

Basic Beck

by Ray Thursby

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It's tempting to dismiss Charlie Beck as one of those easygoing good ol' boys who likes nothing more than to have a good time and take life easy. And true, Charlie - "Chuck," he corrects - likes to play around. What's also true, however, is that he works harder to avoid the boredom of a 9-to-5 gig than anyone else I know. Beck escapes drudgery by building cars.

Building handmade sports-racing machines seems a logical fate for the Florida native, who grew up watching his aircraft fabricator/mechanic father buy, repair and resell cars to bolster the family's finances. When he wasn't working on airplanes or rehabilitating clunkers Beck Senior ran stock cars on Southern bullrings, with Beck Junior watching engrossed from the pits.

After a stint in the military, Chuck found himself living in California and working on the wide variety of imported cars then flooding the West Coast. Servicing ACs, Triumphs, Renaults, Alfas, Mercedes, VWs and Porsches - some race-wrenching included - gave him an appreciation for exotic machinery, and this inspiration soon led to the creation of a series of after-hours, one-off specials. In retrospect, each bore one set of Beck hallmarks: simplicity, low weight and a total lack of respect for the sanctity of a major manufacturer's designs.

The first car was a pseudo-Porsche powered by a mid-mounted VW engine in a tube chassis. Built in 1955, Beckmobile #1 retained all the mechanical pieces of its '46 Beetle parent including the mechanical brakes and non-synchro transmission. This was followed by a former Mark VIII Jaguar sedan - a rollover victim that wound up being shortened, Chevified and otherwise hacked about in search of speed. Beck liked the engine-swap part of this deal, anyway, and a series including everything from Chevy-Healeys to Olds-powered Mercedes 190SLs ensued. Two more mid-engine cars - Alfa-powered autocrossers - were built in 1965-66.

Charlie's growing reputation as a man who could make fast cars faster - plus a conversation with Carroll Shelby unsuitable for even a marginally family oriented magazine - led to employment at Shelby American. After a year there, Beck moved on to campaign a Camaro in Trans-Am and then a Lola T160 in Can-Am.

In the midst of all this he started Funco (a company that built dune buggies), and then moved on again to spend the 1970s working on airplanes and restoring vintage Porsches.

The latter occupation led to the first attempt at a replica, in this case the Porsche 904 coupe. The project got as far as the completion of a body plug before Beck realized it would be too expensive for most kit-car buyers: The plug remains in his shop even now, ignored but hardly forgotten.

Four months of hard work resulted in a more practical attempt, the Beck Spyder. Now built in Brazil to Beck's standards and specs, this

Porsche 550 Spyder replica is the most successful of the line to date: Total sales since 1983 currently top the 900 mark.

The Spyder was also the car that made Beck's wider reputation. Solid engineering, high-quality fiberglass, great attention to detail and a superbly developed chassis set it apart from the regulars of the kit-car crowd, and both road and track versions of the Beck Spyder have a solid following today.

The Spyder also solidified Charlie's reputation for experimentation. Examples have been fit with de Dion rear axles, 6-cylinder Porsche engines, turbocharged VW, Porsche and Subaru (!) mills and in one case even a shortened 4-cylinder version of a Porsche 930 flat-6.

A few years later, Beck and racer-journalist Rick Titus teamed up to produce the Shogun - a Ford Festiva econobox with a 220-bhp Ford Taurus SHO drivetrain mounted in the middle. Other diversions have included a stillborn Lister-Corvette package for late-model Corvettes and a new stepside bed for the current range of Dodge Ram pickups.

None of which gets to the essence of the man. Chuck is outspoken, friendly, and given to seemingly insupportable boasts that turn out to be accurate recitations of what he can really do. He makes time for his customers, and to a man these people all seem to consider him a friend - remarkable, really, in a business such as his. He's a talented driver, an intuitive engineer and a man with a knack for getting things right the first time. Most of all, the essence of Charlie Beck is a fertile imagination.

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