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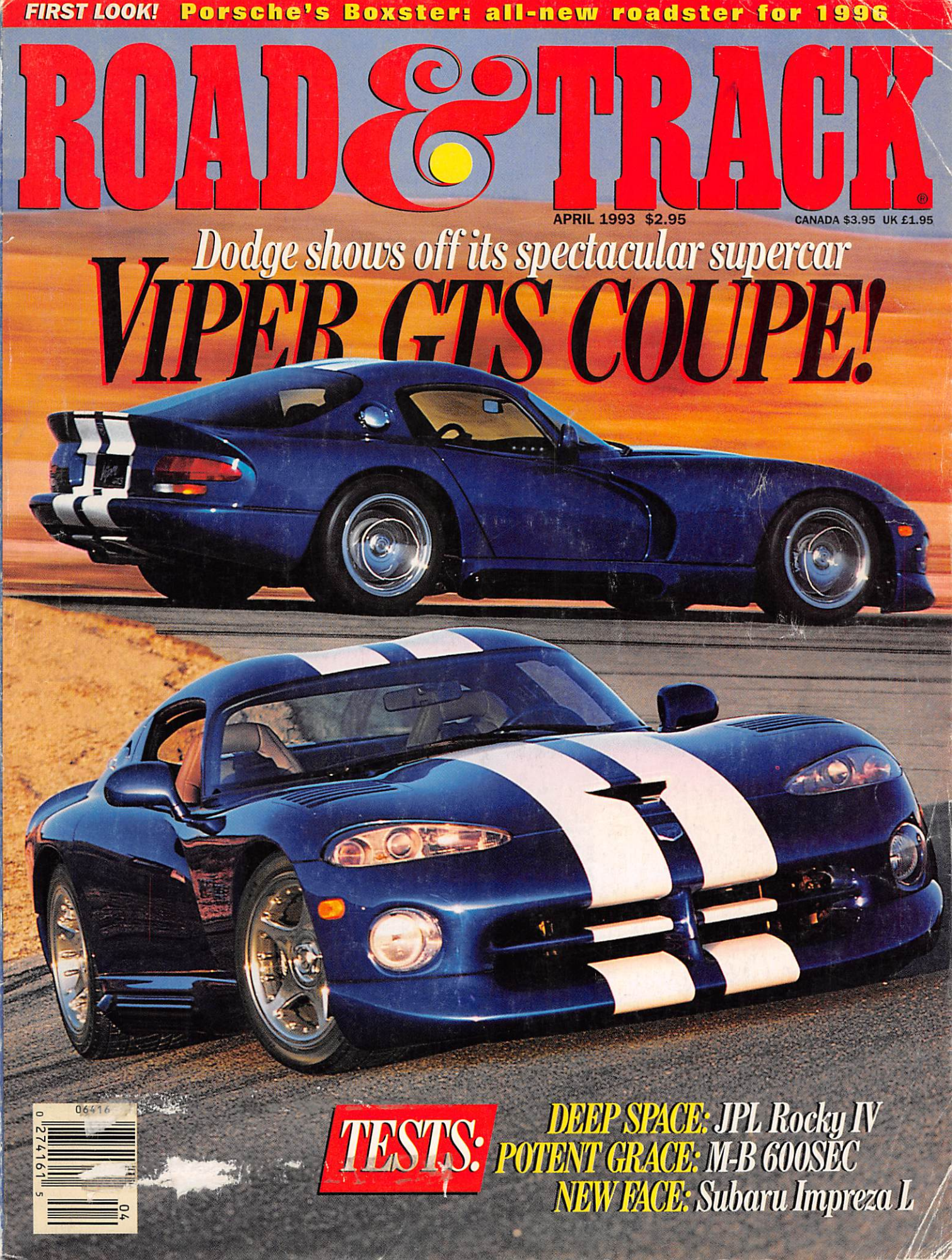

