

REVERSE RUNNING: Now You See It, Now You Don't!

Stepping outside the box with a contrary view



— by *Charlie Comstock*

Model railroaders are asking for more and more detail on their models. The goal seems to be making everything scale size! While wonderful for shooting ultra close-up photographs, is this always a good thing?

In HO, a scale-size ladder rung is less than .010" thick. So are the grabs and stirrups on a box car. In N scale these detail parts are positively microscopic. O scale fares a little better – a 3/4" ladder rung scales out to .015". Even in Fn3 (20.3:1) ladder rungs are only .037".

When all those tiny detail parts are styrene, a good rule of thumb is

"Don't even look at 'em closely or they'll break off!"

OK, that's an exaggeration, looking at a stirrup on an HO scale freight car isn't really going to cause it to break off (though I know folks who would swear otherwise . . .).

Detail and Operation Don't Mix

What happens when super detailed cars are put into regular service on a model railroad layout?

It depends:

- How much are the cars handled?
- What are the details made from?

If your idea of operation is to select a train waiting somewhere, set it orbiting the layout, go to the fridge for a soda or brewsky, then watch it chuffing through your scenery, you won't have many problems. You're not touching your rolling stock that much.

But if you have op sessions where cars get picked up and dropped off at industries, classified in yards, and hauled back and forth around the railroad, your cars are going to see some handling-related wear and tear.

If you have an active staging area, where a *mole* operator moves cars around with the good old 0-5-0 switch engine, those cars will get handled a LOT. Even when I'm restaging my

layout before the next op session, I end up handling the rolling stock more than I'd like.

The more cars are handled, the more likely they are to sport busted details. Missing stirrups, grabs, broken ladder rungs, and boxcar doors that no longer close perfectly become standard. It matters not how careful you are. Eventually stuff gets broken.

If details were made of titanium and chrome moly steel, they would stand up to use pretty well. But all too frequently they're made of styrene.

While great stuff for quickly building models, thin styrene parts just aren't strong enough to stand up to handling.

Engineering plastic, such as is used by Kadee on their great looking HO box and hopper cars, is much more robust, but can still get broken off.

Some modelers routinely replace all the details on their cars with brass wire or metal parts. This resists breakage, but .010" brass wire does bend rather easily.

What's a poor modeler to do, especially if they want to operate?

Either we live with broken details or we use rolling stock without the scale size components.


Weathering IS Pseudo Detail

If you can't deal with broken details, don't put your most highly detailed cars into revenue service. Instead use Athearn Blue Box, Accurail, or Branchline Yardmaster cars on operating layouts. Sure, they have less detail, but from 3 feet away you'll have a hard time seeing that the roof-walk isn't scale thickness with a see-through tread.

You can further increase your ability to NOT notice a lack of detail by weathering. Some heretics claim that a really nice weathering job on a less detailed model looks better than an unweathered, super-detailed model!

A Confession...

I still have a number of high-detail models on my layout, even during op sessions. I try to be careful around them and I discourage the crew from handling cars. Stuff does get broken, but I no longer have a coronary when it happens. It's just part of life. But the majority of my freight cars are Accurail, which are pretty robust.

I no longer feel that every car has to have perfect, scale-size detail all over, because with details, it's a matter of *now you see it, now you don't!* 

The case against more detailed cars

Reverse Running: Stepping outside the box with a contrary view

by Joe Fugate

These days it seems the ultimate in the hobby has become ever more detail on our models.

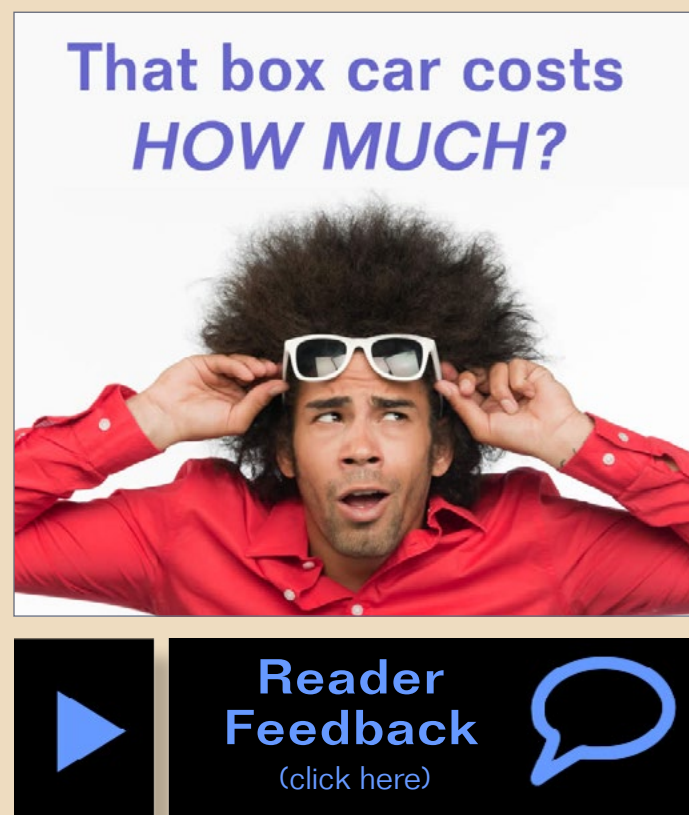
We've become so detail-hungry that manufacturers keep adding those details to satisfy us, to the point the typical ready-to-run HO freight car has gone from less than \$10 in the 1990s to now 20 years later pushing \$35-\$45.

I can remember when Kadee's more detailed HO freight cars priced in the \$25 range seemed very expensive. Now-a-days, a \$25 HO ready-to-run (RTR) freight car seems cheap!

Do we really need all this detail? If you're building an operating layout, especially a layout over 200 square feet in size, I would argue this level of detail *is overkill*.

When you're building a larger layout, you need lots of cars – often dozens of each kind of car, and hundreds of cars in total.

Let's say we're talking 200 cars in HO that you need, and let's say you can get them all as RTR models (that's debatable if you're a prototype modeler, but we'll go with it for now). If you can get all the cars you need for \$25, that's still a cool five grand! If you go fancy and pay closer to \$40 per car, now you're talking eight grand.



That three grand difference will buy you a very nice wireless DCC system with a bunch of fancy wireless throttles. In other words, that's a lot of money.

But beyond the money aspect, I would argue all that detail is largely a waste on a larger layout. When I'm doing prototype operations, I typically have a lot on my mind. If the car is reasonably weathered and has good basic details done in place, I frankly don't notice how much brake rigging or stand-off grab irons a car has.

Ask me later which cars in the train were \$40 uber-detailed and which cars were nicely weathered Blue Box specials with some detail upgrades like better stirrup steps and I could not tell you.

Yes, those super-detailed cars look great in up close model photos. But do they make the op session more fun? Not at all.

One big reason this detail is a waste is because when you're operating, the trains are moving. Have you ever tried to itemize car details on a car when it's in motion? It's tough to do. Or even if the train is standing still, the cars may be buried in yard track three or sitting in a passing siding while the hot freight rolls by in front on the main.

In short, we of the hobby media have done a disservice to the hobby by promoting all this super detailing. Sure it makes great photos, but as an industry we're killing doing the hobby-in-the-large by mere mortals – only the most wealthy need apply.

Isn't it time we decide enough is enough, and start promoting what's reasonable instead of pushing the level of detail ever higher and taking the price of your average HO freight car over \$50 in the next few years?

I mean, c'mon! It's time we modelers flock to the cheaper equipment and show the industry there's still a market for more affordable cars. Let's vote with our pocketbooks!