



NATIONAL STERLING OWNERS ASSOCIATION

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Letter from the editor

The Holiday season is well underway here in the eastern part of the country. Since September, more used cars have appeared on the market than ever, and one has set (as far as I know) the all time high sales number of \$18K for what was essentially a very clean late model car. Whether that was a fluke sale or not remains to be seen - quite a few cars are being listed at five digit numbers lately, which holds good karma for Sterling Sports Cars. With the economic issues currently at large, Dave seems to be holding steady with parts orders and a couple of chassis'. He's also started an on-line store for parts if you haven't checked it out yet. I'm quite fond of the custom exhaust system that's been created - very retro!

With that, this issue is all about one person near and dear to veteran Sterling enthusiasts. Continue on, and you'll find whom it is. Have a safe, healthy and happy New Year to all!



FEATURE STORY

Back in 2005 when I had shown my Sterling for the first time at the Carlisle show, I was approached by a tall, unassuming gentleman with an easy smile. We chatted for a bit in generalities about the car and came to learn that he had a couple that he was working on. Eventually he introduced himself as Warren Daugherty, the webmaster/owner of Sterling Central. Somewhat humbled as that website was one of a couple that encouraged me into the hobby, we chatted for a while about the newly formed NSOA club, websites and life in general in the kit industry.

Warren had but a little time that day due to other commitments, but encouraged at the site of a Sterling on the showfield vowed to regroup and update Sterling Central and spend time on his own cars in an effort to bring more than one to the show. Warren is a local to central PA, and Carlisle is only a few hours from his home.

We've kept in touch over the course of the next few years through the club's global email announcements and private messages and finally arrived at a time late in the fall that we could get together at his place to talk cars and see his projects. Turns out Warren has two hiding places for his vehicles; the nearest to me was his parent's place nestled deep in the Amish countryside of PA. So, setting out one Saturday morning, following both a GPS and MapQuest directions, I boldly sought forth to the place could be a mecca to all things Sterling. Then I got lost. Badly. The GPS

was sending me to an address that didn't exist; MapQuest happened to be close to the destination, but not close enough. A quick phone call and I was guided to a destination only known to mailmen and wayward livestock. But that's not the story. Here, then, is an interview with Warren on his own turf and terms, perhaps the first ever. And yes, I got lost on the way back out, too....



Sterling Central

A tribute to the pioneer of exotic kits

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Let me set the stage: I roll onto the property, which is combination homestead and airfield to Warren's family. There are three hangers on the grounds (that I could see), with planes and cars in each. Some of the planes are renters, owned by other folks. The rest are antiques, restored by Warren's father and friends. Interspersed between them are the Sterlings, one in each hanger (and one at his home, that I did not get to see). One is a parts car, kept under tarps. The other two are rotary powered, one turbo'd, one not. The turbo car is up on blocks, awaiting new brake parts. Warren's father is busily groundskeeping on one of the property tractors, so we do the best we can above the din:

So, as webmaster to another Sterling masterpiece site, Sterling Central, the introduction page says you've been smitten since you saw a magazine article when you were just a kid. When were you able to actually see one in person for the first time? What was your general reaction?

WD: The great thing about a Sterling is that it's one of those precious few cars that can spontaneously make people break out in a big smile when they see it; it generates a very genuine, almost child-like emotional response from people. They remember it. And for us die hard enthusiasts, I think we all have a story regarding when and where we got hooked.

For me, my very first glimpse of a Sterling was through a fuzzy, out-of-focus, black-and-white picture in a local "Auto Locator" classifieds. The ad was short and minimalistic. It only really gave the name of the car plus a phone number. But just that simple picture was enough to start my fascination with this car.

Of course, there was absolutely no chance of me being able to get it at the time. I was just a kid, not even old enough to drive, stuck in that age where I was starting to get very interested in cars and girls but I also still hadn't entirely let go of imaginary adventures with my Milenium Falcon, my X-wing fighter, and the rest of my Star Wars armamentarium either. Seeing a Sterling sitting there with its open canopy and its crazy-sleek lines seemed like the perfect combination of everything I thought was cool at the time. I knew that, if ever possible, I would certainly have to have one some day. So for years I kept my eyes open.

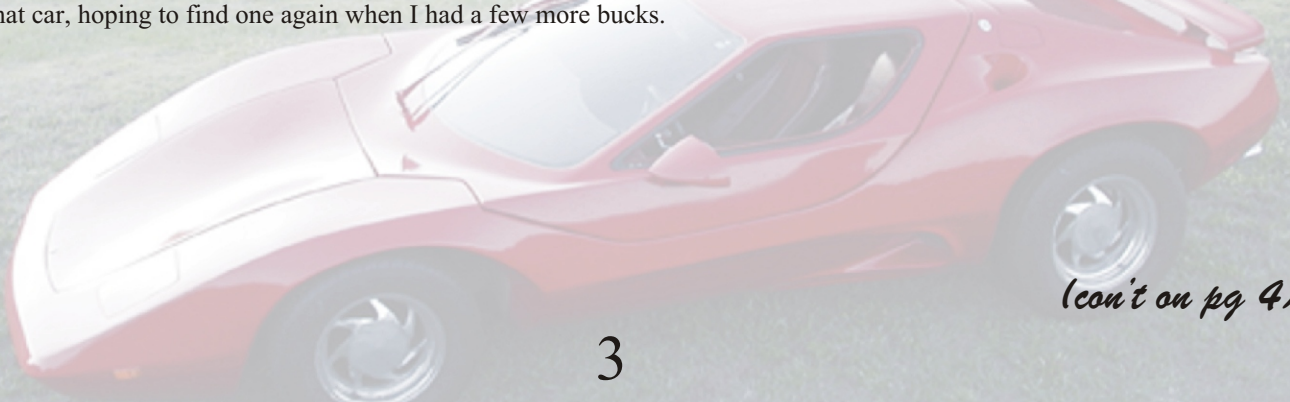
Keep in mind that this was still years before the internet was a public entity. Making matters even trickier, I live on the East Coast. So coming across any kit cars let alone a Sterling was a rare and largely random event. Each month I'd faithfully buy Kit Car Magazine, reading all the articles and scouring all of the vendor and classifies in the back. Then one month, several years after I'd seen that first picture, an ad came up for one of the Sterling's sister cars -- a Sebring -- that wasn't terribly far away. I didn't know quite what a Sebring was, or exactly what its relationship was to the Sterling. But I knew they were similar. And most importantly, I was thrilled to see that this particular Sebring was only a few hours drive. So, one Saturday I loaded up my trusty Rabbit Diesel and started to head down south of Pennsylvania towards DC.

