

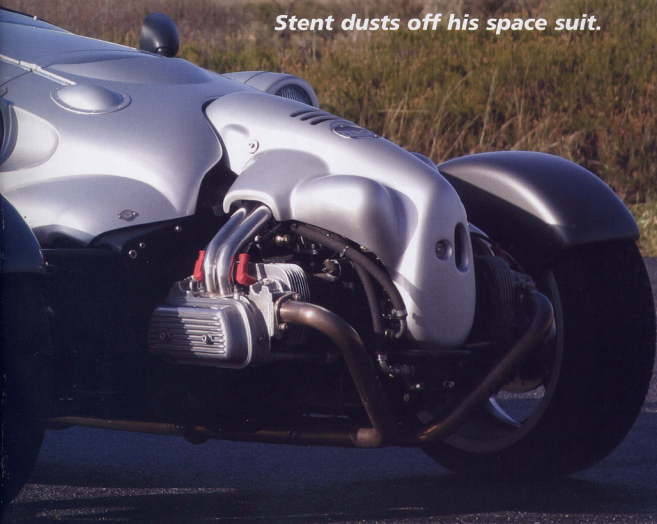
spotlight

Space Invader



Blackjack Zero

Like something from another planet, the Blackjack Zero epitomises all that's great about the UK's alternative car scene. Ian Stent dusts off his space suit.



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Thank god for Richard Oakes! In an industry increasingly drowning under an all-engulfing sea of Lotus Seven lookalikes, Richard has consistently reminded us that professional design can be part and parcel of the UK's low volume, alternative car world. For over three decades he's been consistently producing startling new cars that have taken our breath away.

While the GTM Libra may be one of his best known doodles of the last ten years, when it came to keeping a project for himself (rather than for a client), he came up with the Avion three-wheeler which he marketed through his own company, Blackjack Cars. And while his latest creation, the new Zero, has an obvious family resemblance, it not only shares nothing with the Avion in terms of its mechanical components, but moves the design into a new, more aggressive and purposeful arena. Where the Avion was delicate and quirky, the Zero looks planted and faintly evil.

But above all, it looks designed. This is not a chassis which has been clad in

aluminium sheets and, hey presto, the resulting shape is what you get. Richard Oakes is a professional designer (and I emphasise the word professional) with a natural understanding of form, symmetry, balance and the importance of shutlines as part of the design and not just a function of where two panels meet. So while beauty may be in the eye of the beholder (and you might or might not like the look of the

imitation of Chapman's original inspiration. The kit car industry deserves better.

But Richard has another nifty trick up his sleeve. Not only can he draw a very fine line, he can also transfer it into a three-dimensional form and – here's the clever bit – understand the production process required for anything that has to be repeatable. So hinging panels needed to gain access to the engine or rear suspension are designed-in

from the start, with bespoke hinges. If nothing else, it means there are over 100 unique laser-cut brackets and items for the Zero. All of which hopefully results in a

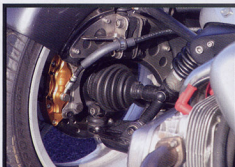
“Richard Oakes is a professional designer with a natural understanding of form, symmetry and balance”

car that's easy to build. The Zero is wonderfully, joyously designed – something that very, very few other kit cars can lay claim to.

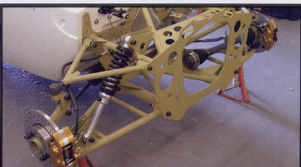
So, once again, thank god for Richard Oakes, for reminding us that shoddy design doesn't have to be the norm and, with even a modicum of imagination, we don't have to settle for yet another rehashed, regurgitation of something that's a poor

car that's easy to build.

If the Avion was a dainty Citroën 2CV-based three-wheeler, the Zero has an altogether more performance orientated brief. Where donor parts are required (and the Zero doesn't use many of those), then the new car looks to VW for assistance. While Richard was keen to retain an air-cooled powerplant and therefore has moved to the Beetle, for items such as the



Front uses VW Golf uprights and fabricated wishbones. Has an anti-roll bar, too.



Bespoke handbrake a very nice touch.

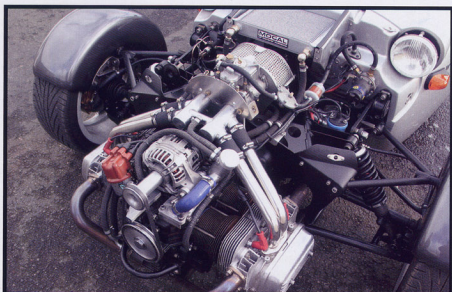


Blackjack Zero

uprights, driveshafts, bearings and other minor sundries he's turned to the more modern VW Golf.

