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## Rotary Power Meets a Super-Light Chassis in This DIY Roadster

story and photos by john webber



# THE Maxton ROLLERSKATE

Attention, class. Let's review those basic yet elusive design elements that make a car a ton of fun to drive. Follow along and repeat:

- Keep the thing as light as possible.
- Slide a powerful engine way back in the chassis.
- Install a race-proven suspension and brakes.

Now, was that so difficult? But here's the really tough question: Why are these simple elements so difficult to pull off in a production car?

The answer, of course, has for years been buried in federal regulations involving safety, emissions and product liability. For car builders, these issues create enough legal work to keep a busload of lawyers filing motions for years. And let's not even bring up the accountants. Imagine the business side of developing, marketing and selling such a fun car at a profit.

Yet all those hurdles haven't stopped dreamers from trying. More than 20 years ago, Bob Sutherland and his Maxton team deserted the ranks of dreamers and became doers. These guys created a simple, saucy and spirited component car powered by a then-modern drivetrain. Turns out their Rollerskate was a ton of fun to drive. It still is today.

### Developing the Rollerskate

Bob Sutherland was a consummate car guy who had made his money in the lumber business. In addition to being a racer and collector, he was also known as the father of the Colorado Grand, one of the country's first top-flight vintage touring events.

He loved driving quick cars and came up with the idea of building a vehicle along the lines of the late, lamented, wind-in-your-face British roadsters. As it turned out, he couldn't actually build a complete car because he would then run afoul of the aforementioned government regulations.

But, he figured, what if buyers did the final assembly themselves? And that's what the Maxton team did: They built a component car.

Sutherland recruited a group of talented, like-minded enthusiasts and off they went. Artist Mike Mate, who had worked with Sutherland on other automotive projects, designed a back-to-basics fiberglass roadster that resembled a muscular Bugeye Sprite.

Ben van der Linden, an engineer who helped run SCCA's Formula Renault series, designed a tubular space frame that recalled the Lotus Seven. SCCA racer and businessman

If weight is the enemy of speed, then the rotary-powered Maxton Rollerskate could be speed's BFF.



Dan Ripley, another of Sutherland's friends, came on board to do some testing. He was so impressed with the project that he decided to head up the car's manufacturing.

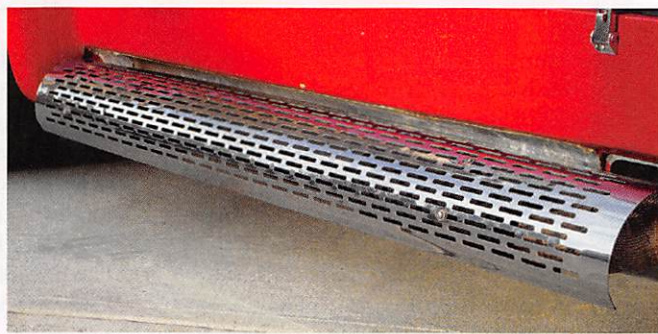
In keeping with the premise of a simple, light car, Sutherland chose the rotary engine from Mazda's RX-7. The new creation's clutch, five-speed transmission and rear end also came from the RX-7. Most ancillaries were sourced from Mazda, too.

The suspension was a mix of purpose-built and adapted pieces, and everything was designed to be light and strong. The front end was mostly Mustang II, including the spindles, steering rack and disc brakes. Adjustable coil-over shocks were used on each corner. The assembled car weighed just 1700 pounds.

By 1990 the team's prototype was developed enough to run in the Colorado Grand, and it did so to positive reviews. Further development and improvements followed.

In early 1991, the crew on PBS's "MotorWeek" assembled the third prototype and filmed the build for the series. The show held a giveaway for the completed Rollerskate that reportedly drew 900,000 entries. A later episode documented the winner receiving the car.

The car started to get some good press. *Grassroots Motorsports* featured a Rollerskate in 1991, describing it as "born of enthusiasts, for enthusiasts." *AutoWeek* also published a glowing review. Later, *Road & Track* praised the Rollerskate in a two-page feature. Other car magazines, including *Sports Car International*, *Exotic*



**TOP:** Don't be ashamed if you don't recognize the Rollerskate, as only about 50 were created in the early 1990s. **CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:** The trunk has room for a spare tire and not much else. The car's designers made low weight a high priority, so you can bet that the exhaust heat shield is absolutely critical in preventing the passenger's legs from being seared. Owner Karl Kemp equipped his car's original Revolution wheels with fresh Toyo tires.