The owner of the car met me at a scary on-ramp outside the DC Beltway. He was driving what perhaps was the most magnificently beat-up, rusted, dented, abused, multicolored old Datsun that I've ever seen, and it had a vanity plate that read "DR PYRO." The driver jumped out and gave me an enthusiastic handshake. I liked him instantly. It turned out to be a man named Joe Domanico, who I thought was "just some random kit car guy" (For those of you who don't know, Joe Domanico was the founder and/or president of the Cimbria club and is essentially one of the most knowledgeable people on the planet about those cars. Yes, he was a kit car guy. But not "just any.")

Anyway, I followed his ramshackle Datsun for an additional 20 minutes and eventually turned down a more rural looking lane to an old garage. Parked behind the garage was a stunning, immaculately detailed, deep burgundy colored Cimbria parked next to a silver Sebring. The Sebring was pretty rough. Definitely not drivable. But it still made a lasting impression.

You asked if I remember that moment. Yes, definitely. Because even if you've seen a Sterling (or its kin) in pictures, you just don't appreciate how low and sleek and extreme-looking they are until you stand beside one. They are stunningly unique. And the roofline is much lower than you'd expect. I loved it. And I remember just standing there, not being able to stop grinning. My teeth felt dry.

But I was still young and broke. And he wanted \$4000 for it. I would have given it to him in an instant, too. But it might as well have been \$40,000 'cause I didn't have more than a few hundred. I remember asking the poor guy if he'd be willing to accept payments for it, though it now makes me cringe with embarrassment. Joe declined, but he was a real gentleman about it. In the grander scheme of things, however, the hook had now been well set. And over the next two years I carried around a silly little faded, dog-eared, 4X6 picture he gave me of that car, hoping to find one again when I had a few more bucks.



(con't on pg 4)

Then one month, a year or two after high school, I had again faithfully picked up my monthly copy of kit Car magazine. However, this issue would be different than all that had come before it because this was the one that had *the* ad in it. Listed in the back, without even a picture, was a classified ad for an old, raw, disassembled-but-complete Sterling body that had been sitting out in some guy's cornfield in Illinois for about a decade. It was only a few hundred dollars. And, what luck; it was within convenient driving distance -- only 14 hours away!

I remember being stressed out because I didn't have a car trailer, and I was still too poor to rent one for the two or three days it would take to go out, get my prize, and return. But then I remembered that my dad had an old 17 foot runabout motorboat in his hanger. And I figured that a Sterling body without a chassis would certainly be no heavier than that boat. So I pulled an all-nighter using various floor jacks and a big old rusty chain hoist to suspend the boat from an apparently-strong-enough steel truss in the roof of his hangar. I made a makeshift flat-bed platform out of planks from an old redwood deck that we'd recently torn apart. And without further adieu, off my girlfriend and I went with our newly procured, poor man's flatbed trailer. Two days later, I arrived back home VERY proudly with the spoils of the multi-year hunt -- my first Sterling.

(And yes, my dad was slightly pissed that I'd hung his boat from the roof. But part of me believes that at least part of him was entertained by the creativity of the endeavor.)

Fast forwarding to present...I currently own four Sterlings: One is a very raw pile of parts I bought from a guy in Texas simply to have spare parts. I have two running Sterlings, both of which are based on Mazda RX7 engines (one carbureted, one injected w/turbo). ...And I still have that very first body -- in all its robin-egg-blue metal-flake glory -- which is still the body that's the basis of my favorite project, a Sterling with a custom chassis, V6 turbo, and lots of little body tweaks.

And that's the story of how I fell in love with this breed of cars overall. I now have those cars, plus one that I sold a few years ago, plus a website, plus a ton of material that hasn't even made it to the website yet. And yes, it has been suggested to me that I might be a "hoarder."

To which I say, "Yeah...so?"

Being self employed, you have, in general, more time to devote to working on your cars when the mood strikes. Of the three currently on wheels, which one are you shooting to finish first...i.e. get road-legal? Why?

WD: Oh, goodness. First of all, I apologize if I've given you the impression that I have ANY free time at all, let alone having 'more' free time by being self employed. To anyone listening: If you want to maximize your free time, don't be self-employed.

To answer your question: Of those four cars, I've recently been focusing most of my time on putting finishing touches on one of the running, drivable cars -- my red Sterling with the turbo rotary engine in it. Why? Simply because it's already drivable and is very close to being inspected and, as such, it's the project that is most immediately rewarding. My goal with this car is to resist the temptation to do anything to it that would take it OUT of the "drivable" category for more than one or two weekends. I have enough projects. This one, I hope, will remain a driver until some of the other projects get finished. For this car, I want to just focus on embellishments like modern backlit gauges, a modern sound system, high end racing disc brakes, etc. No major revamping of this one is planned...at least until (theoretically) one of the others is also on the road.

Did I recall correctly you don't have your first Sterling? It was sold to fund some college resources...ever regret that?

WD: Actually, I still have that original blue body. But the one you're remembering was another red Sterling I owned for just three months when I was in grad school. Long story short, I bought it during a time when I was depressed and frustrated by the fact that I'd had a "project" Sterling for years that was nowhere close to being completed. I desperately wanted something that was simply drivable. So one day when that drivable red Sterling came up for sale and was only a few hours away (which is almost unheard of in PA), I maxed out a credit card that had one of those 'zero-percent-interest-for-the-next-few-months' things going on and I rather impulsively bought that second Sterling. For reasons I can't explain, at that moment in time, I just needed to have a running Sterling that I could actually DRIVE and ENJOY.

The problem, however, was that I never really had the money for it. The plan was to keep that car for a few months until the credit card's introductory offer ended, then sell the car...which is exactly what I did. Actually, as a footnote, I had promised myself that, if that red Sterling was so good that I couldn't part with it, I'd find some way to finance it and keep it as my main car. And conversely, if it was rough enough to warrant totally restoring it, I would've considered cannibalizing it's usable parts for my man project. The reality was that this Sterling was smack dab in the middle: Not perfect enough to keep in tact, but way too nice to cannibalize—and I also couldn't afford to keep it--so I happily sold it.

