

Drivers Wanted Back

By Scott Farrell, aka "Stealth TDI" (updated in 2012)

Disclaimer: Think of this as an op-ed of sorts in which I express a view that contradicts popular opinions at VWVortex and other VW enthusiast discussion forums. I have a dry, warped sense of humor. I'm not nitpicking cars. Instead, I'm commenting against those who bash on others for not following current fashion trends. Take this for what it is, a warped (mature?) look at the VW scene, and enjoy a laugh. Short attention span? Shorter version [here](#)... 🇺🇸

Tuning vs. Styling Philosophies

Back in 1995 when I first entered the VW scene, 10 years after buying my first VW, the consensus for modifying a car was to make it handle, make it fast, and then make it look good. We were drivers. There really was a "function over form" mindset in those days. The "posers" of the day were making their cars look fast and then... yeah... that's it. To their credit, they weren't actually diminishing the performance of the car. They were simply "styling" rather than "tuning" since they weren't working on performance at all. The import owners were the ones doing things which actually degraded the car, made it look silly, or just made no sense at all. The VW community was happy to laugh at them while actually focusing on improvements. But something changed. The introduction of the 1.8T made it really easy to add power. It was so easy and inexpensive, in fact, that just about everyone was doing it. Nothing special there! That's not to say the 1.8T and 2.0T are anything short of great engines. But the easy power may have caused VW enthusiasts to get bored and succumb to the pressure of import styling. 😞



Styling fads and tuning philosophies come and go. Being the original owner of my '98 Jetta could've been an expensive journey had I changed it up every time a new trend came. I've focused almost exclusively on the functionality of the car while keeping the appearance mostly stock. The fashion trend has almost come full circle, currently with a small lean toward OEM. So my car is almost cool... ALMOST! 🙄

I'm not here to tell anyone that my tuning/styling philosophy is best, that anyone else's is wrong, or that there's only one right way to get the job done. Instead, my criticism is directed toward those who insist on telling others they're doing it wrong. Most can hardly post a photo of their car at VWVortex without the immediate response, "needs moar low" or some other tripe. Yes, my "uncool" friends, that's how they spell "more." 🤔 Some critics have spent a lot of time and money to achieve a certain look and think everyone else should, too. Is this because they were ridiculed until they joined the flock and "got it right?" Others like the look of certain cars and think everyone should take that path, even if they haven't done it themselves. Similar to political special interest groups, these VW fans are in the extreme minority yet command the bulk of the attention! Again, I have no complaint with people modifying their cars. I like a lot of what I see out there. However, watching people continually mock cars that don't meet a rather temporary standard gets old really fast, especially after years in the VW community. It's easy to be a harsh critic when cloaked behind the anonymity of a keyboard. Here are a few things which have bugged me over the years, things I cannot say in public forums without getting flamed, banned, edited, or topics closed for the sake of controlling the most offensive of critics. In no particular order:

"Needs Moar Low"

Besides the illiterate look of that statement, this is one styling trend which actually impairs the performance of the car. There is a LOT of opinions about the "best" suspension setup. But that's not what this is about. This is about people who lower their car to the point of it being barely functional and then expect everyone else do it should, too. Although most VW enthusiasts used to laugh at those who would hinder their car in such a manner 10+ years ago, pursuing the look is not a terrible crime. It's a dedicated subculture and some executions look really good! Still, it's not for everyone! So why spout-off online as if it is? What's even more baffling is when drivers of ground-scraping VWs get upset over "terrible roads" when they wreck their subframe, bust an oil pan, or rip an engine off its mount. Okay, being upset over significant damage is natural. But it's a risk associated with the game! It's nearly comical to read advice to sue the city or state for compensation. HELLO!?!? Who altered their car and put it at risk? Why should taxpayers cover the damage? Thumbs up to those who re-engineered their engine mounts to raise the engine out of harm's way. And high-fives to the ones who are smart enough to recognize that maybe their area is not a great place to drive a slammed car and actually chose to leave some room under it. Those who take responsibility for their decisions and use an ounce of prevention should be admired. Nevertheless, the narrowness of those who insist everyone should be "moar low" to be considered an "enthusiast" is puzzling.

