

# Danny Thompson Drives Like a Bat Out of Hell

*Danny Thompson is 66 years old and chasing the piston driven world land speed record. It's a drive he inherited from his father, Mickey, a 1960s racing pioneer.*



*Photo: Danny Thompson Archive/Holly Martin Photography*

[Matt McCue](#) | [Longreads](#) | January 2016 | 9 minutes (2,136 words)

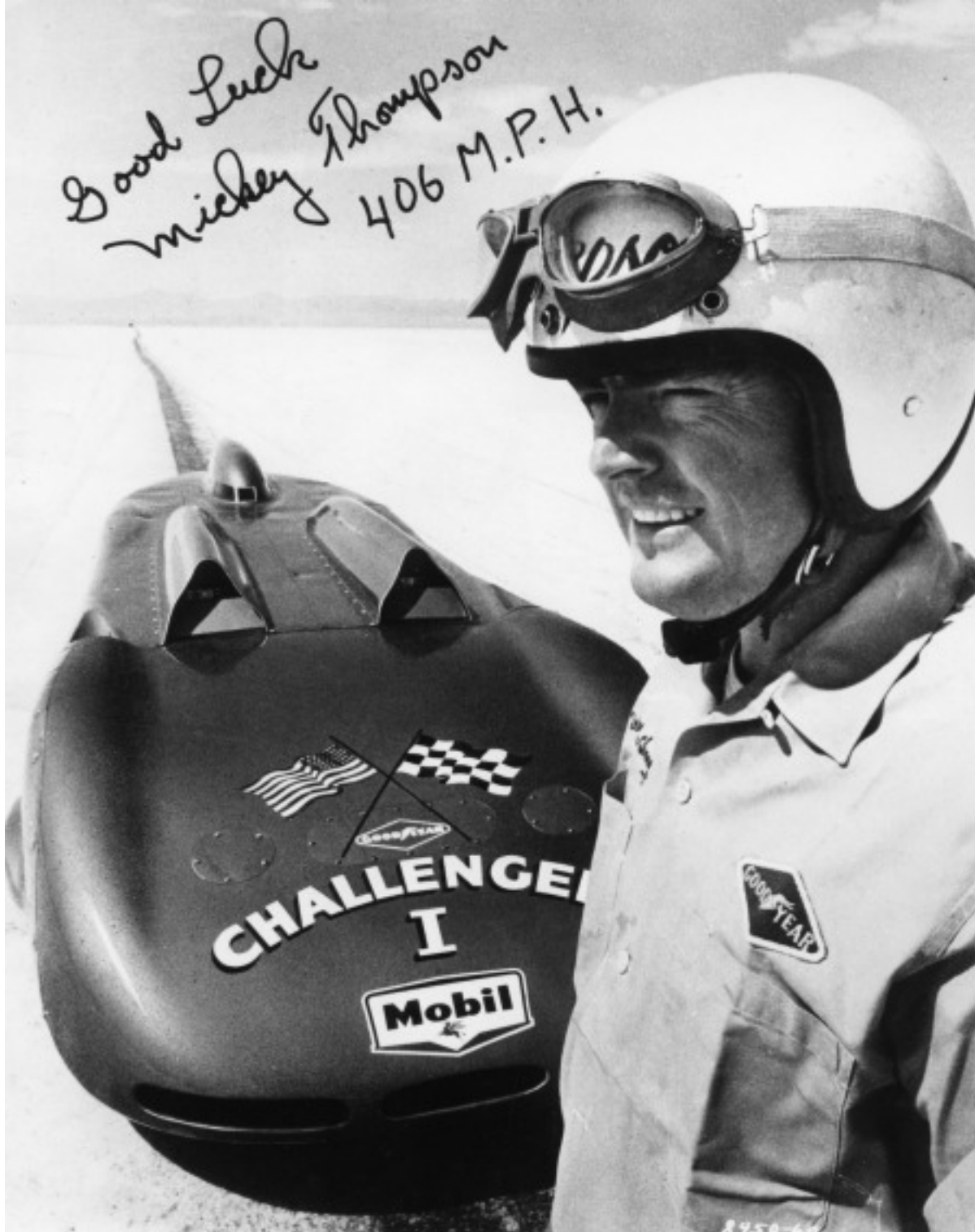
## The Crazy Quest

Almost every day, for the past five years, Danny Thompson has pretzeled his creaky, five-foot-seven frame into his Challenger II car's cockpit to eat lunch in a space so tight it could double as an isolation chamber. Thompson settles into a custom seat he built by pouring liquid foam into a trash bag and nesting in the plastic for two hours until the foam molded perfectly to his body. The 32-foot-long, cigar-shaped vehicle—the missing link between car and space ship—rests on blocks in the middle of a cavernous warehouse building three miles from the Huntington Beach surf. It often is stripped of its wheels. That hardly matters to Thompson. He sits in the Challenger II to become one with the car, he says.

A Southern California native, Thompson has a sun-bleached face, rusty-blond surfer hair and likes to describe things as “bitchin.” His hands are stained by tar-black oil and electric-blue paint, or whatever he’s tinkering with that day. Despite scrubbing his paws raw with a Scotch-Brite brush, he can’t completely remove the layers of grease and grime that have built up from 50 years as a gearhead.