Did I have any regrets? Nope. I'm grateful that I bought it, and I'm happy to have passed it on to the next person. Many, many times I've thanked myself for being 'stupid and impulsive' enough to have gotten it because it turned out that those three short months of ownership produced about 90% of my stories and experiences regarding what it's like to actually own and drive a Sterling. In retrospect, before that car, all I knew about Sterlings was how to weld, sand, and otherwise restore a Sterling. Both aspects of Sterling ownership has its own rewards and frustrations.



Joe Domanico's Sebring:
the picture that I carried around in my pocket for a LONG time in highschool.

I just remembered, with regard to that particular car, there IS one aspect that I miss which I didn't fully appreciate at the moment: It had an insanely smooth paint job. The guy I bought it from said that a friend of his, who was a gifted body shop worker, had owed him several thousand dollars. As payment for that personal debt, the friend gave the Sterling one of the most glassy-smooth, thick, luxurious paint jobs I've ever seen on a Sterling. It looked like it glowed from inside out. And I didn't appreciate it at the time. I thought it was normal for a Sterling to be that smooth. Nope, that paint job and overall cosmetic finish was far above average. But the car had other deficits. Did I mention that the crappy, tired, old engine it had was nothing short of an embarrassment? Hmmm...I wish the previous owner would have had some gifted engine guy as a friend who owed him money, too.

Since you have multiple vehicles...why not take the "worst" case and turn it into exactly what you want it to be – custom chassis, engine, suspension, the works? Why put money into the other cars?

WD: Great question. In many ways, that is exactly what my ultimate plan is. The project that is closest to my heart is the big project based on that original blue body. I've welded up a custom chassis for it and have put untold hundreds of hours into it with the eventual goal of have every button, every switch, all the pedals, every little thing fit me like a glove and perform the way I want it to. That one is my baby. I want it to be fast, comfortable, and reliable and all around "exactly" the way I want it.

But the problem is, projects like that take a CRAZY amount of time to complete, and, being realistic, that project of mine is probably still many years away from running. It's a trade off: you theoretically might end up with a car that's close to exactly the way you want it, but the added complexity in doing so makes it virtually impossible to find time to complete the project. So what is better; a Sterling that could be exactly what you want but never gets done, or a drivable one that's not quite right?

But there's even more to it than that. A project that takes that long to complete has other frustrating sideline problems as well. For instance, I picked a V6 turbo out of a Nissan 300ZX for my blue Sterling because, at the time, 10 years ago when I made that decision, it was a good decision. The engine was cheap, plentiful, fairly light, bullet-proof, and "modern." Now...while it is still a good engine, it is now older, rarer, and less modern/efficient than other options that exist. (Can anyone say Subaru WRX STI?). So, even when you think you're making it "exactly the way you want it," the reality is that our cars are always evolving, and, in many ways, they are eternally our 'projects' – eternal prototypes undergoing eternal beta-testing. Thank goodness there is so much joy in the process. But I think it is important to keep in mind that it's unlikely that a builder can ever make a car 'exactly' the way he or she wants it, even if it's a total rebuild from the ground up. A better goal is to create a rock solid, quality, reliable car that is 'pretty darn close' to the way you want it.

So for me, I do like the 'project' aspect of this car breed, but I also like driving the darn things, too. Which is why, clearly, the answer is that everyone should have at least TWO Sterlings: the driver and the project (...and the 'spare' driver, and the 'spare' project!!) :)

Any chance of all four seeing the light of day at the same time all in a group?

WD: Ha! Well, statistically speaking, I suppose there is a chance of absolutely anything happening...miniature black holes spontaneously forming that could catastrophically swallow the Earth, etc. But at my current rate, the chances of all four cars being running, viable cars under my care is about equal to one of them being swallowed by one of those black holes. (Hmmm...and would my insurance cover that?) I suppose, on a technicality, if I parked the two running ones in just the right spot on the property, and I dragged the other two over with my dad's skid-steer, you might be able to technically see them all in one group in the light of day. But I don't think that's what you were asking.

It is not my goal to hoard Sterlings. That is something that just kind of serendipitously occurred over the short term. Soon, I'm going to sell the running one that has the carbureted RX7 engine. It's a strong car, and somebody is going to have a blast with it. I'd love if it went to someone within a few hours radius of me because I'd be proud to have it parked next to whatever my current Sterling is at the time at our regional shows. Similarly, regarding my car that's just a rough pile of parts, if I don't need the parts, I'll probably sell that one, too. Regarding the big project, hopefully that baby (my blue one) will come to life someday. I can definitely imagine keeping both the red rotary turbo and the blue V6 turbo indefinitely, so seeing those two together someday is not outside the realm of possibility, but it will take some time. My hope for all of our projects is that we'll see them on the road someday. Hopefully we'll all continue to MAKE time for the projects (not just 'try to find time') and that we remember to not get too lost in the details, and that we get some projects completed. ...At which point I'd love to see some Sterlings together, running, as a group, especially here on the East Coast where the cars are even more rare. Official shout out: For everyone within a few hour radius of central PA, let's try to get at least FIVE running Sterlings (or their kin) to Carlisle this year!

(can't on pg 6)

Let's talk engineering for a moment. You've got some interesting talents and background with your family concerning aircraft, mechanicals and restoration. What, if anything, crosses over between the aircraft enthusiast in you and the car enthusiast?

WD: Oh, my...there are a HUGE amount of crossovers between the two. In fact, I'd go as far as to say there are actually more similarities than differences between restoring old aircraft and building a kit car. In both cases, the projects are very likely to involve enjoyable processes such as welding, sheet metal work, fiberglass work, interior work, planning instrument panels and dashboards, troubleshooting and creating electrical systems, plumbing hydraulics, figuring out efficient and reliable ways to give the engine the gas, oil, air, and spark that it needs, etc, etc. Yes, the two hobbies are extremely similar. The single biggest difference is the minor detail of optimal cruise altitude.