FYI: I'm no spelling/grammar-nazi. I know that brains outrun keyboards, people make mistakes, and errors happen. But the craze of intentional misspelling discredits the writer in the eyes of most readers. So the term, "moar low" just makes the act of slamming a car look even more asinine. I've put "moar low" in quotes because I want it read with the most dimwitted voice the reader can muster. 🤪 Try it. It's fun!

Cheap Suspension

Good suspension enables the car to react to nearly every driver input including emergency maneuvers and panic stops. It's an expensive single mod, often costing at least \$1000 for parts alone. Unfortunately, many opt to install the cheapest parts they can find. Since "moar low" is cool and coilovers are the "approved" method of achieving it, those unwilling to buy quality parts often install used, cheap, or used-cheap suspension parts instead. Frugal shopping is okay. But it's quite amusing to read a rant about how poorly one's car rides on \$350 coilovers. Are cheap coilovers which won't last nearly as long as quality parts really worth the compromise in safety, comfort, and durability? Thankfully, no one is preaching that the only cool way to modify a car is with cheap parts. On second thought, perhaps cheap coilovers were never intended to actually upgrade the car. Instead, they're a quick, cheap, styling decision to seek swift approval from lemming leadership. "Adequate performance is not required." 🤪

Big Wheels

Even the automobile manufacturers are selling their cars with larger wheels. Guess what? They build their wheels for strength and put enough rubber beneath them to protect them! "*Crappy roads bent my wheels*" or "*a pothole caused a blowout*" are even more popular gripes than smashed oil pans. They're usually followed by the advice, "*Sue the city!*" More often than not, these incidents are caused when the owner did at least one of three things to the car: 1) installed larger wheels with ultra-low profile tires, 2) installed cheap wheels or tires, or 3) didn't maintain proper tire pressure. A simple rule for wheels: "Light, Strong, Cheap... Pick two!" A bent wheel either had too little tire, too little air, it was "cheap and light," or ALL OF THE



ABOVE. Some lightweight wheels even develop tiny cracks which slowly let air out of the tire, giving the appearance of a hazard-induced blowout when the tire actually failed due to under-inflation. New England has some of the worst roads I've ever driven on. I once struck a pothole with so much force that it sent a rear strut into the passenger compartment! However, there was no blowout or bent wheel. Make smart wheel/tire purchases or learn to live with the consequences!

"Stretching"

This has to be one of the dumbest fads to hit the scene! "Stretching" wouldn't be as offensive if the owners doing it drove within the capacities of their diminished cars. Then again, who enjoys getting stuck behind slow drivers who drive as though they are afraid of breaking something? Unfortunately, many advocates of stretching lower their car to well outside its design limits, buy short, narrow, cheap tires and stretch them onto wide wheels, and then proceed to drive it as if the car is still capable of sporty handling, rain or shine. Should the tire fail or lose traction and cause a crash in the wet, the driver follows up by posting a rant online about the "crappy" tires or "terrible" roads. The fault is with the nut behind the steering wheel! To those who drive their "stretched" show car in a responsible manner, EXCELLENT. It's not for everyone. But at least some understand their car is impaired for the sake of looks and then drive it conservatively.

Air vs. Static

This argument is hilarious! Enthusiasts have long-sought ways to get the desired look without sacrificing ride quality or causing costly damage to their cars. Eventually, a few innovative and resourceful pioneers installed air ride suspension systems. The market was small. So the vast majority of systems installed in VWs were custom. It was sincerely COOL! Air kits were drooled over from afar and flocked around at shows. Then a few companies made them available as kits for specific cars. The kits are expensive, but complete with everything needed to achieve "moar low" for shows and club meets while allowing a manageable, safe, or legal ride height while the car is in motion. Some kits are even automatic. What's not to love about that? Not surprisingly, there's a crowd who believes air ride suspension is for those looking to take the "easy way out" or for posers who want to look cool while parked without the "dedication" or "sacrifice" of driving a slammed VW. WHAT? Is this a joke? Air ride is the solution to the right stance at shows and allows a customized ride height for driving on smooth, rough, or truly awful roads. The Jetta above is a fine example of excellent air ride execution, worthy of high praise! To hate on air ride just because it's not "static" is silly. It must be penis envy or elitism in car-flavor. Sure, it's beyond most budgets and not a priority for the majority. Still, that doesn't make it any less of a functional problem-solver!