All of which has meant a brand new, more substantial chassis. At its foundation is a large 2in twin round-tube ladderframe onto which is added a three-dimensional front structure to accommodate the engine and double wishbone suspension. An anti-roll bar is also part of the package here, along with Avo coil-over dampers. And having driveshafts poking out to the front wheels is something of a novelty within the kit car scene – we're so used to rear-wheel-drive. Of course, it makes perfect sense for a three-wheeler, providing a very stable handling platform, in which any excess power is instantly washed off in hard cornering (via the inside wheel losing traction) instead of being put down via the single rear wheel, with the inherent risk of lifting the inside front wheel and turning your three-wheeler into a two-wheeler!

Out back, a large tubular trailing arm locates a Golf sourced hub, with another Avo damper, along with a Bendix rear calliper and Golf GTi solid disc. Up front, a move to HiSpec aftermarket brake callipers



1776cc VW Beetle engine makes the Zero a very fast, 200bhp per tonne, car!

and drilled solid discs completes a non-servo assisted braking package that is supplied within

Blackjack's utterly comprehensive kit package.

Onto this rolling chassis is dropped a fibreglass monocoque



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centre tub with a built-in dash moulding. All other panels (and there are quite a few) are either hinged or bolted/screwed into place and are supplied in a cream primer finish and intended for final spraying in the colour of your choice. A rolling chassis in Blackjack's very modest workshop is currently being assembled for a customer and it's mightily impressive. Every rivet and bolt hole is marked in the body, with a corresponding number which tells the builder what size drill bit to use. A paper template for the dash also guides the owner as to exactly where instruments and switches should be positioned – it's meticulous stuff that should give even the most inept amateur confidence.

Of course, the silver demo car shows just what can be achieved with the standard kit package – there's nothing here that represents an expensive addition to the basic specification of the Zero – apart from the engine. While most customers are tending to stick with the 1600cc Beetle unit, this demonstrator sports a larger 1776cc lump

with fancy cam, big-valve heads and a lightweight flywheel. All cars will use Blackjack's bespoke inlet manifold, leading to a Weber carburettor, which is located centrally under the front engine cover to meet modern 3-wheeler SVA requirements.

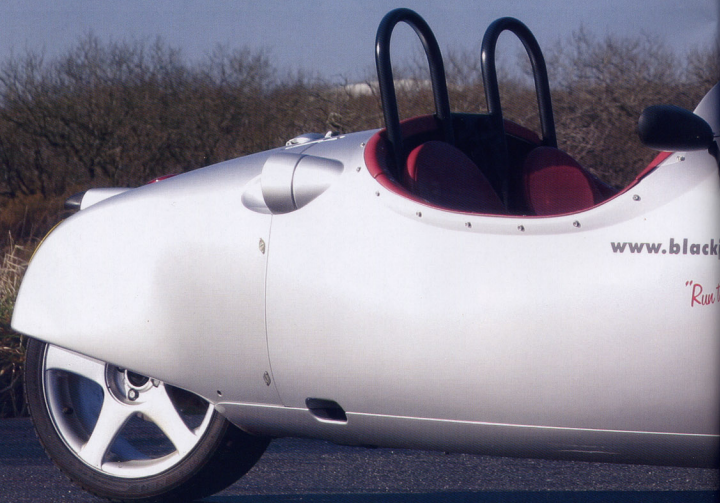
Blackjack Avion enthusiasts will see the family resemblance when it comes to the interior – it's an understated affair with the company's own seats and an uncluttered trim and dash package. Catching my eye is the exposed gear linkage and aluminium Ferrari-esque gate. Along with a trigger release handbrake designed by Richard (and now available to other manufacturers or builders of any kit), these are two highlights in the cockpit...

And cockpit is the right word to describe the interior of the Zero. Slide down into the comfortable seats, and the black dash panel with its flick switches and black-faced dials has more than a hint of fighter-pilot about it. The driving position is very good, the seat slid right back on its runners in order for me to get comfortable (at a smidge under six feet

tall). The steering column comes in between the clutch and brake pedals, but the spacing is very good (and generous) and can accommodate all normal footwear. The relationship between pedals, steering wheel and driver is spot on – it's a comfortable driving position, with only a reasonable stretch to the gear lever causing any thought.