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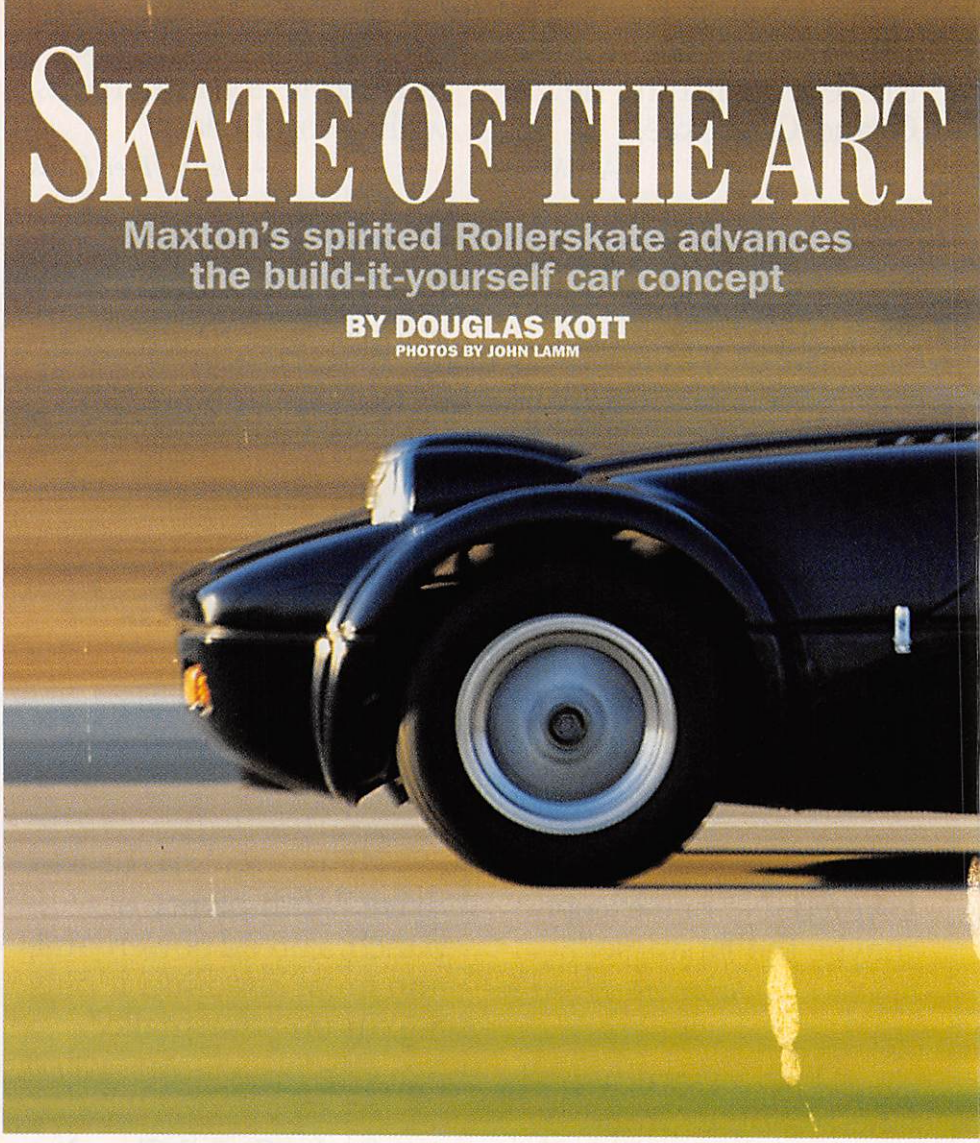
SKATE OF THE ART

Maxton's spirited Rollerskate advances the build-it-yourself car concept

BY DOUGLAS KOTT

PHOTOS BY JOHN LAMM



IF COLIN CHAPMAN, Donald Healey and Kenichi Yamamoto had all gone to a pub, thrown back a few beers and sketched a car design on the back of a cocktail napkin, the result might have been the Maxton Rollerskate. This isn't to imply that the alcohol would impair any of their design philosophies or sense of judgment; it's just that the Social Lubricant would facilitate the sharing of ideas.

What we have here is an engine placed well back in a lightweight tube chassis, with double A-arm front suspension and a live rear axle. Sounds a bit like a Lotus Seven, yes?

The fiberglass bodywork around this chassis could be the Healey influence, with those frog-eye lights, low-cut sides and overall inviting proportions, the sort of friendly-yet-sporty look that invites one to jump in and drive.

And the engine, invented by Dr. Felix Wankel but nurtured, refined and popularized to its present fine form by Mazda's Yamamoto, is perfect for the application: compact for its power output, smooth and goof-proof simple, without all those pesky poppet valves, camshafts and the like. And simple solutions to challenging problems are the stuff of an engineer's dreams.

Fortunate for us, Maxton President Bob Sutherland is a doer rather than a dreamer, and a kindred spirit of all previously mentioned engineers. Bob is the moving force behind the Colorado Grand, a 1000-mile rally for vintage cars held on public roads through the Rockies, and an avid collector/racer of vintage cars himself, and in his own words, "a hopelessly addicted gearhead."

He and a small staff of similar gearheads with road-racing backgrounds designed the Rollerskate, and build 50 of them a year at their shop just outside Denver (3774 S. Lipan St., Englewood, Colo. 80110; [303] 781-1945), in various stages of completion. That's right, the Rollerskate is a component car, where you can buy everything from a suspension kit (contains A-arms, springs, shocks, front disc brakes, anti-roll bars, trailing links and a Panhard rod for $995) to an 80-percent-completed "roller" car with everything supplied except engine, transmission and paint for $19,995. Intermediate kits are offered for chassis ($4995; also includes fuel system and rack-and-pinion steering) and bodywork ($6995; also includes seats, dash and windshield, plus cooling, exhaust and electrical systems).

