The Fireman's Seat
By Robert Bell, Division 15 Assistant Superintendent

Greetings!

Blackstone Models, a division of *Soundtraxx*, recently introduced the first truly "Ready-To-Run" HOn3 locomotive. In doing so, they have raised the proverbial bar for all model railroad manufactures. In the past, the closest to RTR in HO scale narrow gauge was some expensive, imported, brass model, maybe factory painted, but one still had to install couplers and in most cases "tweak" the mechanism for smooth operation. That has all changed now. *Blackstone Models*' RTR HOn3, Denver & Rio Grande K-27 is highly detailed model with exceptional running characteristics, and phenomenal sound. This is a 2-sided review of the model, one side is the Model of the locomotive and the other side is the *Tsunami* DCC sound decoder installed.

The brief history of the prototype starts with the delivery of 15 three foot-gauge, outside frame 2-8-2 Vauclain compound locomotives to the D&RG in 1903. Numbered 450-464, they were "state-of-the-art"' and the largest engines on the D&RG at the time. Without discussing in detail. The intricacies of a Vauclain compound cylinders. Suffice it to say this arrangement resulted in a large amount of maintenance, and in 1906 they rebuilt with "simple" cylinders with square valve chests and slide valves. Between 1917 and 1929, all four again had been rebuilt, this time with modern piston valves and Walsharts valve gear. In 1924 they were given the designation K (for Mikado) -27 (the approximate tractive effort in thousands of pounds). Two K-27's survive today, the #463 operates on the **Cumbres & Toltec** in Chiama, NM and the #464 (slide valves—not rebuilt with piston valves) operates on the **Huckleberry RR** in Flint, MI.

The same company that is building all of *Bachmann's Spectrum* series, built this model in China. The model's packaging within the box is even the same style. But there, the similarity ends. The model I ordered was painted-not lettered version, and it came with a 7-page "Quick Start Guide", an 11-page "Operations Manual"; a 7-page history booklet, an exploded parts diagram, a sheet of decals (custom made by San Juan Decals), a product registration card and a compact disc with all the manuals for the Tsunami sound decoder. WOW! The Operations Manual has lots of high quality pictures and descriptions of how to disassemble and lubricate the model, and how to install the snowplow, (available separately).

So, how does the model look? Fantastic! While I am a narrow gauger, I am not a big fan of the D&RG, (or any of the CO ng rr's for that matter), so I did not count the upper course of rivets on the tender. But, the finish is every bit what we have come to expect on model produced today. The number of separately applied details surpasses anything else out there, I think. This engine has nice backhead detail and a metal deck plate between the loco and tender. The tender trucks even have chain connecting them to a frame. The only minor (and I mean minor) detraction to the looks of the engine is the drawbar. This is actually a two-piece micro connector between the engine and the tender through which pass all of the wiring for the motor and lighting effects, (this will be available separately).

The *Tsunami* decoder is a "dual-mode" decoder, meaning it will run on straight DC or DCC. I do not own a DCC system, yet, so I first tried my *TAT-V* (True-Action-Throttle 5) that I built about 1990. How does it run on DC? Weeeeelll, the "destructions" state that it takes about 5-volts to start the sound and about 7-volts to get her to move. This is probably "pert-near" close. The potentiometers (the electronic thingy that the knob turns to control the speed) in my power pack are pretty good and I can control the amount and duration of any "pulse" output from the *TAT-V*, so the sound started first and then the locomotive moved. "Herky-jerky" at first, do to the factory having applied a tad too much oil to the motor, but I already knew about from the HOn3 "yahoo" e-mail list. A slight puff of smoke and she ran beautifully.

OK, then club member **Bill Seibert** loaned me his *NCE Power Pro DCC* system. Now the engine really shines. I set the *Power Pro* cab to 128-speed step mode and bumped it to speed step 1; the model started creeping down my 7-foot test track. How slow? How about between 4 1/2 and almost 6 minutes to traverse

76 inches! Yup, 5 minutes 49 seconds, that's 1.08 scale MPH. On another run of 52 inches the time was 4:02 or 1.067 scale MPH. Double WOW!!

Sound is the fourth dimension for model railroaders. The *Tsunami*'s 16 bit sound is incredible. Most sound decoders are 8 bit. 16 bit decoders can do twice what an 8 bit decoder can. Many of the sounds are linked to what the locomotive is doing, for instance: when the headlight is turned on, first the dynamo starts to spin up and the light is dim, as the dynamo reaches speed, the headlight increases to full brightness. When the engine is brought to a stop, you might hear "Fireman Fred", start shoveling coal, rummaging through the toolbox, or "oiling around". As the locomotive starts one can hear the "pphhtt" of the snifter, or when the direction is changed of the Johnson bar is heard. The sounds included:

Optically synchronized exhaust chuff	Bell
Whistle	Short Whistle
Air Pump	Dynamo (generator)
Water Stop	Brake Squeal
Brake Release	Slide Rod Clank
Snifter Valve	Cylinder Cocks
Johnson Bar/Power Reverser	Firebox Blower
Cylinder Blowdown	Boiler Pop Valves
Fireman Fred Toolbox	Coupler Clank

According to the paperwork/ed, one add automatic sounds such as a grade crossing whistle, bell, steam release and brake squeal. In DC mode, many sounds are automatic: three short toots for reverse, one for stop, and two medium toots for forward. And there are supported to be 8 different whistles to choose from. I also understand that is a "back EMF" feature that will deepen the exhaust chuff under load of heavy train or steep grade. I'll get to that someday.

The last thing I want to applaud *Blackstone* for the LED headlights, the price, and their customer support. They used golden-white or warm-white LEDs instead of the bluish-white or yellow LED's that certain other manufactures use, and these look MUCH better than those. The locomotives retail for $339 without sound and $419 with sound, and there are 11 versions to choose from in either format. From what I have read on the HOn3 list, *Blackstone* seems to have a real interest in their customer's happiness. Though the models were built in China, the decoders were installed in Durango, CO the home of *Soundtraxx/Blackstone*. So, unlike other sound equipped locomotives that use somebody else's decoder, *Blackstone* has an intimate knowledge of both the engine and electronics installed.

The model is really something, the only thing missing is the smell of real coal smoke, but I'm not sure the wife would appreciate that. I remember reading years ago about how HOn3 stuff never ran that well, at least not without a LOT of "tweaking", (of course they said the same thing about N-scale). This K-27 changes all that. *Blackstone Models* have really set the bar several notches higher for ALL manufactures. The various effects and sounds that the Tsunami sound decoder procedures are second to none. For those interested , *Blackstone Model*'s website (www.blackstonemodels.com) and *Soundtraxx's* website (www.soundtraxx.com).

In August Fireman's Seat, I'll try to talk you joining the NMRA (Hey, I can try can't I?). **Until then, remember: It's your club - get involved! LET'S PLAY TRAINS!**