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*Cars Quarterly*, and *Specialty Cars*, tested the Rollerskate. The verdict was clear: Enthusiasts loved the car.

By this time, the factory in Englewood, Colorado, was set up and ready to go. Maxton seemed poised to carve a niche in the enthusiast market.

### Selling the 'Skate

Actually, two companies were behind the Rollerskate. Maxton Components Ltd. manufactured the parts and delivered the car as a roller—everything but an engine and paint. According to the sales brochure, the car arrived 80 percent assembled, and a moderately expert mechanic could complete the rest of the work in about 50 hours, not including paint time.

For a little less than \$20,000, a buyer could have a Rollerskate-on-a-pallet delivered to the garage. Add an engine, paint and incidentals, and final cost came out somewhere between \$22,000 and \$25,000. According to *Road & Track*, intermediate kits with fewer components were available at lower prices.

The other company, Maxton Concessionaires Ltd., handled sales of fully assembled vehicles. This "outside" enterprise could offer customers ready-to-drive cars without exposing the company to those pesky federal complications. A Rollerskate ready to hit the street was listed for \$26,500 and up.

With no dealer network, no sales force and little advertising except for in enthusiast magazines, the Rollerskate faced an uphill climb. And as often happens, the market had changed dramatically during the time it took to bring the Rollerskate to market. The economy had gone south, and prices on vintage and collector cars had dropped significantly.

To make matters worse, a 2200-pound gorilla zoom-zoomed into the roadster market. For about \$14,000, enthusiasts could buy a brand-new Miata. This car, which some called the British roadster that the Brits never built, featured a clever top that actually worked, roll-up windows and comfortable seating. It was supported by a worldwide dealer network and a growing aftermarket for performance parts. By the end of its first year, Mazda had sold more than 23,000 Miatas.

Maxton had planned to build and sell 50 Rollerskates a year. It took them three years to build the first 50 cars, and not all of them found buyers. In the end, sales were so slow that Sutherland gave away a few cars to managers of his lumber yards in Colorado and Wyoming.

Today nearly all of the Rollerskates are accounted for, including a couple of the prototypes. Many are still with their original owners. Rollerskates don't come up for sale often, but when they do, advertised prices for a good example generally range between \$14,000 and \$20,000.

### Maxton No. 030

Atlanta-area enthusiast Karl Kemp bought his Rollerskate because he liked the way it looked. "I wanted a two-seat roadster," he says, "and I liked the way this car reminded me of the early British roadsters."

He searched for about three years before he found this Rollerskate. He's no stranger to fast cars: He used to compete in SCCA Solo I and II competition and has owned two Corvettes and a Porsche 944 Turbo.

He was also drawn by the fact that the Rollerskate was designed and tested by enthusiasts who knew what they were doing. "The people involved were racers," he says. "I was impressed by their tie-in with SCCA and spec racing."

When Karl and his wife, Tonya, took delivery of their own Rollerskate, it showed only 1240 miles on the odometer. It had remained bone-stock and in excellent shape.

Karl dug into the paperwork and learned that the previous (and original) owner had worked in one of Sutherland's Colorado lumberyards and received the car as a gift. Nearly 20 years later, he traded the Rollerskate in on a new Toyota Tacoma.

Since the car hadn't been driven in years, Karl is still in the process of sorting it out. So far he has replenished all the vital fluids, replaced the rubber brake lines with stainless steel pieces, and bled the brakes and clutch. He has rebuilt the carb and installed new Toyo Proxes RA-1 tires on the factory Revolution wheels. He also replaced the outdated seat belts.

The more he works on the Rollerskate, the more impressed he becomes with its design and assembly. "The gaps and fit are better than my 1972 Corvette," he says.