Put It All Together

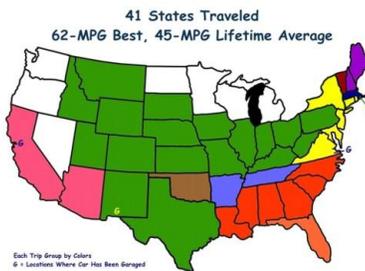
Consider this: What is the result of the combination of "moar low," cheap suspension, big wheels, and stretched ultra-low profile tires? Besides being a hazard to the public and its property, casual observation suggests it's also a car that can barely maintain the speed limit on surface streets, has to take corners like a wedding cake cart or risk shredding tires, and has to crawl over speed bumps and railroad crossings in order to avoid destroying the car. Think about how annoying that is to those who can drive normally? Being stuck behind one of those "proper" cars on a road with turns or bumps is seriously irritating, especially to those who can corner like a go-cart and fly over railroad crossings at the speed limit. Get that impaired road hazard out of the way and let people drive! "Proper" cars may look cool in photos. But they're NOT cool when holding up traffic. What are the odds the average driver thinks, "Wow, what a cool car and driver" when they are finally able to pass such an "amazing" car?

"Your Car Is Not a Build"

As if VW fans can't be petty enough, it's always a pleasure when someone buys a VW, is excited to share his or her* pride and joy, and then posts a topic to share a build. Apparently, the term "build" is precisely defined. "Buying a car and slapping on a set of coilovers and wheels is not a build," some tout. "A build is a restoration." Okay. I suppose I agree with that to a point. But why abuse the owner for it? Just because I didn't buy some dilapidated junker of a car or allow my new MK3 to become one over the past 14 years doesn't mean I didn't do a "build." I avoid the term at VWVortex because I don't care to read the drivel from those who want to dispute my accomplishments. What else does one call the effort which slowly transformed what was once my only car, a 90-hp compact family sedan, into a 150-hp, 300-ft/lb daily-driven autocrosser that's 20% faster than stock and discretely houses more electronics than any other VW of its era, all while achieving over 50-mpg and maintaining a relatively subdued appearance for the sake of thwarting thieves and cops? For the record, restorations which save old VWs from the junkyard are VERY COOL. However, it's unnecessary to treat those who didn't take that path as though they are not enthusiasts.

What's an "Enthusiast," Anyway?

I've been at this a long time. Much to the chagrin of some online, I know my car is an A3 (platform), a MARK 3 instead of an "emkay three," and I know what I want from it. In short, I want EVERYTHING from it! It's my daily commuter, tow vehicle, weekend autocrosser, and primary road trip car — currently with over 400,000 miles logged in a little green book. I like it to look good and hope to get it repainted someday. I'd also like to do another turbo upgrade and some head work. But my priority is to minimize downtime and DRIVE IT... A LOT! I have Bentley manuals for each of my VWs, special tools for odd jobs, and a garage full of spare parts to speed repairs, even for the jobs I



know I'll pay someone else to do. Some people want a show car. Cool. Some people want a commuter that's all function and no form. Very good! Some people want a play toy. I LOVE IT! And some want their VW to do it all. AWESOME! Is any one of those people better or more of an "enthusiast" than the others if they all love their VW and the community the same? Are the ones who turn their own wrenches any more devoted or any more of an "enthusiast" than those who sacrifice their hard-earned cash to pay someone else maintain their VW, cash which could've been used in a different manner like a new pair of shoes or the latest video game? I say "NO!" A "non-enthusiast" just might save your bacon someday, either by helping you on the side of the road, providing information or diagnostic advice, or perhaps giving you some cash to do the maintenance they lack the time, knowledge, tools, or space to do themselves. So let's work on paying each other a little mutual respect. In closing, I ask the following question: Did you remember to use a dimwitted voice in your head each time you read "moar low?" I knew you could! 🤖
By the way, [here's my "not-a-build" video](#).

*Female enthusiasts – I love you and wish my wife understood my passion for VWs the way you do! Keep up the VW love and don't give up! There are men out there who admire your devotion to VW culture and see you only as fellow enthusiasts. To the men who don't understand why there aren't more women among us – Perhaps more will join us if you treat them like fellow VW enthusiasts who just want to share the community instead of objects who might be interested in getting together to hold your torque wrench! 🤖