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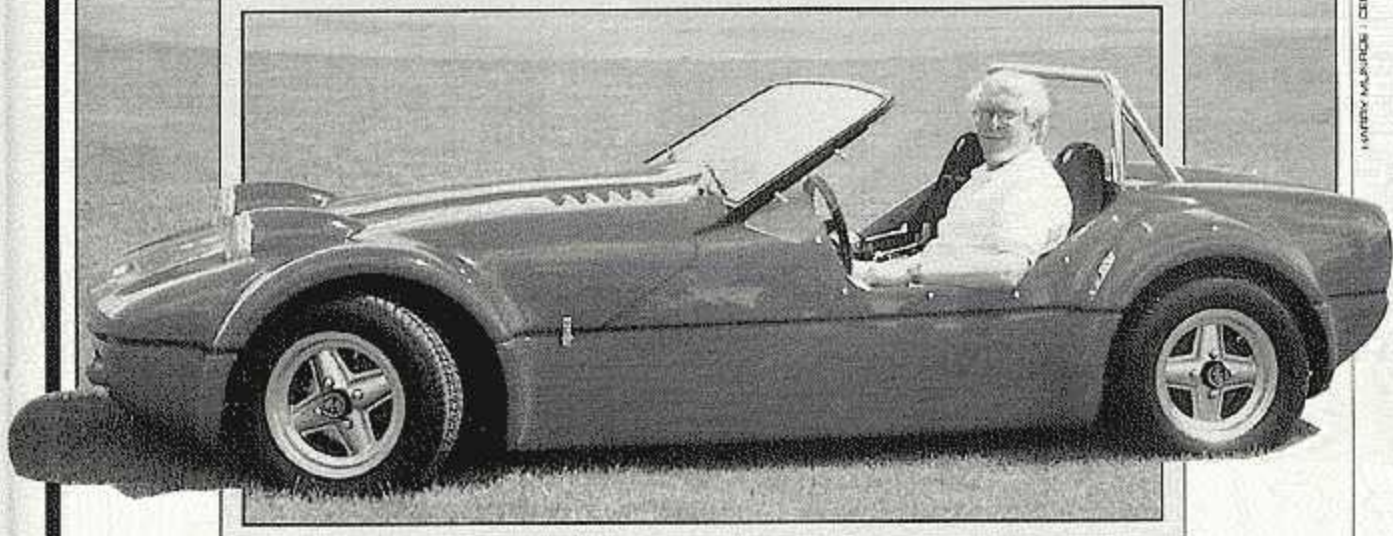
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ALL SKATE!

*Pick your power, drop it in Maxton's original skin
and you have the recipe for free-wheeling fun*

By Denise McCluggage



Bob Sutherland (above) wanted to build a car as distinctive as his old cars. He's found it the Maxton

Maxton. Masten. No cognizant connection exists, but never underestimate the imprinting of an adolescent unconscious.

Denverite Bob Sutherland has been deeply involved in the creation of the Maxton Rollerskate, a put-it-together car made by Maxton Component Cars, Ltd. of Englewood, Colo. (Dan Ripley, president.) It was a name Bob came up with because it sounded right.

And Bob Sutherland's steps through a Kansas City prep school followed by several years those of the late Masten Gregory, one of America's colorful pioneers on the international racing circuit. The time interval was enough for Masten to have become a hero to the students and anathema to the faculty, both for the same reason: Masten's nonchalance in squandering his inheritance on race cars only to wreck them and write a check over their twisted bodies for another.

Clearly, spending profligately on cars—or even caring deeply for them—was a generational rift. Bob has never been in doubt since his childhood days which side he was on. Not that he was ever as carefree as Masten with money, but through the years

he has exchanged a few dollars (earned primarily in his family's lumber and home-center business) for a glorious assortment of vintage racing cars, predominately Bugattis, Maseratis and Millers.

Bob is firmly in the camp of collectors who actually use their vintage cars rather than flick dust off of them. He has raced them with relish wherever a checkered flag flies—from Monterey to Italy to New Zealand. And his is the vision behind the recent burgeoning of 1000-mile over-the-road vintage events in various states—Arizona, California, the Carolinas and, come spring, New Mexico—all reprises on the grand Colorado Grand which Bob began in 1989 as an homage to the Mille Miglia.

Bob thrills to the challenge, the spirit, the sheer joy in racing, yet the essential appeal of the old racing machines to him is aesthetic. But that's understandable, too, since his degree from Yale was in art history. To Bob, the soul of the artist made manifest in a Rembrandt, a Caravaggio or a Giacometti is kindred to that which takes shape as a Bugatti, a Maserati or a Miller. Indeed, to express that view he has written commendable poetry which is included in his singularly charming book called, *From Bugatti to*

Bougainvillea: Racing and Spirit.

Bob came to know Dan Ripley as car people get to know each other—from being where cars are raced, restored or repaired. Dan had raced Alfas in SCCA and IMSA and had a Boulder dealership for a while.

The pair first collaborated on a venture that ultimately saved from the crushers Ford's great Group B rally car—the RS200—and put a fistful of them in the hands of grateful American racers and collectors.

With the RS200s gone, what should roll into the vacuum but the Rollerskate.

Bob Sutherland had always wanted to build a car, one that was as individual and distinctive as the old cars he admired. He had had a prototype of such a car (which he called the "Mille Miglia") produced in England, but it was deemed prohibitively expensive. Maybe, to start such a venture, something less ambitious?

So he reefed his sails. And the Rollerskate began to emerge.

Ben Vanderlinden, whose hand was evident in SCCA Formula Renault and Shelby Can-Am cars, designed a space-frame chassis and most of the suspension system. Michael Mate did a body in glass fiber. A grinning little pop-eyed one that was bound

to turn everyone's mind to the Bug-Eyed Sprite.

