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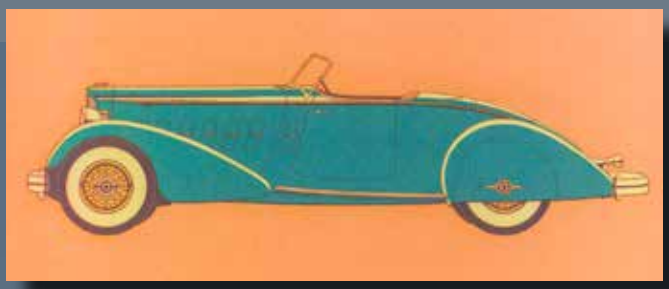
photos West Peterson

the rise and demise of the Packard Speedsters

Packard's storied rise as a successful car manufacturer, whose origins date from a confrontation in 1898 between James Ward Packard and Alexander Winton, is well-known historical fact. From well-engineered plans and an attention to detail, this luxury automobile company steadily evolved and thrived by offering what its well-heeled customer base wanted, which in turn heavily influenced what Packard subsequently offered its customers in future years.

Packard had produced a runabout model as early as 1904, and indeed a version of the Model L was raced by its design engineer, Charles Schmidt. The "Gray Wolf," as it was known, set a speed record on Daytona Beach in January 1904, and Schmidt placed fourth in the first Vanderbilt Cup race in October, a significant drubbing of many larger, more powerful European steeds. Packards would occasionally do well in endurance and hillclimb competitions, but at the hands of privateers.

Packard did not support a race team, nor did it delve deeply into the nascent but growing speedster phenomenon that was sweeping across America. Packard runabouts were large, open, cabriolet-style vehicles meant to cruise in style, a strategy that it adhered to up into the 1920s. Because of this myopic viewpoint, it completely missed the speedster and sport roadster market of the early 1920s that was all the rage on moneyed college campuses and in country clubs.



By 1922, the postwar economic slump was largely over, employment was on the rise again, and markets were picking back up. Many collegiates of this era were affluent and spent tons of Daddy Warbucks' money on parties, clothes, polo matches, trips to the Bahamas or Europe, and flashy little cars to take them to all of their social events. That same dad typically bought a Packard town car or a limousine for himself and his wife, as Packard dominated the luxury car market by supplying as many cars to the affluant as all the rest of the companies put together, thriving well into the Roaring Twenties. The two lines of Packards for 1922 were the well-tried Twin Six, a steady but long-toothed veteran at the end of its run. Along with that was a shorter wheelbase Packard Single Six, a conservative and modest answer for the recovering purses of the 1920s. Both of these models sold well to their conservative adult clientele, but each had their challenges.

The Sport Model from 1922-26 is generally acknowledged in Packard circles to be one of the most exuberant examples of cataloged American open coachwork of the period.

For the Twin Six, its time had come and gone in the marketplace. The design was old and would soon be supplanted by smaller engines and chassis that could perform as well or better. For the Single Six, named to differentiate itself from its 12-cylinder sibling, it was initially too stodgy to sell well in a depressed market.

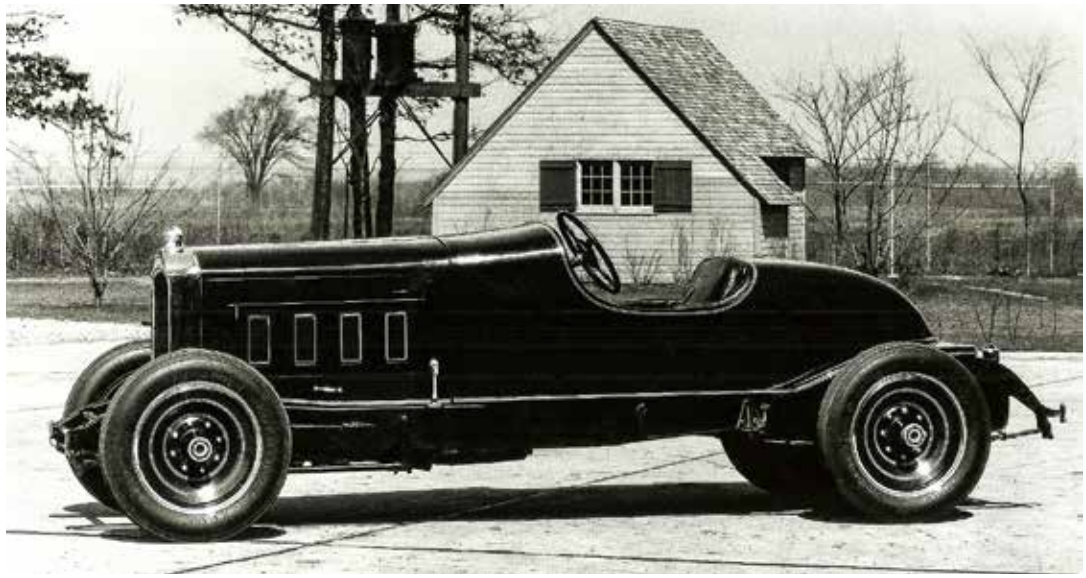
The Single Six of 1922, as well as the Six Model and Single Eight of 1923-24, and the Eight of 1925-26, offered a lower, narrower, and racier-looking four-passenger phaeton called the Sport Model. Painted in Dust Proof Gray Deep with black fenders and molding, and fitted with Extra Permanent Vermillion disc wheels and body striping, its lowered seat and raked steering wheel presented a more youthful-appearing Packard ...but it wasn't a speedster.