Working with airplanes, however, makes a person become very good -- necessarily so -- at trying to find beautifully simple, clever, and LIGHT ways of fabricating parts. Especially with the old school aircraft being restored, we are routinely amazed at how clever the original designers were at finding ways to make brackets, clasps, sliders, hinges, indicators, mounts, structural elements, and a wide variety of controls for the plane that are incredibly light, efficient, and strong. People who work on planes are conditioned to look for lightweight-yet-very-reliable solutions to problems; a recipe for a light, fast, safe, dependable plane OR kit car. My inherent tendency is to overbuild stuff. It's like when you're making spaghetti and you're not sure if there's enough so you end up throwing "just a little more" in a few times. I tend to do that with structural parts: I make them a little thicker and heavier than they need to be, "just in case." But the end result is that I have a Sterling with a front bumper you could mount a snow plow to, which is a heavy and wasteful way to design things. Working with planes helps me remember that you CAN keep something more than adequately strong yet still have it be light as well.

Going beyond the skills that cross over, I have to make a comment on attitude as well. My dad is the consummate project guy, and his friends are the same way. Projects range from house renovations, to music, to cars, to restoration of antique aircraft, etc. So I grew up around a creative bunch of cool people who always had much enthusiasm, good imagination, and a wonderful attitude of creating things from scratch. These guys approach virtually every problem with an attitude of "where there's a will, there's a way." I mention this because I think it is the single most universal crossover among all the projects, and perhaps the most important quality for a kit car owner/builder to have: You MUST be able to creatively solve problems. There might not be a manual. There might not be someone else to ask. Moreover, you might be doing something to the car that is totally novel and unique. So you have to be ready to get creative.

I'm routinely amazed (and sometimes irritated) at how few people share the desire for creative problem solving. I know this has probably happened to the rest of you, too: You need some part -- like a dual-pole momentary keyswitch, or a hydraulic cylinder, or even just a muffler of certain dimensions -- but when you go into a car parts store, all they are capable of doing is asking "what's the year and make of the car..." ("Well, the chassis is a '69 bug, the body is from the mid '70s, it was first built in the late '70s, and it is arbitrarily re-titled as a 1990 "specially constructed vehicle," none of which will help you answer my original question of "Do you have any dual-pole momentary key switches!!!!") Unless I can give them a year and a model, they just can't wrap their heads around it, and worse, they don't seem to care. I've seen this happen at all the major chains but also in some of the specialty stores that should know better. I'm disheartened by how many people will say, "Sir, you can't do...[insert the challenge of the day here]." Whether restoring old aircraft, building a kit car, or planning any other cool project, the main skill is the skill to be creative and imaginative, do your research, know that anything can be done but that you might have to be persistent, fail a few times, and possibly throw away some early attempts in the process. I find that owning a kit car (or an old airplane) is not an act, but a process. And if you don't like creative problem-solving...geez...just go buy a nice used Mustang or a tricked out Civic with some neon. Nothing wrong with those choices. It's all good.

Some of the aircraft that you've flown appear to be about as cramped as the Sterling cockpit. Any other similarities?

WD: Awesome question because it leads me to a funny thing I realized recently. Namely, all of my friends who AREN'T pilots say that the Sterling is very claustrophobic. But when the pilots get into it, they just look side to side once, smile, and say something positive like "Not too bad in here!" I guess it just goes to show that much in life depends on your perspective. Pilots are used to tight cockpits as a trade off for the experience of a unique, performance vehicle. I've had one pilot actually say that he felt my Sterling had a 'nice' amount of elbow room(!?).

Beyond the arguably cramped quarters, Sterling cockpits and airplane cockpits remind me a lot of each other in terms of the typical "raw" looking, form-follows-function look to the dash/instrument panels. I'm even considering borrowing one of the tricks that's very common to instrument panels from airplanes, namely, to use reset-able, easy-to-reach breakers on all aspects of the electrical system. In a plane, you need these. You can't just pull over and fumble for fuses. Regarding kit cars, we all know that the electrical systems tend to be a nightmare. The circuit layout and wiring tends to be quite scary in out cars, and there might even be multiple hidden locations for the fuses. In an airplane, one section of the panel is dedicated to a tidy looking group of little buttons that represent the breakers. Might be a cool and convenient mod for a Sterling.

As for other similarities between driving a Sterling and flying a plane: 1) Passengers and spectators will always have a big smile on their faces, albeit sometimes with a little dash of nervousness added. 2) If you go fast enough, you WILL leave the ground, and 3) If you actually want to get somewhere efficiently and with luggage, just take your minivan instead.

How do you approach your projects? Do you do a lot of research before hand, or are you one to leap in, try to repair or replace then call in an expert? Or are you pretty confident in your abilities to repair most mechanical and electrical things?

WD: There are tons of things I don't know, but I have confidence in my ability to eventually solve a problem. Sometimes the answer is to figure it out by trial and error. Often the solution involves some research (and THANK GOD for the internet!). Sometimes the correct solution is to call on the help of an expert. The trick is in being able to explore each of these avenues, and not be afraid to ask some stupid questions (or to keep asking questions again and again until you get your answer) or to make some errors. There have been times when I've spent an entire weekend welding up/fabricating a part or reorganizing a system (like the position of my intercooler) just to find out by the end of the weekend that my original idea, even if very well planned, won't work. This used to discourage me. Today, it's still frustrating, but I've gotten better at just shrugging, cutting the part back off, and realizing that I had a wonderfully successful weekend insofar as I've done a great job of confirming that one of the options is not the right one.

Now, although all that sounds good, might I just add that electrical problems really piss me off. I feel lost. Recently, I bought a rotary engine plus its computer and wiring loom off Ebay. My goal was to get it running on an engine stand. But that electrical system is insanely complex and non-intuitive. It turns out that there are a great variety of modules -- like 20 individual sub-circuits for just the old security system -- any of which can cripple the engine and ruin my weekend if they aren't just right. It took several weeks and a lot of UNrewarding hours to troubleshoot that system. And the thing that was freaking me out about that particular problem was that there was noone I could call to bail me out. Even the professionally trained technicians at the local Mazda shop just shrugged and told me I was on my own.

Which brings me to an important point: Although we aren't totally, profoundly alone in our projects, it is unavoidable and NECESSARY for each of us to become "the expert" on our own vehicle. In a way, this is one of the biggest advantages in deciding to build or rebuild your car from scratch: You have the opportunity to control the quality and organization of your own work. If YOU have been forced to create the wiring (etc) for yourself, then you at least have given yourself the opportunity to understand it and to do it correctly. With a kit car, you have to become your own expert and your own advocate.

