send care packages, boxes of food, and clothing to orphanages or other places in need. Then I took a step back and realized there was more that I could do. I have more power than that in me." Along with director Kevin Indigaro, Menounos formed Take Action Hollywood, a charity whose mission is to utilize the power of the entertainment industry to edu-

RISING STAR: Maria Menounos is moving from reporting on celebrities for *ET* to being one herself.

cate, empower, and raise social awareness.

Looking ahead, it's certain that sparks will fly when red-hot Menounos plays the love interest of the Human Torch in 2005's *Fantastic Four*. "I've been daydreaming about this since I was 13," says Menounos of her career with *ET* and various film and production projects. "I'm thrilled to be able to reach such a large audience and to have an impact on young viewers." And while she's sticking to covering the stars for now, she'll soon be the one who is reported on.