Apparently this model did not impress the affluent youth market. As L. Morgan Yost wrote in *Packard: The History of the Motorcar and the Company* compiled and edited by Bev Kimes, "The day of the sports roadster had already dawned — but without Packard. Such exemplifications as the Kissel Speedster, the Templar, Wills Sainte Claire and H.C.S. roadsters, and the Jordan Playboy would become the rage among college students." As is true now, college kids back then wanted something racy ... something that looked snappy. Speedsters fit the bill. The Sport Model did not.

Packard missed the boat on this sales trend, and that fact had not been lost on Jesse Vincent, a self-taught mechanical engineer who had been hired in 1912 by Alvan Macauley, the company's eventual president who would guide Packard through its most profitable years. Vincent had developed the Single Six engine from an idea for a "quality light car" as early as 1912, and he also designed the revolutionary Twin Six in 1915, a model that had grown the company's brand well into the 1920s. Although Vincent was not in charge of strategic vision or marketing, he did have the ear of Macauley. It would be Vincent who first broached the idea of a real speedster for the company.

DEVELOPING THE PACKARD SPEEDSTER

Late in 1926, Packard Motor Co. began establishing a proving ground facility, which eventually would encompass 680 acres in Utica, north of Detroit. On it they created the world's fastest 2.5-mile concrete oval with baked corners, and with this went about setting speed records for Packard cars. Vincent was appointed to be the track development engineer.



The concept of a fast lightweight Packard was initiated with a supercharged prototype in 1927, utilizing a newly developed 384cid powerplant. The supercharger was developed by Allison and preliminary tests indicated that it helped the new engine produce 160hp. While Packard and its engineers were certainly capable of producing such an advanced engine, persuading Alvan Macauley and the conservative members of the board that the company should introduce high-performance models would not be easy. In the end it was decided to use regular carburetion with less cost and more reliability. Three more prototypes were built, which had Vincent and others soon lapping the track at speeds in excess of 125mph.

In July of 1928, a shortened Series Four chassis (Packards were built in series, not in model-year cycles) was procured on which a taper-tail racing-type body was built featuring a 117-inch wheelbase but sans lights, fenders, windshield, and bumpers. It was also fitted with the Speedster 385cid engine that was in its final stages of development. While it may have been more of styling exercise than test mule, it was certainly something that was used to impress dignitaries and even management. Charles Lindbergh test-drove it in 1928 and later spoke of his experience, as recounted in Kimes' *Packard* tome: "I drove the car several times around the track, at a little over 100mph, if my memory is correct ... I believe the average was 109mph, and that the car had averaged 128mph with its regular driver."

Concurrent with this new direction for Packard, other firms that competed directly with Packard were developing their own cars for affluent youth and young professionals. Several of these, such as Auburn, Kissel and Stutz, had already been producing competitive products for this market at their factories or through coachbuilding proxies. These manufacturers had determined the marketing power of this type of car, and no doubt this news along with the success of the Packard Speedster prototype made an impression on Macauley and Packard's corporate board

THE 626 SPEEDSTER EIGHT

Packard historians agree that while the Vincent prototype Speedster may have partially inspired the production Sixth Series 626 Speedster Eight that debuted on August 1, 1928, any stronger linkage may be debatable, due to the short time-line that separated them. Built upon a 126.5-inch wheelbase, it used components from the 640 bodies on its Standard Eight chassis. Just two body styles were available for this line of speedsters, a runabout and a phaeton, and were priced at $5,000 (roughly $2,000 more than an equally equipped Custom or Deluxe Eight version!). A sedan was also constructed and tested, but not produced for the public. For the runabout, its 640 body was sectioned 14 inches behind the front seat, eliminating the compartment for golf bags but keeping the rumble seat. This modification trimmed weight by 455 pounds to 3,830. The 385cid engine, along with a high-compression head, high-lift camshaft, and metric plugs, developed 130hp at 3,400rpm, a full 40hp more than the Standard Eight, and 25 more than the Custom Eight. The new Speedster had lighter bodywork and a narrower chassis than other Sixth Series models. With a high rear axle ratio (3.31) and a muffler cutout, these cars could be driven at well over 100 miles per hour!