Ever get over your head on a project?

WD: Yes, mainly in the scope of a project. I tend to dream big but underestimate the amount of time a project will take. I used to try to find an actual "accurate" estimate for time and money for a project, building in a small buffer. Then, I started to figure out my best faith "accurate" estimate and multiply the time and money by 2. Currently, I calculate the best faith estimate for my personal projects and then multiply the money by 3 and the time by 9. With this formula, I'm finally getting pretty close!

As for getting in over my head on specific projects or problems, sometimes I do hit a wall, explore all the avenues I can think of, and feel like I'm out of ideas. Most often this has happened with mysterious engine or electrical problems. I've found that, first thing, it is often helpful to just walk away from it for a while. Sometimes you have a different perspective a day (or week or two) later. Beyond that, it's just a matter of persistence and going back to basics. ("An engine needs gas. Did I check for fuel flow? Did I check every component individually? An engine needs a spark. Am I getting a spark? Did I check every component individually? Is there any way I can rig something to check the subparts of the system?" etc)

It's important to have confidence that every problem CAN be solved. A car is not on the fringe of theoretical physics. It was created by people. It ran before. It can run again.

Switching subjects a little bit, how did you manage to take hold of Sterling Central? Did the original owner just get tired of it?

WD: Sterling Central was created in the mid '90s by a Sterling enthusiast named Tim Hoffman. Although the exact dates have been lost, we believe he ran the site from 1995 to 1997. The original site, as created by Tim, was a beautifully informative site that was well ahead of its time. Keep in mind that this was still during the relatively early years of the internet, before websites were ubiquitous for everyone and every hobby everywhere, during a time in which even most commercial sites were relatively unsophisticated and their design was something of a black art often left to design specialists.

Yet here was Tim's site; clean and efficient and surprisingly "modern" with perhaps the largest collection of Sterling pictures in existence at the time. The original Sterling Central also included scans of the original Sterling build manual, plus copies of the original Sterling "rap sheet" newsletters, plus an early club registry which had accounted for about a dozen cars. It was an excellent site dedicated to the very rare topic of our cars, and it quickly became known as THE main site for Sterlings on the net. But sometime after 1997, disaster struck: Sterling Central simply disappeared. There was never any warning. One day it simply wasn't there anymore, and I still haven't found anyone who knows the story behind it. I know from my archives that Tim owned Sterlings #362, 464, and 793. And I notice from your site (NationalSerling.org) that these cars still aren't otherwise accounted for. So perhaps Tim is still out there somewhere quietly enjoying his Sterlings. But as for the site, we don't know for sure if Tim just got bored with it, or if there was some other shake-up or falling out, or what. One day the site just disappeared. And at least a handful of us Sterling enthusiasts who had come to love and frequent the site were greatly saddened by the loss.

One such person was a guy named Rick Rickert. Rick is a friendly and interesting guy who had a self-professed love for web design, exotic cars, adventure, and for life in general. Any links to "travelhead" that still exist on Sterling Central are links to Rick's other personal sites (which I have left intact out of respect to one cool dude).

After the original Sterling Central by Tim Hoffman vanished, Rick Rickert was the person at the right place and time, with the web savvy and persistence to try to find/save/recreate as much as he could of the site. He was fascinated with the design of the Sterling and had fairly recently acquired a rare white Sterling “GT” with significant body mods. Considering his interests and skills, Rick was just the right Sterling enthusiast to save the site right then. He eventually acquired the name, and within a fairly short time, Rick had a basic second incarnation of Sterling Central up and running.

Unfortunately, much of the information had been lost. Or so we thought.

On the other side of the Atlantic was Steve Cook, creator of the Nova/Sterling/Eureka supersite known as Nova-International. Steve is a wonderful guy who is, without exaggeration, one on the most dedicated enthusiasts on the planet for our cars. For years, he painstakingly collected and archived every little picture, personal website, advertisement, personal letter, magazine article, or (later) auction that exists for this breed. He “laughed” once (in email) when I referred to him as a rabid super-fan of the car. But super-fan he is, and he collected EVERYTHING about these cars. And serendipitously, he just happened to have copied virtually all parts of Tim’s site before it died.

And so Rick got in contact with Steve, and Steve happily donated the ‘lost’ information back to our side of the Atlantic to be used in the new version of Sterling Central. As such, the site was granted its second life.

Rick Rickert faithfully maintained and updated the site for a few years. At its peak, it was still the most current and informative Sterling site on the web. All internal and external links worked flawlessly. The site was great. Albeit as niche site, Sterling Central was known all over the world. At some point along the way, Rick had come into a bit of money and free time as a result of some odd twists and turns to the businesses he was in. And while these resources didn’t diminish his love of cars in general, or of the Sterling specifically, it left him with an interesting prospect and a dilemma: Rick is the consummate free spirit, and he choose to utilize his new found time and money to sell everything he owned and simply travel the world (in a rather sparse, adventurous, and humble manner). So he was bravely going to follow his dream like many of us never have the opportunity to do. But in doing so, he was leaving almost all of the rest of his life behind.

One day around this time, he and I just happened to be on the same Yahoo group at the same time (a now defunct group that at one time had essentially been the only Sterling group.) Rick was chatting about his car and his story, and he just happened to throw out the idea that he might need someone to take over his site whenever he decided leave the states to start his next adventure in life. At the time I was already several years into my own rather ambitious Sterling rebuild, a project which was requiring me to start turning into “one of those obsessive Sterling super-fans” who was collecting every little picture or scrap of information I could get my hands on, mainly just to collect ideas for my own project. I had long known of his site and was probably one of the most frequent visitors. Though it probably sounds geeky, the idea of taking over the site was absolutely dreamy.

And so Rick and I wrote back and forth for a while. We enjoyed each other’s projects and dedication to the Sterling, and when he eventually left for his self-engineered tour of the world, he happily tossed me the keys to the site and, for all intents and purposes, never looked back.

