



# Automobile Quarterly

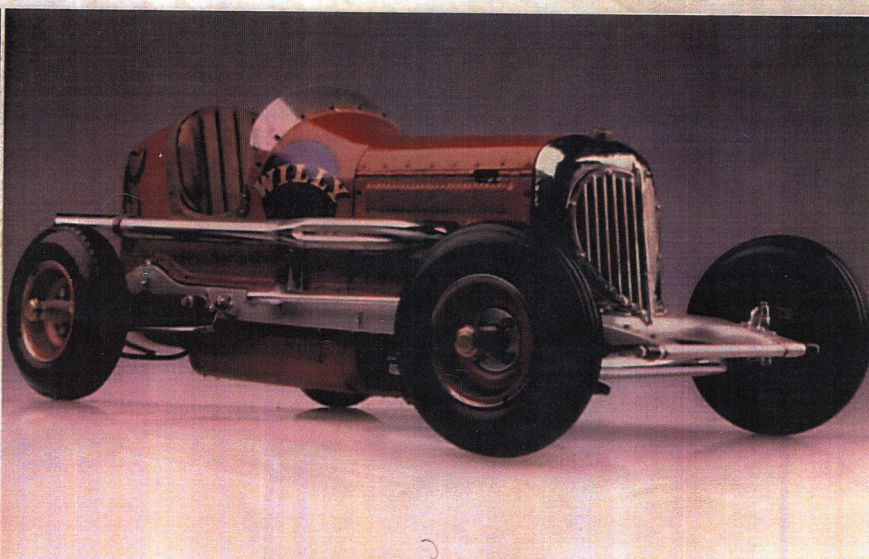
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## WILL NEELY

**I**ndustrial designer Will Neely's association with racy automobiles can be traced back to the days of "American Graffiti"—he graduated from a southern California high school in 1962, when hot rods ruled the streets with majestic clamor and color.

But his design roots go back even further, back to a childhood filled with welding torches and lathes.

"I always had an interest in building things," says Neely. "I worked for my dad from the age of 9, sitting down at the lathe and so forth; he was a truck



mechanic, rebuilding truck engines, Cummins primarily.

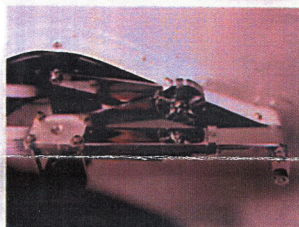
"One day my dad came home and I had the lawnmower engine off and was nailing it to a plywood board—to make a go-cart." He was 12 at the time.

As a boy, Neely had always wanted to race, but the closest he came was the time he transformed a Volkswagen into a dune buggy. His interest in racing and building is a direct influence of his father, who "used to build hot rods, and strip down Model T's and run them. As a hobby, he raced hydroplanes."

These speedy boats brought home many honors, including world speed

records. The Neely-designed hull was powered by a modified flathead Ford; its name was "Cumon Baby." After further tweaking, another record-setter was born, this one named "Cumon Baby II."

Perhaps it was the stellar success of this design that prompted son Will to pursue his interest in design. Before learning to drive, Neely knew how to weld and machine parts; before leaving for college, Neely had hopped up his first car, a 1954 Studebaker, and built a "T Bucket" hot rod on a stripped-down '31 Ford Roadster. He also built supporting structures for Rose Parade floats "from the chassis up," including everything but the decorations.



After a mechanical engineering stint of study, time in the Army, and odd jobs—including work for IBM—Neely found his calling again, that of designer. An "accidental" discovery of furniture manufacturer Knoll led to a productive 14-year career.

The painstaking craft of the scratch model builder is intense and demanding. But the results are astounding. The detail of Neely's work (above left) is almost too much to take in at once; indeed, photographs do not do these models justice. Above: one-eighth scale midget racer.

"I fell in love with their products," notes Neely. "They were so beautifully designed."

His passion for the process of designing a new product led to his high-level position at Knoll as product developer. While at Knoll, Neely happened upon a book titled "The Complete Car Modeler," and his modeling hobby-turned-career began in earnest. Scale modeling consists of



constant problem-solving and infinite patience and focus. It was the perfect fit for Neely, whose ability to design solutions hadn't gone unnoticed.

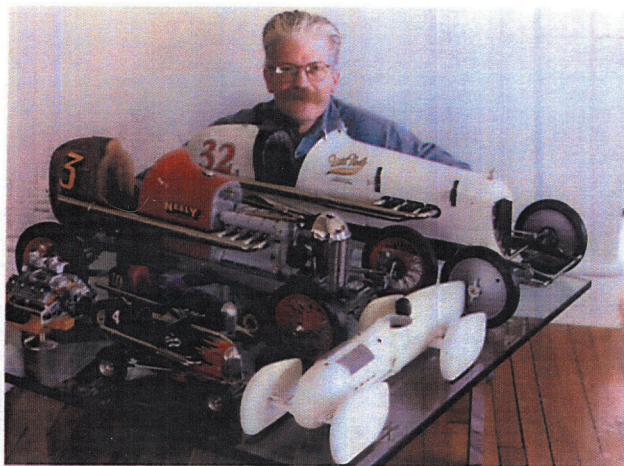
One example of Neely's problem-solving strategy via design is found at Texas A&M University. Neely was asked to design a desk for the campus's architectural suites. The problem: fit 2,000 students into 500 desks. The solution: Neely designed storage elements, inspired by the travel industry, that a student could move and use as a module, as well as different lighting placement. It was a winning design.

A keen interest in architectural design led to Neely's departure from Knoll to pursue buying and renovating houses, while continuing his model-building. As his talents overlapped into different industries, Neely also designed

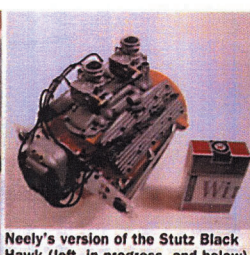
cosmetic products for companies such as Elizabeth Arden and Clairol. But his long-held love for cars continued to draw him to his models.

"I like the old stuff before the wings and cages came in," notes Neely. "The early sprints and midgets are like one of my old cars—take this Model A frame, chop it down, narrow it, put a body on it—and that's the way I made my hot rod at 17. So that design made sense."

Most of Neely's work is now done for a select few customers, primarily other industrial designers. His take on apparent signs that Big Three designers are being given more freedom speaks for designers and enthusiasts on many levels, from the largest to the smallest scale: "I love it that the designer has gained a little more power and respect." **AQ**



Neely modeled the Flathead Ford "60" (left) after a photograph taken of him standing next to his father's "Cumon Baby" engine, with a little help from a similar powerplant he acquired from a junked midget race car. The first model built was for his father—it was an exact scale replica of his boat engine that held three world speed records and three national championships. Below: one-eighth scale midget.



Neely's version of the Stutz Black Hawk (left, in progress, and below).