And the gate of the old 4-speed Beetle transaxle is typically wide. From second across to third seems almost gaping until you get used to it, but the selection itself is precise and the aluminium 'gate' adds to the fun without getting in the way.

You might think a Beetle engine, even a tuned version, seems strangely archaic in such a contemporary design, but it all makes sense when you flick the ignition switch before pressing the starter. Through the Blackjack exhaust, this 'mature' lump is transformed into an airy but convincing impersonation of a Porsche engine (which, of course, it almost is). With the lighter flywheel, the unit blips up the revs with real purpose, and its raucous edge sounds more



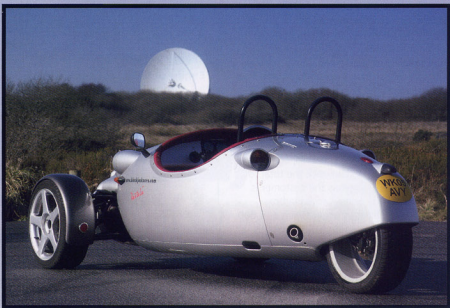
Blackjack Zero

period racer than Herbie comedy car.

First impressions are of a relatively firm ride, but that's something that dulls as the day progresses. I think the front end is perhaps a smidge on the hard side, but the pay-off is precise and predictable handling as you get confidence in the package and begin exploiting the power available.

Blackjack estimates this engine's output at around 90bhp – hardly breathtaking, until you factor in the sub 450kg kerb weight. A tidy 200bhp per tonne makes much more sense of the rapid performance this Zero puts in. Decent torque means you can drive the Zero in two ways, either pottering along enjoying the scenery, or giving it some grief and surprising other road-users. In the latter guise, the engine really gives its best above 4000 revs, where for the next 2000 revs it clears its throat and does the business. This is a quick car.

And it all makes even more sense when you hit the twistier bits. I've always been a tad cautious with three-wheelers, but the Zero's level cornering, prodigious grip and



superb brakes soon cast any concerns to one side. Indeed, it's the sense of

predictability in this car's performance that struck me throughout the day – it doesn't



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appear to have the compromises I've usually associated with the breed.

Of course, such accomplishment, both in terms of the Zero's performance and its polished design, does have a cost. The Zero isn't a budget kit car (and neither should we realistically expect it to be). The company's starter kit is £3800 plus VAT and includes a large number of components over and above the basic body panels and chassis. Onto this need to be added a number of additional packs, such as brakes, lighting, interior etc all of which knock the total to nearer £10,000. It means the customer is left to source the engine and gearbox, wheels and tyres, plus paint. Call it £14,000 and you'll be close enough. The reality is that this compares favourably with other upmarket competitors and I reckon you only need see the car and the components that go into it to understand that it represents value for money.

From a purely selfish perspective, I think the Zero also represents so much more. For *Which Kit Car?* and for the kit car industry, the Blackjack Zero (and the few other independently designed offerings) is a timely reminder of what can be achieved when genuine originality is added to genuine talent. While I will always be a huge fan of Cobra replicas and Lotus Seven inspired lookalikes, it's the free-thinkers that make this industry special. Thank god for Richard Oakes!

FACTFILE

Blackjack Zero

Engine: 1776cc VW Beetle engine.

Engine options: All Beetle variants, although smaller 1300cc and extreme bored-out versions are not recommended.

Chassis: Substantial 2in 14-gauge cds round-tube twin-rail ladder with three-dimensional front engine and suspension cradle.

Bodywork: Fibreglass centre monocoque with many hinging and fixed additional panels. Supplied in cream primer finish

Suspension: Front – VW Golf uprights with fabricated wishbones, Avo dampers and anti-roll bar. Rear – Single trailing arm with Avo coil-over.

Brakes: HiSpec front drilled discs and alloy callipers, Bendix rear calliper and Golf GTI solid disc. No servo.

Kit prices: From £3800 plus VAT.

Budget build cost: Home built from around £14,000.

VERDICT

Funky styling allied to immaculate engineering and genuine performance makes the Zero an irresistible package.

We liked: Superb styling, predictable and accomplished handling, driving position.

We didn't like: Not a budget kit car, superb styling not for everyone!

For more information contact:

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It would cost from £14,000 to build a Zero at home meaning that, like many kit cars, it's not cheap. But quality is very high!