Although they were more expensive than other Sixth Series cars, Packard sold out the production run of 70 units. Still, management was not satisfied with their looks, and thus did not advertize them. Instead, they okayed a better, swifter-looking successor to compete with the Auburn, Kissel, and other speedsters. For 1930, the improved model would be called the Seventh Series 734 Speedster Eight, which debuted at the New York Auto show in January 1930.

THE 734 SPEEDSTER EIGHT

The 734 Speedster Eight used the longer Standard Eight chassis to achieve a sleek profile line that the 626 lacked. The highly-modified Deluxe Eight 385cid engine was fitted with its own special cylinder block featuring 45-degree exhaust/intake ports. It went onto the 134.5-inch wheelbase chassis, and with a high-compression head, larger valve openings, finned exhaust manifold, exhaust cut-out and a unique dual-throat Detroit Lubricator Model 51 updraft carburetor, it developed 145hp at 3,400rpm.

The chassis of the 734 was reinforced for strength and rigidity. In a *Packard News Service* bulletin, it was stated that each car was "tested on the proving ground speedway so thoroughly that it is ready for maximum performance upon delivery. Packard, in talking of the new cars, gives the warning that caution must be exercised in using the Speedsters' maximum power only under the most favorable highway conditions ... special attention has been given to deceleration and stopping because of the great possibilities possessed by the cars in acceleration and speed." While the brakes of the Speedster series contained triple shoes as in the other models, the Speedster drums were finned for better cooling.

Four body types were initially available for the Speedster chassis, each coming from Packard's inhouse "Custom by Packard" body shop. The most popular, and a cost of $5,200, was a "perfectly streamlined" two-passenger runabout (boattail) with staggered seats — "the driver's seat being placed slightly forward of the passenger's seat, as in a racing car to insure the driver against any interference when traveling at high speed." (*Packard News Service*)

A phaeton, priced the same as the runabout, along with a victoria and a sedan, both priced at $6,000, were also included in the initial lineup. Both the phaeton and the close-coupled victoria limited passenger capacity to four, while the sedan could place five. Soon after, a 2/4- passenger runabout was offered, but with the added rumble seat its rear deck could not feature the tapered boattail line. Speedster bodies were lighter and were several inches lower and narrower than cars in the Standard, Custom, or Deluxe Eight lines. The cowl was lengthened six inches, and with it the windshield, steering column and seating were pushed back as well, all done to effect length and sleekness in the hood line.

In a fashion similar to the 626 Speedster line, 734 Speedster models were mysteriously void of any advertizing or print promotion, and a maximum of 118 factory-built units were made available and sold through the Custom Body Division. Why were the 734 Speedsters neither advertized nor promoted? Certainly the two runabouts and the phaeton were as sleek as their competitors. They could probably outrun the Cadillac V-16 that had been designed to upstage their Packard straight-eight engines; the Caddy had 40 more horses but was also a heavier vehicle. Packard Speedsters did cater to a youth market that had hitherto been neglected, however several other factors were in play at this time that might shed light on the lack of advertizing and marketing support.

Many auto firms, Packard included, provided stock bodies for general sale and farmed out custom bodywork among the array of coachbuilders who served the high-end market in major cities by providing chassis to these coachbuilders. In an effort to bring some of that income home and increase company profits, Packard created its own Custom Body Division in 1927 and hired Ray Dietrich, formerly of LeBaron-New York, to consult.

The Custom Body Division did not normally construct fully customized units; rather, they were production bodies that were accessorized with better trim and optional decorations, bodies to which a plaque was fit that read either Custom Made by Packard or Custom by Dietrich. This allowed up to $2,000 of markup per car to

accompany the prestige associated with the emblem, not to mention the accessories that the discriminating customer could have ordered.

