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feature

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Neil DeAtley's '27 Track Roadster

By **ERIC GEISERT** Photography by **THE AUTHOR**

Most times you can't see the entire road that is laid out before you, and you have to travel it in bits and pieces. The same can be said about one's life: one simple turn can send you down a new path.

So what are the chances that a kid, whose first car in high school would be a '27 Ford hot rod roadster, would end up with a world-class collection of vehicles later in life? Or, while in your early seventies and with the financial ability to quite literally own just about any car on earth, would you decide to build a rather high-end '27 Ford roadster?

In Neil DeAtley's case, it's because he can. Automobiles have played a large part in Neil's life, when, in 1954, his father took the 17-year-old to go look for a car in nearby Portland, Oregon. That's when they found a '27 roadster, fashioned up a tow bar, and brought it back home to Lewiston, Idaho.

As would any teenager who has his first car, Neil poured his energy into the roadster that, though it had a top and a Chevy grille, had no engine. He found a near-new '49 Ford Flathead for his ride, which would eventually end up with aluminum heads and lots of chrome.

Over the next few decades, Neil became involved in the family business that his grandfather had started in the '30s: road construction

and rock crushing. After decades of involvement he helped guide the company in becoming a large corporation with nine subsidiary companies, though Neil's love of cars never waned.

In the '80s he formed DeAtley Motorsports—a two-car Camaro Trans Am team sponsored by Budweiser, with two well-known drivers: David Hobbs and Willy T. Ribbs. Nowadays DeAtley Motors, based in Phoenix, is home to Neil's collection, which numbers 70-plus vehicles. A wide spectrum of automotive history is represented, from European sports cars (including Mercedes' 300 SL gullwing) to American classics (a '41 Packard Darrin), but a handful of hot rods are also present.

To keep his collection is fine running order, Neil relies on Jim Martin who maintains the vehicles in-house and does whatever is needed to keep them looking good and running well. But Jim's experience was tested when Neil wanted to recreate his first car, and the project grew from being a simple Track T roadster into what could arguably be one of the finest '27 Ford roadsters out there. The quality and craftsmanship exerted in this highboy is what you'd expect in an AMBR award contender—and something that easily holds its own in a garage filled with dozens of high-end vehicles.

THE QUALITY AND CRAFTSMANSHIP EXERTED IN THIS HIGHBOY IS WHAT YOU'D EXPECT IN AN AMERICA'S MOST BEAUTIFUL ROADSTER AWARD CONTENDER

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Over an on-and-off period of about five years, Jim assembled the creation, starting with his own custom 2x3x3/16 tube framework. The wheelbase was dialed in at 107-1/2 inches (7-1/2 inches over stock), with the rear centered around a Dutchman Motorsports quick-change (3.70:1) outfitted with 38-inch hairpin radius rods, a custom Panhard bar, QA1 coilovers, and a set of polished aluminum '63 Buick brakes.

The front suspension features a straight axle, an elliptical leaf spring system, a pair of 31-inch hairpins, another set of QA1 shocks and polished aluminum Buick brake drums, plus one-off custom pieces, such as the steering arm and headlight/shock brackets. The steering utilizes a modified Corvair box, mounted under the dash, alongside the Wilwood brake and clutch masters. There isn't a lot of space under a '27's cowl, so the fluid reservoirs are accessed under the hand-operated cowl vent. A 12-gallon aluminum fuel tank came from Speedway Motors, and the American Racing Salt Flat wheels (16x5.5 and 7.5) are wrapped in Toyo Proxies rubber (205/60 and 265/70).

Jim Martin also assembled the engine in-house, adding some racing tricks along the way. The '70 351 Windsor (backed to a Tremec T5 gearbox) was dialed in with a 9.5:1 compression ratio, and fitted with a COMP Cams Street Roller camshaft, Edelbrock Performer aluminum heads (with COMP Cams roller rockers), a Victor Air Gap manifold, and a Holley 650 double-pumper carburetor.

An MSD Pro Billet distributor delivers the spark generated by the MSD 6AL ignition box, and a SPAL fan and aluminum radiator from Active Performance Cooling aid in keeping the engine running cool. Exhaust exits fabricated headers (coated by Jet-Hot) into two-chamber Flowmaster mufflers.

Once you start looking around the engine you won't notice the water pump or alternator, as both are hidden. The Stewart Components electric water pump is mounted behind the transmission, and the car's framerails are used to conduit the water. The 105-amp Powermaster alternator is driven like some dirt track racer's car: with a pulley mounted to the Centerforce pressure plate. Martin removed the center portion of the pulley, welded it to the pressure plate, cut a slot in the top of the bellhousing (above the pulley), and runs the belt-driven alternator above the trans.

The body, a 'glass '27 from Wescott, and the nose, from Speedway Motors, didn't stay in their stock configuration too long after Martin got a hold of them, as both were

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extensively reworked. Gary D. Smith had been referred to Neil from a mutual friend and, with his two-decade experience as a designer for GM, helped locate the project's nose and body to get the right proportions. Martin sectioned and lowered the Speedway Motors nose, and the crosshatch polished stainless mesh screen looks like it could have been borrowed from a vintage Bentley. The door hinges and latching mechanism were also modified so the doors shut with a convincing thud—like you'd find on any of today's high-end automobiles.

Martin also fab'd belly and roll pans for the roadster, then scratchbuilt the alligator-type hood with its reworked Bilt-Rite hinges from Sachse Rod Shop so the hood could both stand straight up but close like a contemporary vehicle. All of the car's gaps are beyond perfect and are a testament to Martin's expertise.

Smith also worked with Martin in the final stages of the car, and suggested the hood sides that Martin was going to make be of an open design so Smith could incorporate the engine's headers into the car's graphic scheme he had planned.

Smith sketched out a scalloped paint layout, which complemented the vehicle's nostalgic feel while not detracting from the car's overall impact. Also done in-house, Martin sprayed the black, brown, and cream PPG paints following the design spec'd by Smith. The result was a black paintjob so deep you could lose your car keys in it—not bad for first-time car painter Martin!

The '39 Ford taillights were added, but not before being reshaped to fit the curve of the body (and without gaskets) and the windshield stanchions from Speedway Motors were also altered—adding a new header piece fab'd from square stock.

The simple layout of the interior belies the fact there is a lot going on behind the dash, with the aforementioned master cylinders, steering box, and electronics (with wiring from Painless Performance Products) for the Auto Meter gauges that fill the flat surface. A Martin-made steering column supports a four-spoke steering wheel, and two-tone leather upholstery complementing the black carpet was custom stitched by Phoenix local Lance Troupe.

What Neil was able to get out of all of this is, at first glance, is a cool hot rod roadster that is an absolute blast to drive but, upon closer review, an exceptionally well-built hot rod that can proudly stand next to any other car in his exceptional collection of cars. SR