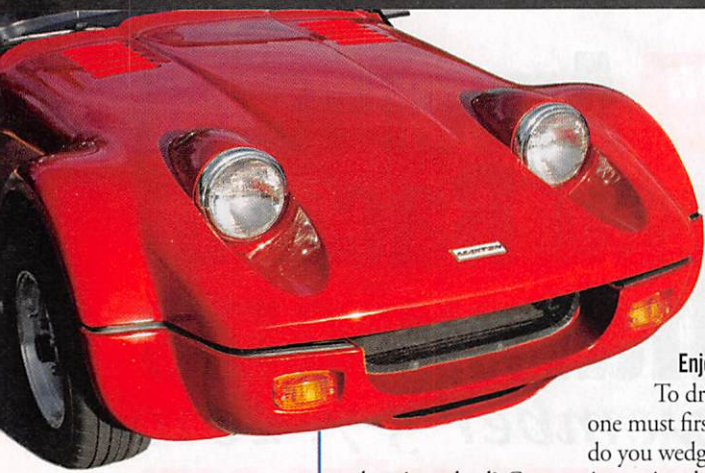
Flip up the front end and the engine sits right there in the open, nestled in the space frame. It's positioned inches behind the centerline of the front wheels, creating a front/rear weight distribution of 47/53.

This Rollerskate sits on a 90-inch wheelbase—a few long-wheelbase examples were stretched to 96 inches. According to Maxton, the mildly ported 13B rotary produces 210 horsepower in factory tune. Additional equipment includes a Dell'Orto two-barrel carb and a Racing Beat manifold.

The sales brochure states that the Rollerskate can reach 60 mph in less than 6 seconds and cover the quarter mile in 14.56 seconds at 92.2 mph. Top speed is advertised at 127 mph.

Karl is working to get his 'Skate fully sorted. The car may receive a few subtle upgrades, but Karl enjoys it in stock trim. "It's quick and nimble," he said. "I love the crisp handling."

He also enjoys the comments and second looks he gets from people who have never seen or heard of a Rollerskate. "Really cool. Never seen anything like it," these folks tell him, and



The Maxton Rollerskate mixes a cheerful front end reminiscent of a Bugeye Sprite with the wide, flared stance of a car built for serious business. The car's diminutive Mazda 13B rotary engine lies aft of the front wheels, so the Rollerskate is technically mid-engined.

then they want to know all about it. Karl and Tonya plan to enjoy the Rollerskate on short trips and show it at events around the Southeast.

#### Enjoying the Maxton Mojo

To drive the Rollerskate, one must first enter. But how do you wedge yourself behind

that tiny wheel? Gymnastics are involved.

Sling your right foot over the body-side cutout and step on the driver's seat. Now draw your left leg up and in. Place one hand on the console, the other on the door cutout, and limbo your way into the narrow foot box.

Don't grab the windshield; it already has plenty of rake. Racing shoes are recommended, or you'll find yourself stomping two or more of the tiny pedals when you want only one. If you're taller than 6 feet, better look for one of the elusive stretched examples, which afford a few more inches of legroom.

Once you're behind the wheel, all of the controls are right where you want them. Twist the key, and the Wankel blats to life. Snick the shifter into first and you're off.

Since the rotary needs some revs, the Rollerskate isn't a rocket right off the line. But the car is so light and balanced, who cares? At any speed, it handles like, well, a roller-skate. It's as close to a two-wheeled ride as you'll

get on four. Simply look where you want to go, flick the wheel, and there you are. No wasted motion here.

Pitch it into a tight turn—doesn't take much, only two turns lock to lock—and you'll encounter near zero body roll. Drive over a rough patch and you won't feel any rattles or cowl shake. The higher the revs, the better the rotary likes it. The tighter the road, the better the chassis likes it. It's plain to see that the more you flog the car, the more rewarding the drive.

And it's all about the drive, since you'll find few creature comforts. You will find plenty of VDO instruments, a bevy of well-labeled rocker switches, snug seats that hold you in place, and a chrome roll bar behind your head.

Passenger legroom is even more cramped than the driver's, since the exhaust headers intrude on that side. There may be no doors, but there is a heater. The tiny trunk can hold a full-sized spare and maybe a couple of six packs.

This car also sports the optional top and side curtains. Installing this top, Karl says, requires as many curses as putting up the top on an early British roadster. When the top is finally in place, normal-sized people find it nearly impossible to worm their way into the cockpit. And once in, they're trapped.