My plan was to initially not change anything on the site (except contact email) out of respect for what he’d created -- with the intention of very gradually updating it over the years. And I suppose I’ve done a good job of archiving what he (and, indirectly, Tim Hoffman) had done. And I certainly haven’t stopped collecting new pictures or privately playing with new ideas for the site. Unfortunately, several years ago when I started into the first round of updates, I set a bad precedent for myself: I had a huge brainstorm of cool things I wanted to change on the site and decided to try to revamp the entire site and launch it all at once rather than making little, incremental improvements. Several questions ago you asked if I had ever gotten in over my head on a project. Well, in terms of time – not in desire or skills-that-would-be-needed – the site represents one project that turned out to be much bigger than I had anticipated, mainly due self-imposed complexities of the update. At the time I was in school for a profession and then later a specialty, neither or which gave anything but a trickle of free time. And when I did have those precious few bits of free time, to be honest, I often choose to work on my actual cars rather than the site for them. And now I’m very happily self-employed but have perhaps as little time as before. (All that said... I have been better at making the time for the web site project recently).

Which brings us up the present, minus one huge side note to the story of Sterling Central. In those few intervening years, two very significant things changed: You (Rick Milne) created an absolutely wonderful dedication site for our cars that is slick, current, informative, and has done a superb job at forming an actual community among Sterling owners. And Secondly, Dave Aliberti has taken the reigns of Sterling production and has created a site that is impressive in content and form, beautifully professional, and is a testament the future of our cars, not just the history. You two deserve huge accolades from the rest of us for your diligence and efforts.

As for Sterling Central...it still has a few little surprises that will eventually be added. Nothing profound, just some little embellishments that will bring it back to being current and strong. I think that some of the appeal of our cars is that the community of enthusiasts is so small that, in a way, we each become a significant little part of the history of the car. If you own a Mustang, you run the risk of being “just another” Mustang owner. But each Sterling owner adds more than a little to the history of the car.

For years, Sterling Central was THE web presence dedicated to the Sterling. It has become part of the history of the car. And if for that reason alone, I plan to make sure it stays online. Currently, it has a few cobwebs and a ton of broken links. But the story will continue...

How active has the site been over the years?

WD: It amazes me that, even as a very static site, there has still been a small but consistent amount of traffic to the site. From time to time there will be a slight burst of new activity, probably during times when there are a few Sterlings on Ebay and when newcomers to the car are doing some research. Also, it still tickles me that, every once in a long while, someone will copy the entire introduction of my site to their ebay ad to use as their description of what a Sterling is. In a way, that lets me know that the site still makes a contribution.

With Dave and Sterling Sports Cars in business, do you see any resurgence in the 'grass-roots' kits like the Sterling happening? Old time 'grass-roots' kits seem to be a thing of the past. Good or bad?

WD: This is a cool but complicated topic. On the forums and in our email lists, there is a surprising amount of discussion about "whatever happened to grass roots kit cars" and/or "can grass roots kit cars ever come back?" Please forgive me for giving a complex answer:

Although there is no formal definition, a "grass roots" kit car is usually in reference to the "old school" kits in which the entire body of the car is replaced – either with a loosely-based replica of some existing car or, even better, a totally unique body – and in which the builder has a huge amount of input and creativity in the engine, body, interior, and other customizations. Some examples include the Sterling (Nova, Eureka, Sebring, Cimbria, Neria), Kelmark GT, Laser 917, Bradely, Aztec 7, Avenger, Valkyrie, Fiberfab Jamaican, etc.

First of all, let there be no doubt that there's NO shortage of car enthusiasts who love to creatively tweak and modify their cars, sometimes to radical levels. Sure, there have been huge changes in styles, tastes, and technology, but there is still an endless supply of people who want to take a fairly mundane car and, without spending a fortune or taking ten years, turn it into something that looks more unique or exotic than the original. And it stands to reason that any potential kit manufacturer who can still get that equation correct stands to make at least a little profit doing so. The potential market is there; that is NOT one of the things that have changed.

For proof of the potential market, all one needs to do is to visit the parking lot of the local Mall to see the wide handful of tricked out cars with fully custom fiberglass hoods, ground effects, rear valances, interiors, etc. In these cars, I can easily see some obvious lineage back to the traditional kits, both in technology and in market niche. For better or worse, these are currently the evolution of modern "kits"

Think about it: for every modern common compact car, there is some "kit," in some form, from some vendor that allows you to replace essentially all body components that aren't absolutely essential to the structure of the car...all with the ultimate goal of creating something more exotic, unique, and/or radical than you started with. Modern re-body kits allow you to replace everything that CAN be replaced, just like in the old days. The trouble is that there aren't as many parts that you CAN substitute as you once could, which brings us to the first major reason why grass roots kit cars have become almost extinct: cars just aren't built with the same strategy that they used to be, which places new limits on what parts can be customized. The old school paradigm for actual production cars was to have a body that superficially sits on top of a chassis that's independent of that body. But that old paradigm of car design has been gone for MANY decades. In modern production cars, the suspension and chassis are now integral to the entire car – in most cases the core of the body and the "chassis" are one in the same and cannot be easily separated. You can't replace the entire body anymore because you can't structurally dispense with the OLD donor body like you used to be able to do. Think about how bizarre it was 'back in the day' -- you could take the entire body off a Bug and, with barely any changes, you could drive around the remaining chassis as if the body was never there to begin with(!) From an engineering and creative standpoint, that is truly beautiful! But doing so is simply not possible with ANY modern donor car, which is sad in a way, because it severely limits what you can do with the design of the kit's body.

For today's would-be donor cars, you're pretty much stuck with the existing roofline and overall dimensions/profile because most parts of a modern car's suspension and "chassis" are now integral. The few parts that still can be changed include the front and rear valances, the front fenders, the hood, and side skirts. Not surprisingly, this is exactly what you see in the parking lots these days. It's nearly impossible to make a fully custom, "grass roots" body nowadays because there is no easy donor car for the suspension and chassis.

But that isn't to say that it can't be done. The obvious logic stemming from the above is that a person COULD take the subframe and engine from certain modern cars and graft it into a semi-custom chassis (with all new, custom fabricated attachment points for the suspension components, etc), at which point you could use or design just about any shape body you wanted. (Modern examples include the Attack from _____ and the _____ from Factory Five.) And the result, if done correctly, could be wonderful. (By the way, grafting-in a modern engine AND transaxle is one of the options/strategies that Dave Aliberti from Sterling Sports Cars has developed).