Though Dan Ripley was looking for a new project, this one did not entrance him at first. But then he test drove a bare-chassis Rollerskate.

"I must have put 3000 track miles on that car trying to break it," Dan recalls. "And I'm good at breaking things. I got blisters through my gloves." But he couldn't break the tough little car and, instead, fell in love with it.

And he signed on.

More than that—he bought the company.

Could this, then, be the birth of a new carmaker—building and selling sports cars to delight the heart of the enthusiast?

In a word, No.

Not in an era of overwhelming government regulations and a public with a litigious mindset. Crash-testing alone was prohibitively expensive. Emission controls and assorted certifications meant prototypes and a testing expense that put the kibosh on any notion of building the Rollerskate.

Unless, of course, they didn't actually build the car—you did!

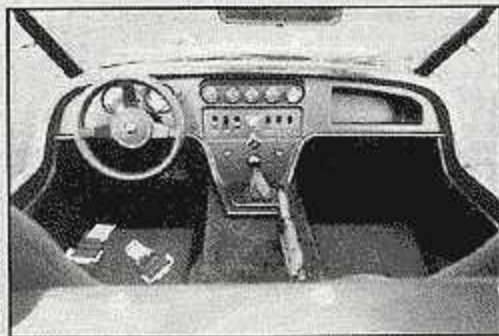
But just don't say the word "kit" anywhere near the Maxton people.

That word induces unwelcome images of replica cars—those sometimes-shoddy facsimiles of famed cars of the past. The Rollerskate, they will have you know, is not an imitation anything: It is an original Maxton.

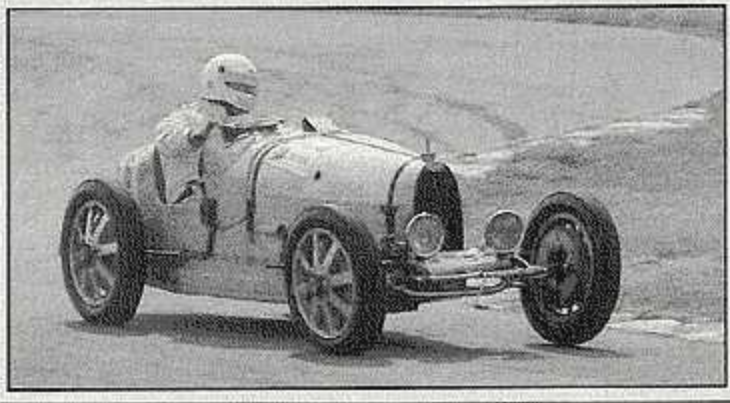
Yes, it evokes the sports cars of your growing-up years, but that is a summoning of the gods of wind-in-the-hair and tears-on-the-cheeks, a spiritual cloning, and not merely a copy of a physical appearance.

So they set a price—\$19,500 F.O.B. Denver (engine not included)—and planned components with as much quality and safety that those dollars could buy. They assemble most of the difficult or complicated parts—like wiring harnesses—and complete nearly 80 percent of the actual building. When the buyer gets the crated components it looks more like a car (look, Ma, it rolls!) than a daunting pile of parts.

Finishing it, Dan claims, should take



Open sides make the Rollerskate (above) a true wind-in-the-face roadster. Interior (left) is stark in the best street-legal race car tradition. Sutherland drew on his collection, including a Bugatti 37A (bottom), for inspiration



thing but the 3.3 lock-to-lock quickness. For stopping, Mustang II discs in front and early RX-7 drums in back (along with the accompanying RX-7 live axle.)

The Rollerskate is more street-legalized race car than hopped-up road car. For instance, it has a roll bar, but no doors. (You just step in over the cut-down sides.) And it has a raked, flat windscreen, but no top or side curtains.

What it all comes to is this: If you like that sort of thing, you'll probably love the Rollerskate.

But be advised, it is a genuine throwback kind of sports car—not a refined one, like the Miata, made for middle-aged memories. If you don't like noise; or buffeting wind; or fast, flat cornering; or quick acceleration—or all the stares—then you likely won't like the Rollerskate.

Some people have found other things to dislike about the car. For instance, Augie Pabst told me that he noticed the suspension bottomed-out during the time he spent behind the wheel. That was contrary to my experience in the car, so I checked with Dan.

And Ripley said that, yes, Pabst was right. But also that Augie had driven

a prototype Rollerskate before they had a chance to alter the spring rates.

Anyway, I have a notion that the truly important experience in the Maxton Rollerskate could be in the building of it.

I can see families, clubs, organizations—all banding together in a project mode to try and put this thing together. And in the process learning something about cars, about each other, and about themselves.

What was it that Pirsig said in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*? Something to the effect that the motorcycle you work on is ultimately yourself.

So be it with Maxton Rollerskates.

They're a motor meditation that can result in a feisty little wagon that will rip off some snorting 0-60s, and corner like those old pool tables we used to invoke.

And that might just tilt the balance between frown lines and grins. ■

about 50 hours of only moderately expert labor. And the final cost of a finished Rollerskate should fall somewhere in the neighborhood of \$22,000 to \$25,000.

Oh, but please add in the time it takes to track down an engine of your liking. Ask around for a Mazda rotary, either a 13B or a 12A. (One with all the emission controls still in place; passing any state emission tests is the responsibility of the buyer/builder.) The engines can be variously tweaked, too. For example, with an RX-7's 12A engine properly breathed upon, the Rollerskate will reach 60 mph in a blink over five seconds.

Try that in your precious-memories Sprite or MG Midget or Morgan.

O.K., that's for going. For steering, the Rollerskate uses a Ford rack-and-pinion made quick by using a power-assisted unit without the power. You won't notice any-