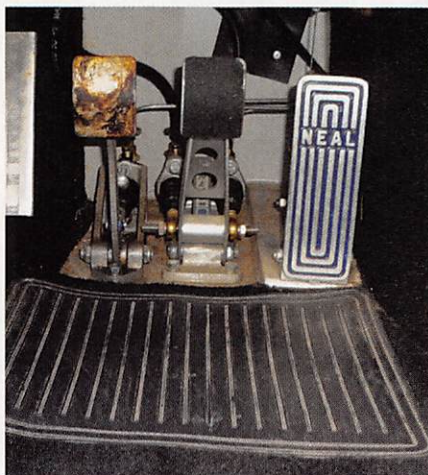
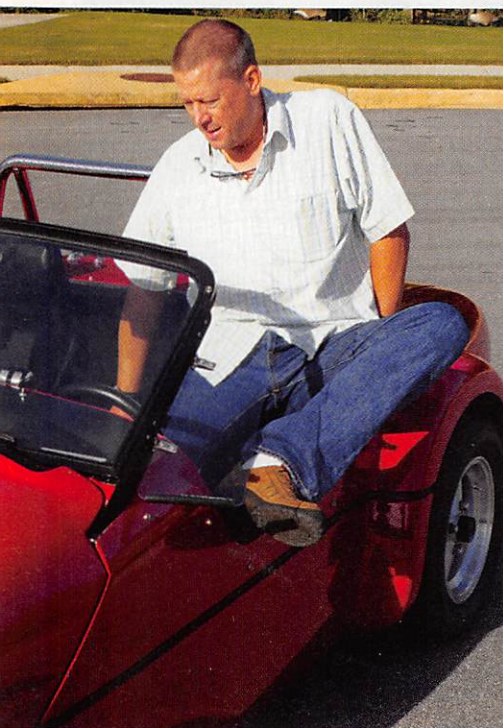
Of course, he knows the Rollerskate is a fair-weather car, meant to be enjoyed in the sunshine with the exhaust wailing and the wind beating you about. Sure, for civilized folks an hour's ride would be 50 minutes too long, but civilized folks don't appreciate cars like this.

#### Skate On

Bob Sutherland died in 1999, but more than 20 years after the Rollerskate first appeared, it still seems like his



**CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT:** The interior is fairly comprehensive, with a full suite of gauges, carpeting and real-car stuff like turn signals and a horn. The pedal setup is reminiscent of a formula car, however. There are no doors, so getting in and out requires a bit of agility on the part of the driver.



## Maxton to the Max

If a stock Maxton Rollerskate is quick, how much quicker is a modified one? Rotary racer Ken Scheepers, who hails from Flower Mound, Texas, owns No. 001, the first Rollerskate produced.

Ken also knows fast Mazdas, having raced his yellow RX-8 Nuclear Banana drag car to many wins. It has run down the quarter mile in only 7.27 seconds at 190 mph. (Check out his fleet at [kenscheepers.com](http://kenscheepers.com).)

It seemed a shame not to put all this go-fast knowledge and experience to good use in his Rollerskate. So that's what Ken did.

He installed a fuel-injected, turbo-charged 13B Cosmo engine that produces a whopping 264 horsepower at the rear wheels. He replaced the transmission with an RX-7 Turbo II gearbox and installed a later limited-slip, disc brake-equipped differential. He has also upgraded the shock absorbers, changed the spring rates, and improved the brakes. The list of modifications is long, and he is thrilled with the results. According to Ken, the competent chassis handles the extra power with aplomb and shows no signs of stress.

"The car is such a blast to drive," he explains, "both on the track and on the street. Nobody knows what it is, and when it accelerates from a traffic signal, everyone is surprised!"

Ken says the car handles very well on the track, although the front end gets a bit light at speeds above 90 mph. Still, on some of the tighter sections, he has managed to humble the drivers of both a Porsche and a Corvette. On the plus side, they now know what a Rollerskate is.

idea could have worked. Chassis designer Ben van der Linden (who owns the original mule, which he is restoring) thinks the car continues to stack up well against similar cars.

Today he voices a wistful what-if: "I keep thinking that if they could have kept it going at a low pace, and every year made a little bit of improvement—like larger brakes, things like that—you would have a very nice car today. I still love those things."

Other owners agree. Few of today's sporty cars rival the Rollerskate's thrill quotient and exclusive appeal—even when the car is in 20-year-old trim, like No. 030. It's a shame only 50 enthusiasts get to enjoy this little car, which they say carries them back to the days when roadsters were simple, spirited machines—and a ton of fun to drive.

But what about the rest of us?



*Special thanks to these Rollerskate owners for sharing their expertise: Ken Scheepers, Ben van der Linden, Frank Barrett, and Allen Singer, who maintains the Maxton Rollerskate website and register, [mxtrollerskate.home.comcast.net](http://mxtrollerskate.home.comcast.net).*

