



# GOOD



*We Reach Maximum  
Trajectory in the MEV Rocket*





# BONES

*story & photos by Harold Pace*

“Where’s the body?” Owners of the new generation of “exoskeleton” cars are frequently asked that question, and the obvious answer is “it’s already on the car.” Although racecars frequently have exposed parts of their frames and roll cages, the concept of intentionally leaving well-finished chassis members on display was popularized in the mid-2000s by the Ariel Atom, a very quick (and at around \$50K, very expensive) turn-key sportscar. Since then a number of kit car manufacturers, including Race Car Replicas/Superlite Cars, have picked up on the bared-bones concept at a more wallet-friendly price. We recently had the opportunity to track test the MEV Rocket, an English kit that has been on the market for a while overseas, but only recently acquired an American distributor. Lucky us!



One glance will tell you the most important thing about this great new kit...it's light! There isn't anything here that isn't absolutely necessary to make the Rocket roar. Think 1,100 pounds mounting a potent Ford Focus engine and gearbox unit in back of the driver. The current generation of Rockets use the Ford Zetec engines with power outputs in the 130-200hp range, but there is also room for the newer Ford/Mazda Duratec and even Honda Vtec engines.

The Rocket is available on these shores from Dove Racing in Trenton, Texas (near Dallas). Rocket kits are built in England by Road Track Race Ltd., which also manufactures other kit cars with an emphasis on max performance in a tiny package. Racing driver and businessman Pete Dove is the American distributor as well as the Texas dealer for RTR autos, and is setting up more dealerships across the country. His 20-plus years of experience with both racing and kit cars made him appreciate the concept of a very quick street sportscar that is ideal for "track day" events as well.

The Rocket is not a take-no-prisoners racing car suitable

only for serious trophy collectors. Purpose-built racing cars are way too expensive and sophisticated for the average performance car enthusiast. They require constant maintenance, an unending supply of pricey racing slicks and meticulous suspension tuning to keep up with the pack, and they are obsolete (and almost worthless) after a few seasons. Not to mention that racing fuel is currently running \$7 to \$10 a gallon. The Rocket is a very different concept, a fun car for amateur-level events that has a simple drivetrain package with parts and service available as close as your local Ford dealer. It even has an OBD2 diagnostic port. And it burns pump gas.

However, if you want to go faster there are loads of aftermarket performance bits that can boost power into the 240-horse range. "We're working on adapting the frame to accept the Duratec," says Dove, "and Ford has announced they will soon have a new four-cylinder, turbocharged Ecoboost crate engine that I'm anxious to get a hold of." Dove says the new Ford engine will deliver 265 hp. Dove is also working on an OMEX supercharger kit for the Zetec that will boost power to the 240hp level.

Another benefit to a street-legal track car is that the owner can acquaint himself with the car away from the track, a big advantage to those who can't skip work to head for the track on a regular basis. And the two seats allow another family member to ride along and share the fun.

## TRACK TIME

We met Dove at Eagles Canyon Raceway ([www.eagles-canyon.com](http://www.eagles-canyon.com)) just north of Fort Worth for a day of slinging the Rocket around the challenging 11-turn, 2.5-mile circuit. It was 41 degrees out, so I appreciated that Dove had installed the optional smoked polycarbonate inner panels that fit just inboard of the frame rails. They can be easily removed for summer use, but they keep the chilly drafts down at speed.

And speed was the word of the day. The Dove Racing demonstrator is equipped with a rare 2003 Ford Focus SVT Zetec



engine that has been pumped up to 200 hp from the stock 170. "My Rocket is tuned with a SCT Xalibrator that gives you two levels of performance," says Dove. The Street settings provide an extra seven hp over stock, or 12 hp with the Race setup (Dove recommends 93 octane fuel plus an octane booster for the Race settings). He has also added a larger throttle body and a straight-through exhaust system, plus a large K&N filter to feed approximately 200 horses. This results in a 0-60 time of under four seconds. "I've done an indicated 142 mph and it still had some more," says Dove. The stock Focus has 130 hp, which is enough to have fun with, but the 2002-2004 SVT models feature many improvements that make them worth searching out – like a big-valve head, 10.2:1 compression and an excellent six-speed Getrag transmission with dual-mass flywheel. One of the goals of the SVT team was to keep a broad power band, so the healthy torque curve starts coming in as low as 2,200 rpm, allowing the Rocket to take off from a standing start with a lot more aplomb than most highly-tuned four-bangers.