A turn-key, I-can-put-you-in-this-car-today Rollerskate can be had for $26,500 on up, but not directly from Maxton: To prevent the Rollerskate from being classified as a production car—and therefore subject to all federal regulations for emissions controls, crash testing, etc.—the help of an outside contractor is enlisted for final assembly, under the watchful eye of Maxton personnel.

So there I was, in my garage with a Rollerskate of this last persuasion, with long-wheelbase chassis and equipped with a mildly ported 210-bhp 13B 2-rotor engine fitted with Racing Beat's sidedraft Dellorto induction setup. It had rained the night before, so the ground was slick but the skies were clearing, leaving that happy after-storm situation of boiling, pure white clouds against a startlingly blue background. Perfect weather for a short blast to work.

If one is to blast, one must first get into the car, and this is helped by the Rollerskate's low doorless body sides but hindered by my narrow one-car garage and the tiny leather-wrapped steering wheel positioned close to the seat's lower cushion. Best technique: step onto the seat's lower cushion; then, while pretending you're in a full lower-body cast, thread your feet past the wheel into the footwell, lowering your butt into the seat with one hand on the center console and the other on the bodywork. A slight adaptation of this technique also comes in handy for Formula Fords.

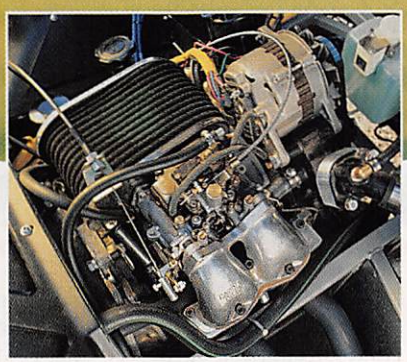
Once seated, it's snug, with the carpeted center console and body sides performing lateral locating duties. A 4-point harness gives an additional sense of security, as does a chromed rollbar immediately aft of your head. The Wankel fires on the first twist of the key, aided by a pull of the manual choke knob. The needles flicker on a row of five VDO gauges set high in the dash, relaying the engine's vital signs. The speedometer and tach,

though, are partially blocked by the toylike wheel. We're off!

This is a spirited little beast. Quick and loud. The factory says 60 mph can be reached in less than 6 seconds with an engine in this state of tune, and it certainly feels like it. Induction noise and exhaust are attention-getting, adding to the excitement at first, dulling the mind later. To approximate this Rollerskate's sound at full throttle, grab a goose, sharply administer the Heimlich maneuver and amplify by a factor of five. In fairness, an owner could fit a somewhat quieter exhaust and retain the stock carburetor or fuel-injection system.

The chassis feels tight and responsive, no doubt because Ben van der Linden, who headed SCCA's Renault spec racing series, designed the Rollerskate's space frame and suspension system along race-car lines. Sitting so low and far back in the wheelbase takes some getting used to, but after familiarization it's very rewarding to drive quickly. Being light (about 1700 lb.), having relatively wide rubber (P205/60VR-13s) and possessing a front/rear weight distribution of 47/53, the Rollerskate has great balance and regains adhesion very quickly after it's lost it. Pushing the tail out with power here is a very predictable, enjoyable experience, not the guessing game of some high-powered cars.

Great gobs of fun, this little rocket, at least in small doses. And well put together, I must remark, looking closely at the neat welds, precise fabrication and attention to detail. Bob Sutherland should be one proud gearhead.



A sidedraft carb, header and mild porting give the Maxton's 13B rotary about 210 bhp.

SPECIFICATIONS	
Curb weight	**1705 lb**
Wheelbase	96.0 in.
Track, f/r	54.2 in./55.7 in.
Length	**148.5 in.**
Width	**64.0 in.**
Height	**41.5 in.**
Fuel capacity	11.0 gal.

ENGINE & DRIVETRAIN	
Engine	**2-rotor Wankel**
Chamber width x generating radius x eccentricity:	80.0 x 105.0 x 15.0 mm
Displacement	**1308 cc**
Compression ratio	9.7:1
Horsepower (SAE)	**est 210 bhp @ 7000 rpm**
Torque	**est 165 lb-ft @ 6200 rpm**
Fuel delivery	one 2-barrel Dellorto
Transmission	**5-speed manual**

CHASSIS & BODY	
Layout	**front engine/rear drive**
Brake system, f/r	**vented discs/drums**
Wheels	Revolution cast alloy, **13 x 6 in.**
Tires	BFGoodrich Comp T/A, **P205/60VR-13**
Steering type	**rack & pinion**
Suspension, f/r	**upper & lower A-arms/ live axle on trailing links**