Thompson’s rented garage-cum-auto workshop has become a clubhouse for a motley crew of car junkies who go by names like Lou Dog and Baby Ruth and stop by after work to provide their mechanical services, listen to classic rock and drink beer. Everyone’s focus is the dry-land torpedo. Thompson has poured his \$2 million life savings into resurrecting the 47-year-old Challenger II that used to belong to his dad Mickey, a racing pioneer in the 1960’s. Danny’s sole motivation is to drive faster than anyone has ever motored a piston-engine car—439 mph. (Piston-engine cars are what most Americans drive.) He will go after the record beginning in August, so his crew has added every whizbang mechanism that can help make the difference: a pair of 2,000 horsepower engines, four tires coated in a thumbnail-thin layer of rubber and two tanks for the super-charged nitromethane fuel that gets 0.1 mile/gallon. The car body is wrapped in an electric blue, aluminum skin. “All of my dad’s cars were blue,” says Thompson.

## **Inheriting A Love of Cars from Dad**



*Photo: Danny Thompson Archive/Holly Martin Photography*

Danny's love of cars stems from Mickey. The elder Thompson set nearly 500 different speed records; invented the red, yellow, green "Christmas tree" starting lights; and held the first patent on the wide oval tire. In 1960, Mickey became the first American to break 400 mph when he hit 406.60 at the Bonneville Salt Flats—a mecca for speeds racers that stretches across a desolate, dried lakebed in western Utah. But since drivers must back up their landspeed mark by running twice and averaging the two speeds, Mickey's 406.60 was never ratified—the Challenger I broke down on the second run.

"It motivated him to want to do it again," says Danny.

Danny aspired to race like his dad, but Mickey forbid it. In those days, racecars didn't have roll cages, drivers wore leather helmets and some cars didn't even have seat belts. At the 1964 Indianapolis 500, Dave MacDonald ran a radically designed car by Mickey that went

up in flames after a crash. And during the 1953 Mexican Road Race, Mickey himself swerved to avoid a person in the course path and plowed into five bystanders, killing them all.

As a teenager, Danny secretly began racing motorcycles, winning, he claims, his first 18 contests. "It gave me a lot of hope that I could make a living out of racing," says Danny. Mickey got wind of Danny's exploits and confronted his son. The conversation ended with Danny challenging his father to a backyard fight at their Los Angeles home. Both agreed that the winner would call the shots for the family. Fighting solved problems for the Thompson men. Danny got beat up and thrown in the rose bushes at his elementary school. He cried to his dad that he needed help, so Mickey taught his 10-year-old to box. "After that, I didn't get my ass kicked anymore," says Danny.

That night in the backyard, the two put gloves on and Danny quickly popped Mickey in the nose. "Then I looked in his eyes, and knew I was in trouble," says Danny. "My dad was an animal. He needed a string of lawyers behind him because he liked to fight." Danny received a broken nose, a broken rib and two blacked eyes. "I could hardly see through my tears, and I would keep getting up," he says. Mickey, the clear winner, ultimately ended the bout because Danny refused to quit. "I was too stubborn to know better," says Danny. He points at his crooked nose. "It's still sideways from that fight."

Danny left home at 18 and hitchhiked through California mountain towns. When he ran out of money, he returned to work for Mickey, building trucks for his racing team. Danny got a chance to race a friend's car one weekend, so he asked Mickey for the day off—his first, Danny says, in six months. Mickey said no. "I said fuck it, and I grabbed my toolbox and walked out the door," remembers Danny. The only way to race, he realized, was to get away from his dad. He began piloting Super Vee's, sprint cars and off-roaders and patched together an amateur career. "Danny can drive anything," says his friend and former racer, Mike Cook. "We can put him in a tractor, and he'll cast down through there." Thompson, though, was never the best at any of them. "That's one reason I'm so intent on the land speed record," he says. Danny's dream of racing the Indy 500 in the early 1980's was "redirected" by his father, who secretly encouraged teams not to hire Danny. "My dad wanting to protect me from getting killed overrode everything else," says Danny. "I understood it, but I never accepted it."

## **The Tragedy That Changed Everything**

Mickey had a change of heart in late 1987. He wanted to take another run at the landspeed record, except this time he asked Danny, then 38, to drive his Challenger II. "It

made the hair stand up on my arms," says Danny, who never learned the reason for his dad's about-face. Father and son were to spend the next year working on the car together. However, in March 1988, Mickey, then 59, and his second wife Trudy were leaving their house one morning when witnesses saw two gunmen shoot Mickey and Trudy point blank and ride away. It was deemed a murder for hire. According to *Car and Driver's* account, Mickey and Michael Goodwin had promoted stadium supercross events together until the relationship soured and Mickey won a \$500,000 judgment against Goodwin. The details of the murder remain fuzzy to this day. Despite no direct evidence connecting Goodwin to the deaths, he was convicted of the double murder in 2007. Earlier this year, a California appellate court upheld the decision.