Despite having a circuitous route to get the shift linkage from the box to the center console, the transmission is a joy to operate. I have driven many Seven-type kits with overly sensitive clutches and recalcitrant sequential transmissions that pale in comparison to this setup. The clutch takes up normally and the gears are right where you think they should be in the pattern. The six-speed ratios are not overly close, so you don't have to constantly row the gear lever to stay in the power band (the standard Focus has a five-speed box with wider ratios that is adequate for street or track-day usage). And the pedal layout allows blipping the throttle during downshifts, simply because it's fun to do.

This Rocket was fitted with a full-width roll bar and a button-type five-point racing harness. Different racing clubs may have other safety equipment requirements, and the Rocket can be fitted with anything you need for solo events to wheel-to-wheel combat. A seven-gallon fuel cell is optional. The seats were one of several designs available and a Danmoto Digital Cockpit reads out the data. There was also a camera-based rear view system of marginal utility, plus two tiny mirrors.

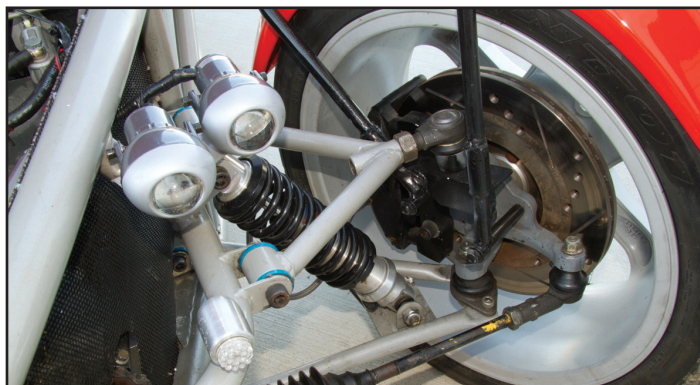
Once strapped in I headed out onto the track and the fun really started. The Nitto R1 205/40 rubber mounts on 17" X 7" Focus SVT rims, and despite the cool weather they came up to temp within half a lap. The exoskeleton frame feels plenty stiff and the fabricated A-arm suspension front and rear keeps the car planted. Unlike a racing car with heim-jointed suspension linkage, the Rocket has poly arm bushings that are easier to replace and last longer on the street. The trade out is that the Rocket is not as adjustable as a pure racing car, although there is some room for track tuning by shimming the arms forward or back.

Eagles Canyon is a very demanding circuit, what racers refer to as a "technical" track, requiring careful planning in order to link together the many turns and sudden elevation changes. It's an ideal place for a car like the rocket, with phenomenal acceleration due to the exceptional power-to-weight ratio, coupled with rat-with-tennis-shoes handling and killer braking courtesy of Wilwood calipers on the front (Focus calipers in back) and vented, grooved and cross-drilled rotors.

Hanging the chassis on the outside has many benefits, but aerodynamic efficiency isn't one of them. Still, adjustable nose wings are available, both in fiberglass and carbon fiber. Our test car had the nose planes but not the optional rear wing.

The driving experience was one of the nicest I've ever experienced in lightweight track-day cars. The rack-and-pinion steering is perfectly weighted, quick but not nervous, and the tiny Momo steering wheel feels comfortable to grip. Within a few laps I had the confidence to start pushing the limits...almost *too*

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soon. Even when I overshot my braking coming down off a short straight, the forgiving handling saved me from embarrassment. Unlike most pure racing cars the Rocket is eminently driftable, meaning you can pitch the car into a turn and "plant" it with the accelerator pedal. This gives you the ability to tighten up turns you misjudged on corner entry, and also to turn inside adversaries too-married to the "correct" line through the corner.

Before we knew it the sky was getting dark and we still had photos to take, so our testing was reluctantly cut short. The Rocket is great fun without the constant adjustment and tuning required by pure racing cars. It's a winning combination for those wanting to move up from flogging their daily drivers at track events, or those wanting a less maintenance-intensive racing experience.

## BUILDING A SKELETON

The Rocket kit is designed to use a Focus donor car, and a fun car can be made from even a standard 130hp model with a five-speed box. The Base Kit comes with the complete frame, Pro Shocks coilovers, fabricated suspension components, the complete fiberglass body (in color), trim pieces, cooling tubes (from the front radiator back to the engine), a five-gallon fuel tank, the steering rack and an assembly guide CD. Options include powdercoating, racing seats, a Painless Wiring harness and a wide variety of performance upgrades for the brakes, suspension and bodywork. To this the builder will need to add the engine and gearbox from their donor Focus, plus the drive shafts, hubs, rear uprights, radiator, fuel system, various brake parts, steering column, ECU, shifter and cables, safety equipment and wheels/tires. The kit starts at \$7,438, and Dove says a complete base-model can be built for about \$15,000, or one to this SVT spec for about \$18,000.

That's Cobra-level track performance for less than the cost of a new Miata, and less than half the ticket on a new Atom. No bones about it.

**KCB**

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