But doing so leads directly into the second big reason why there are essentially no successful grass roots kits right now: For every additional little bit of custom fabrication, you pay a price. No...literally. I'm not being figurative. You pay a price for it. It's expensive to buy custom stuff.

But the reasons for the plight of the grass roots kits continue.

Even if you can keep the cost of the custom chassis down – and by the way, I think Sterling Sports Cars offers a VERY nice chassis for a VERY fair price -- the other potential pitfall involves having ‘too much’ of a custom chassis. This taps into a combination of basic human nature plus a quirk I’ve noticed about many kit car enthusiasts: Namely, the more complex a kit gets, and the more custom fabrications that the builder must do on their own, the less chance of the kit actually being completed. And a kit can’t truly be successful unless a good percentage of the cars actually make it to the road.

I have seen this phenomenon happen not only in the realm of kit cars but also for homebuilt airplanes. In sport aviation, there are a whole lot of otherwise gorgeous, impressive airplane kits out there that never get completed because there ends up being way too much custom fabrication for all-but-the-most-masochistic builders to complete. In order to have widespread popularity, a kit has to find the perfect balance of being just barely “do-it-yourself” enough to be rewarding (to we crazy people who like to build and customize things) while still being adequately practical and manageable to build from the standpoint of time and resources. Said another way, if the kit gets too complicated or has too many custom fabrications (like having to accurately figure out how to adapt and mount your engine to an otherwise very nice “generic” custom chassis), the chances of the average builder having the time and ambition to complete the car go WAY down. Many of us would have the time to ASSEMBLE and substantially PERSONALIZE a kit, but very very few of us have the time and resources to radically fabricate a car from (almost) scratch. (Yes, there are exceptions and exceptional builders...but I’m talking about how to reach the widest possible market in an industry that is already “niche” at best.)

The original manufacturers of the Sterling knew this. One of the strengths of the kit was that, if you had a donor beetle, you could assemble the entire Sterling in essentially just a few long weekends. Even so, I’ve read that the Guys as CCC were constantly looking for even more ways to do subassemblies to reduce build time.

The reality is that, if you want to open up a kit market to as many enthusiasts as possible, you have to make the kit as easy as possible. Don’t worry; a kit will never get “too” easy: The act and process of building a kit is already a wonderfully enjoyable challenge. But the fact is that, if a person can’t build a kit in a manageable time frame, the majority of kits won’t ever reach completion. In sport aviation they refer to this at the “completion rate,” which is the ratio of the number of kits sold to the number of vehicles that actually get completed. Question: What good is it to sell several hundred kits if none ever show up in their completed form. I’m much more impressed by a company that sells only 20 kits total but has 18 units that make it to completion within 12-18 months.

Putting this blatantly in terms of our Sterlings: The space frame chassis that is now available from Sterling Sports Cars is a beautiful thing. And I know that Dave made it as a generic, universal chassis to allow for absolute maximum creativity and flexibility of engine choice. I respect him immensely for that. I love it. I ‘get’ it. But I sometimes wonder if it would be better to have a custom chassis that is fully committed to ONE (or several, specific) modern platform, like a certain year range of Subaru engines, at which point the chassis could include all the critical little tabs and tags and mounting points to make for a simple and fun installation of an existing engine, along with all of it’s modern wire loom, emissions, and other mystery stuff. The goal would be that you could buy a wrecked donor car and then, in just a few weekends, transfer all of it’s mechanicals to the kit without too many custom fabrications, just like it used to be. It would still be fun, challenging and rewarding. And a builder could still customize ‘til his heart heart’s content. But now you have also provided a project that is manageable and practical.

Ironically, I’m one of the guys who likes to do almost all of that custom stuff myself. But again, the reality is that many, many potential builders would be more than happy being able to just plop that engine and all of its accessories into that chassis over three weekends and then move on to (arguably) more rewarding mods like tweaking the engine performance or doing cosmetic personalizations.

In order for a modern grass roots kit to be widely successful, it needs to be at least slightly easy to assemble. If it takes several months to mostly complete, we’re still okay. If it takes several years, don’t expect the kit to be successful.

Okay...almost done.

So nowadays, if a kit is to have a radical new “grass roots,” totally unique body, you not only have to be able to afford the body, you also have to be able to afford the custom chassis as well (rather than just using 90% of the mechanicals from a cheap and available donor car like could be done in the past). The net effect is that this essentially doubles or triples the price of the kit, which immediately starts to push the build price far up out of the reach of many of the typical would-be modern kit car enthusiasts. If a person could spend \$15,000-\$20,000 to end up with a car that looks like it is \$150,000, they are likely to want to do so. But if a kit ends up costing \$40,000 to \$80,000 to build correctly, it puts the project into a whole other realm and out of the reach of a huge part of the potential market (which Dave at Sterling Sports Cars thankfully knows). The last big issue with grass roots kits is that we have become accustomed to higher (or at least different) standards of style for things like headlights, taillights, dash, etc. Think about it; back in the day, headlights basically came in two flavors -- round or rectangular. Sure, there were lots of lots of cool ways to style the body around the headlights, but still, the headlights were simplistic and each of the lights was isolated from the others. All modern cars have cluster headlights that include not only multiple beams but also the turn signals, parking lights, etc. And the same is true for taillights too, as well as the entire spectrum of dash gauges and interior features.

In order for a grass roots kit to be popular today, it has to LOOK like a modern car in its details. You can’t get away with surface mounting headlights and taillights anymore. And you can’t have a dash that looks like it belongs more in a fiberglass motorboat from the ‘70s than in a car. Dave at Sterling Sports Cars has been working commendably to these ends. He now at least has raw materials for some nice modern headlights, though I think it can be even better with a contoured insert for the headlight bay that looks even more modern and less “surface mount.” In terms of the dash, the current straight dash is wonderfully versatile, which I like. But it is also very plain and takes a good deal of artistry to make it look believable and “modern,” which hurts the kit. In my opinion, the kit would benefit dramatically from a very sexy dash that had a built in / default layout that looked more modern. People could modify it from this point if they chose to. But it would at least ensure that the unmodified default style looked great. Bottom line: the sexier and more finished the kit looks in its basic form, the higher the odds that it will appeal to a modern market. I know that Dave will continue to improve everything he can. I also know that his resources aren’t infinite.