*Mickey and Danny Thompson. Photo: Danny Thompson Archive/Holly Martin Photography*

Danny describes the ensuing years as hollow. At times, he found himself calling his dad with a car question, only to remember that his dad would never pick up. An unmotivated Thompson shelved racing. He and his wife Valerie moved to Colorado to raise their son Travis far away from Southern California. Danny built Travis a dirt bike track around their backyard, but Travis never took to racing. "It does not bother Danny that Travis doesn't want to race cars," says Valerie. "Travis wants to be a lawyer—and that's what Danny's father wanted Danny to be." Over in Telluride, Danny skied bumps "the size of Volkswagens" and crafted copper countertops for the town's mansions. "I knew how to make race car parts, and I converted my welding, machining and cutting skills over," he says. To keep a toe in the car world, he traveled to 32 cities and personally conducted head-on crash tests on water-filled highway barriers invented by his father. "They called

me a crash test dummy," says Thompson.

## The Late-In-Life Return To Racing

In 2009, Brent Hajek, an Oklahoma farmer and car enthusiast, approached Danny about going after the Ford Mustang landspeed record. Danny had driven for Ford and knew the car well. He temporarily moved to the Oklahoma plains, lived in a trailer and fixed up Hajek's ponies so they would tear past their 135 mph factory settings. At Bonneville, Thompson set a class record of 255 mph in 2009. It got him thinking that, in the right vehicle, he could join the 400 mph club.

On the 50th anniversary of Mickey's 406 in 2010, Thompson retrieved his dad's Challenger II from storage to finish what Mickey had started. While vehicle aerodynamics had changed over the years, the principle was still the same: pierce the air with the smallest downforce. Overhauling the car took Thompson four years. Thompson and crew beefed up the original 1,800 horsepower to 4,000. They switched the car from an automatic transmission to a clutch system to handle the increased power. And to run a car packing that kind of muscle, they replaced the two 11-gallon fuel tanks with two 28-gallon tanks because the car consumes 50 gallons of fuel every run. "Mickey always did everything by the seat of his pants," says Danny's mom Judy Creach. "Danny wants everything to be perfect from the get go."

## Taking Care of Unfinished Business



*Photo: Danny Thompson Archive/Holly Martin Photography*

Unlike a NASCAR race that moves along at 200 mph for hundreds of miles, landspeed records focus on a single person racing the radar gun over a five-mile sprint. Participants

use the first two miles to warm up, then the miles between two and three, three and four, and four and five are recorded with the best speed used for the result. Located 111 miles west of Salt Lake City, the Bonneville Salt Flats is an ideal venue. It has a hard, flat surface and miles of uninhabited space—save for the hundreds of thrill seekers who make the pilgrimage every August and September with souped-up rides to compete in a wide variety of speed tests. These gearheads spend all year working on their cars for about 80 seconds of racing, and the sole prize for their efforts is bragging rights.

During a 390 mph run at Bonneville in 2014, Thompson's three fire extinguishers accidentally exploded inside the Challenger II and covered the scuba goggle-sized windshield in foam. Thompson blindly steered the vehicle to a stop way off course. All he can remember is popping the cockpit's canopy and thinking, *Holy shit, I got out*. When Thompson scorched 419 mph the next day, he traveled the equivalent of almost two and a half football fields per second. "I didn't have enough confidence in my own ability to know that I could do it," he says of breaking 400. "I should of, because this is all I have done my whole life." The ultimate goal is to best the 439 mph record set by George Poteet, a businessman from Mississippi with a triple-digit car collection.

This past year the August and September races were cancelled due to wet salt conditions, so Thompson has one shot to triumph next summer at the Bonneville Shootout. The trip to Bonneville costs him \$30,000 to transport the hot rod and house his 24-person volunteer crew. To fund his venture, Thompson has spent essentially his entire life savings. He's sold six vintage racecars and his beloved 1913 Indian motorcycle to collectors. Thompson is retired, but Valerie has told him that he needs to find a real job when this is all over to help the family refill its coffers. "I'm not sure I'm really employable," shrugs Thompson.

He constantly dials for sponsorship dollars. It's a hard sell. Landspeed racing isn't on TV and has no sizable fan base. After striking out with the obvious industry players like Ford, Valvoline and Red Bull, he's getting creative. Thompson recently called Depends, who asked him to explain the connection. "I am trying to go 450 mph and, if I do and the thing scares the shit out of me, I want one of your diapers on," he said. Thompson has been to TROJAN and emphasized how the car resembles the male anatomy. "I said we would paint a prophylactic on the front end of the car with the words 'Drive Safely,'" explains Thompson. No luck. "Everybody I talk to says this is one of the most bitchinest projects they've seen," says Thompson. "Why don't they jump onboard?"

Thompson insists that this pursuit is about tying up Mickey's unfinished record business, though he'll admit how great it felt to top Mickey's 406. ("Hot damn he beat the old man!")

someone yelled that day.) At one time, beating dad would have been enough for Thompson. Now at age 66 he can finally race for his own legacy.

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*[Matt McCue](#) is a writer based in New York and a senior writer at [99U](#).*

*Editor: [Mike Dang](#); Fact-checker: [Matt Giles](#)*