While the Speedster line was made by the Custom Body Division, it did not provide dealers with much option-laden markup opportunities. Speedsters were, by definition, light nimble cars that were relatively free of adornment so that they could go fast. Although the Packard 626 and 734 Speedsters weren't light, they were significantly lighter than their associated models and certainly had few, if any, baubles to weigh them down ... or, for that matter, to add to net profits. Perhaps this is why they weren't advertized or promoted? Perhaps … but it remains to be a an unsolved mystery.

Market realities were also undermining the popularity of this model. The movement away from open cars to closed sedans and town cars accelerated in the 1920s. This was in part due to improved roads, which in turn allowed faster between-town speeds. Closed cars provided better comfort at higher speeds, and Packards were always about comfort. Speedsters were almost universally open cars, and certainly did not provide the comfort and soundproofing associated with a closed car.

Another trend was the market penetration of low-cost cars in America that occurred in the mid-1920s and on into the 1930s. As reported by C.A. Leslie Jr. in *Packard*, the number of cars costing well under $1,000 steadily grew from 1925 on:

1925	69.4%	1930	83.7%
1929	81.5%	1931	85.5%

Speedsters from most any company at that time were never inexpensive; Packards were no exception.,As the Great Depression waxed, the market for luxury autos withered. Speedsters were but a minor player in this high-priced group and would soon become a victim of the Threadbare Thirties era of stodgy, characterless automobiles. All of the above trends contributed to the relative obscurity and low production of this model, which, ironically, have made them so valuable and sought-after today!

Of the five different body styles offered for the 734 series of 1930, only the two-passenger runabout (boattail) featured the staggered seating. "The driver's seat being placed slightly forward of the passenger's seat, s in a racing car to insure the driver against any interference when traveling at high speed." — Packard News Service

THE MACAULEY SPEEDSTER

Ed Macauley, the son of President Alvan Macauley, initially worked at Packard as an aircraft diesel mechanic and diesel salesman. In the late 1920s he took up auto body design, and in 1932 he was put in charge of Packard's styling division. Soon after, Macauley hired Count Alexis de Sakhnoffsky as chief designer for the Division. Sakhanoffsky's European-influenced styling would soon supplant Dietrich's, and his designs resulted in more aerodynamic and flowing lines on successive Packard models.

Macauley's design exercise and personal car was built on a 1932 Packard Twin Six chassis and used a modified 734 Speedster body. Changes to the bodywork consisted mainly of removing the staggered seating arrangement, and shortening the cowl to accommodate the new and longer "false hood."

Sakhnoffsky also brought experience from Hayes Body, where his designs heavily influenced client products, including American Austin, Auburn, DeVaux (later Continental), Franklin, Marmon, Peerless, Reo, Roosevelt and Studebaker. Together with ideas from Ed Macauley, Sakhnoffsky created a prototype Twin Six Speedster in 1932 that gave birth to the third iteration of speedsters from Packard. These Eleventh Series cars of 1934, most notably the Model 1106 Twelve Speedster (utilizing a 734 boattail body), were directly descended from design experiments and evolution of the Macauley Twin Six Speedster prototype.

For instance, in 1933 Sakhnoffsky replaced the sweeping 734 fenders with semi-pontoon-style units, with the production fenders being almost exact copies of those found on the Mercedes-Benz Autobahnkurier. The pontoon fender derived from the aerodynamic movement that had blown in from Europe, and it would become a signature piece of the Speedster Twelve models.

As a result of his evolving prototype, Sakhnoffsky was credited with extending the engine hood shut line to the cockpit, thus eliminating the awkward hood-to-body segue flare evident in most cars of that period. Sakhnoffsky wrote, "By discarding the short hoods, we were free to lengthen and widen them and carry the flowing lines into the body." Extending the hood in effect lengthened the front of the car, a design element that denoted power. Ed Macauley, a lover of fast cars and an ardent promoter of the speedster model, used this prototype for his personal transport for several years.

THE ELEVENTH SERIES SPEEDSTERS

The twelve-cylinder Twin Six model of 1932 represented Packard's Senior luxury line of motorcars, and was available to both custom body and private coachbuilders for custom coachwork projects. The Twin Six engine underwent a minor redesign and name change to reflect that, becoming the Twelve models for 1933 onward.

Three styles of speedster-related models would be offered in the Packard Custom Cars sales brochure for 1934. Two designs, the Speedster Runabout (Model 1106) and the Sport Phaeton (Model 1108) were credited to LeBaron-Detroit. The third, the 1106 Sport Coupe, was attributed to Packard Custom Body, but according to Hugo Pfau in *The Classic Body Era*, it was actually made at LeBaron-Detroit alongside the others. This stands to reason, as all three were quite similar in appearance, thus indicating one shop's handcraft.