In total, the market for a modern grass roots kit still exists, but there is only a narrow envelope for success. In order for such a kit to thrive today, it must have:

- 1) Option for a modern drivetrain (or two, or three). that can be EASILY adapted from a modern, inexpensive donor car.
- 2) Fairly easy to assemble/build with as few "mission critical" custom fabrications as possible.
- 3) Details that are sexy, refined, and very modern looking, with out exception.
- 4) A price point that makes the entire "kit" portion no more expensive than an inexpensive new car such that the entire build price is on par with a nice modern entry level sports car. A total build price of \$25,000 is already very hard for most enthusiasts to come up with, especially considering that kits usually have to be done a cash deals. (I defy you to go to you bank to get a \$25,000 loan for a Sterling...that's unbuilt.) A build price of \$40,000 takes a kit immediately out of the reach of the masses. The beauty of the old school grass roots kits was that they allowed the totally average custom car enthusiast to own unique, fun cars that look like high end exotics.

The good news is that I believe Dave Aliberti knows these things. He's on it. And even now, the Sterling is very close to these parameters. He seems to understand the price point dilemma. And he is working to subtly modernize the car. If he can tap into the market that encourages a kid to drop the engine from their car into a Sterling RATHER THAN pimping out their donor car, I think he's found a particularly strong niche. But for better or worse, any modern Sterling needs to have some of the refinements and stylistic trappings of a modern custom car in order to appeal to the widest possible market.

Ironically, the body is NOT a problem. Although a Sterling body could be redesigned, I am still amazed at how many people ask me if it's a "new type" of car or who say it looks "futuristic." Richard Oakes, I applaud you: You designed a car in 1971 that people say looks "futuristic" in 2008. Just...Wow!

If you were a kit manufacturer, what steps would you take to get noticed?

WD: Dave at Sterling Sports Cars is doing an absolutely wonderful job of making sure the Sterling has a presence at prominent kit car shows and some appropriate VW events. Awesome. Don't stop. ...But also know that there is a bit of "preaching to the choir" that's occurring in doing so. I think that the majority of the kit car community probably knows that the Sterling still exists, and we Sterling enthusiasts certainly know that Dave (and a source of parts) is out there. But I'm worried that people who don't already know what a kit car is definitely don't know of the Sterling and don't see it as an alternative to modifying their own production cars...and that is a huge, untapped market.

I hate the advice I'm about to give: Kids these days like blinky things and big sound systems. I don't want to ever see the Sterling turn into a cartoon. And it doesn't need to. But you either adapt to the market or the market will kill you off. My advice is therefore make sure the new Sterling show car has an insane sound system with all of the modern bells and whistles. Although it makes me a little queasy to say this: consider even putting some colorchanging LEDs under that b'otch and then take it to EVERY compact car rally and sound system showdown you can afford to attend. In an era of lambo-style doors and big aftermarket hood and side scoops, the Sterling would be an insanely huge hit at these shows, which might generate a buzz and more press coverage...and hopefully more life for the car. And please don't get me wrong; I don't want the Sterling to be a blinky and silly car. But I want a HUGE number of younger enthusiasts to know that this car really is an option for them. They can spend \$15,000 modifying their compact car, or they can spend the same \$15,000 and end up with a whole lot more car from an exotic and artistic standpoint. THAT segment of enthusiasts is a very important chunk of the new potential market.

Current Sterling owners and existing kit car enthusiasts already know and like the Sterling. The Sterling needs to accessorize a little to break into the greater market.

Which kit, other than the Sterling, do you think would benefit from a resurrection if someone like Dave found the molds and started production again? Why?

WD: I'm going to say something which I know some people will agree with, and some will disagree with: Although I have respect for all the kits produced over the last 30 years, well...there were some really ugly-ass kit cars that were produced in the 70s and 80s! In fact, in my opinion, there were precious few kits that looked 'believable' and balanced and 'real.' I do have huge respect for the relative success of cars like the Bradley, Aztec 7, Averger, Jamaican, Invader, Porsche 917 replica, etc. Each has its place, and each contributed to the story of kit cars overall. But that said, even some of these more famous kits are really weird looking cars when you get right down to it. I'm not convinced that they are 'timeless'. I'm not convinced that there are many kits that should be brought back.

The Sterling is not just any kit. The Nova/Sterling/Eureka/Eagle/Sebring/Cimbria/Eagle SS family of car represents some of the only 'non-replica' kit cars that got it almost 100% right. They represent a very small number of kit cars ever made that got the balance of exotic-ness and style just as it should be. They look like "real" cars. And the basic design, save for some details that should be modernized, are quite timeless. As for other kits, I wish they were still being produced just so that the people who love them have access to parts. But there aren't many that I personally want to see come back. (I personally wouldn't mind seeing a mildly updated Avante (British), Valkyrie, Kelmark GT, and Manta Montage (but NOT the Manta Mirage).)

And then there is the Sterling. The Sterling "got it right," and I sincerely think it deserves to survive as a living, evolving kit.

Weather notwithstanding, the Carlisle Kit show definitely is declining in the number of kits shown each year, while the West Coast shows generally seem to attract the same number of cars. Do you think that's just an East Coast phenomena, or is there something more sinister afoot?

WD: Well, it's probably nothing sinister...although I did hear that the Russians are hoping to topple all capitalistic societies by decreasing attendance at kit car shows.

But the reason I give a goofy answer is because I don't know a real one. I don't know why attendance is down except that I really do fear that the kit car industry is seen as kind of an 'old' or antiquated niche. All of the old kits are...well...old. And of the few modern kits that exist, most tend to be replicas, and many are extremely expensive. For all of the reasons discussed in previous questions, I think there is an almost total absence of kits that use common donor cars to create radical exotics for an affordable price. I think that's the big reason that kit car trade shows seem to be fading. Fortunately, I think the trend could be reversed with just a few good kits marketed the correct way.

Finally, at the end of the day, you've just driven your car for miles through winding roads, a bright autumn day, with no worries. What do you say to your car when you turn off the hanger lights?

WD: That one's easy: "Thank goodness the top went up one more time."

My gratitude to Warren and his father for the graciousness they possessed while I poked around the various toys and for inviting me to their home, and for taking the time to provide thoughtful answers to my questions!

---- Rick



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