Their lines incorporated Sakhnoffsky's ideas from the Macauley Speedster, reflecting his European-style design. This style of sweeping


CLASSIC CAR
734
MINNESOTA

pontoon fenders was all the rage in Europe at the same time, analogs of this being the Bugatti Type 57 Atlantic and the Castagna-bodied Lancia Astura. The most extreme examples of this teardrop fender style came from Figoni et Falaschi, Carrossiers; all the designers blatantly stole ideas from each other, yet everyone benefited from the resulting variations and improvements.

The 1934 Speedster Twelves looked like they had just rolled off the boat from Europe. Sporting a Packard radiator grille and mascot, little else on it resembled its more stately Packard brethren. Its chassis contained a 445cid V-12 engine that produced 160hp at 3,400rpm and buckets of torque, important for accelerating these sport models. The Speedster Runabout and the Sport Coupe both rolled on a 135-inch wheelbase, while the larger Sport Phaeton used a 147-inch wheelbase chassis. These were large cars, but they were fast when compared to their contemporaries.

These Eleventh Series Speedsters broke new ground in design. According to Richard Carson: "The Runabout Speedster and the Sport Phaeton occupy a very special niche in the history of automotive styling because they were virtually the only attempt to bring radically streamlined contours to traditional open body types."

Unfortunately, only a handful were ever made, even though they earned, for the first time, front-page placement in the Custom Body advertising catalog. Certainly there was more of a market for these beautiful speedsters than just the four copies each that were made, but the clientele that purchased these types of vehicles were just as interested in exclusivity as they were in unique styling.

ART, CULTURE, AND THE PACKARD SPEEDSTERS

The influence of Packard from the 1920s and 1930s is fundamentally interwoven into the fabric of art, culture, and style of the times. As Carson wrote, "Packard's name and face appeared in Cole Porter songs, Fitzgerald stories, Hollywood movies, and Thurber cartoons, and this rapid canonization was heady stuff …." Scores of famous politicians, dignitaries, business leaders, athletes, and movie stars owned and drove Packards. The financially well-to-do class adored them!

Economic and political events that propelled the world into the 1930s spelled disaster for those who would not adapt and change in order to survive this storm front. The Great Depression, which began with the stock market crash of 1929, left an indelible mark on Packard, as seen in its plummeting sales. Beginning with total model-year sales of 55,062 units in 1929, this tumbled to a low of 4,800 by 1933.

The countertrend of the Threadbare Thirties that demanded a low-cost middle-class car with luxury appointments was addressed by Macauley, who directed the company to design a $1,000 production luxury car for this demographic. The Junior series 120 beginning in 1935 led the charge to the middle and saved the company from ruin with a total of 37,956 cars sold in 1935, and then 61,027 total units in 1936; 1937 was even better, at 87,243 with the help of the six-cylinder 115. The high-water mark for the brand was in 1940 with a total of 98,000 cars. Macauley's marketing agenda worked ... for the time being.

While Packard's prewar positioning was saved, its custom body division had been sacrificed. The Packard Speedsters and other custom-bodied models depended heavily on clients who purchased factory-offered luxury models or who shopped special bodies made by coachbuilders, and this industry languished and largely died in the mid-1930s from a diminished customer base. So, too, did the ideas that conceived these models die off. The custom-body trade and the culture that supported this largesse were all pushed aside by democratized humdrum stemming from a lackluster 1930s economy in recovery mode.

Although production speedsters disappeared from Packard after 1934, they remain to this day the high-water mark of a car company that produced close to a million cars before it went down. Packard speedsters

The 11th series Speedster was much more refined than the Speedster from 1930. Gone were the staggered racing-style seats, and a much more "enclosed" cabin with a top and wind wings that protected occupants better from the elements.

are classic icons that today command attention at concours and earn strong prices at auction. Their unique presence invokes the storied past of the early 20th century, when moneyed bluebloods and Hollywood entertainers cruised the boulevards in big shiny cars while the rest of the country wistfully admired the lifestyles of the rich and famous. The Packard speedsters from the coachbuilt era still stand tall in this crowd because of their unique styling and classy looks. Just ask the man who owns one!

Editor's Note: *This article is excerpted from a forthcoming book on classic speedsters by this author. You can read more about other classic speedsters on the author's web journal, which will also feature news about the book, both found at ClassicSpeedsters.com.*

Many thanks to the owners of our two feature cars: Donald R. Peterson (1930 Model 734), and Robert, Sandra and Gary Bahre (1934 Model 1106).