

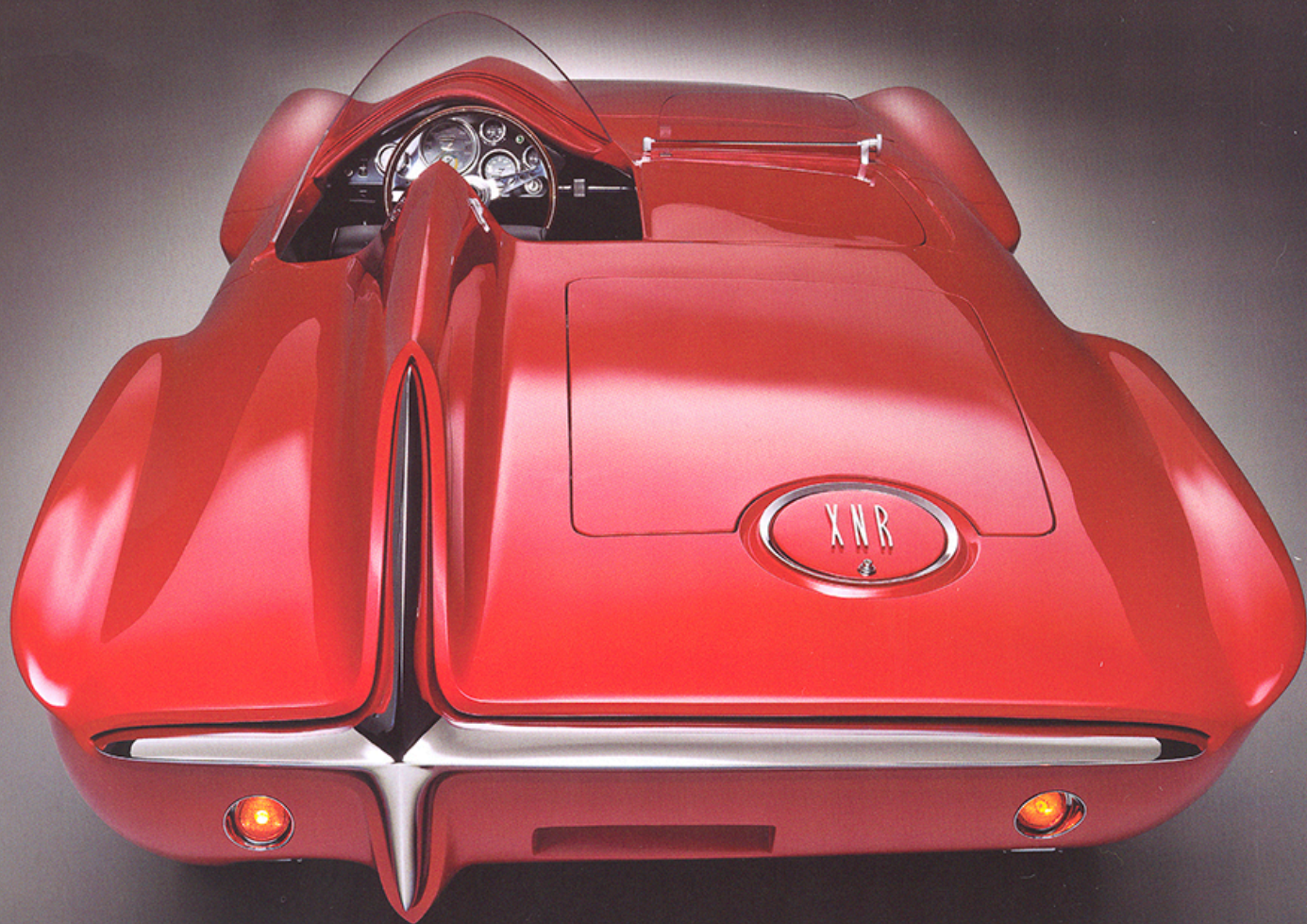
COLLECTION™

Published by Robb Report

April 2014

MARVELS OF DESIGN

REDISCOVERING AMERICA'S CARS OF THE FUTURE



HORSE POWER An Insider's Guide to Thoroughbred Ownership

A Rare Ferrari Racecar Crosses the Block ♦ Marilyn Monroe Memorabilia
Chasing Land Speed Records at Bonneville



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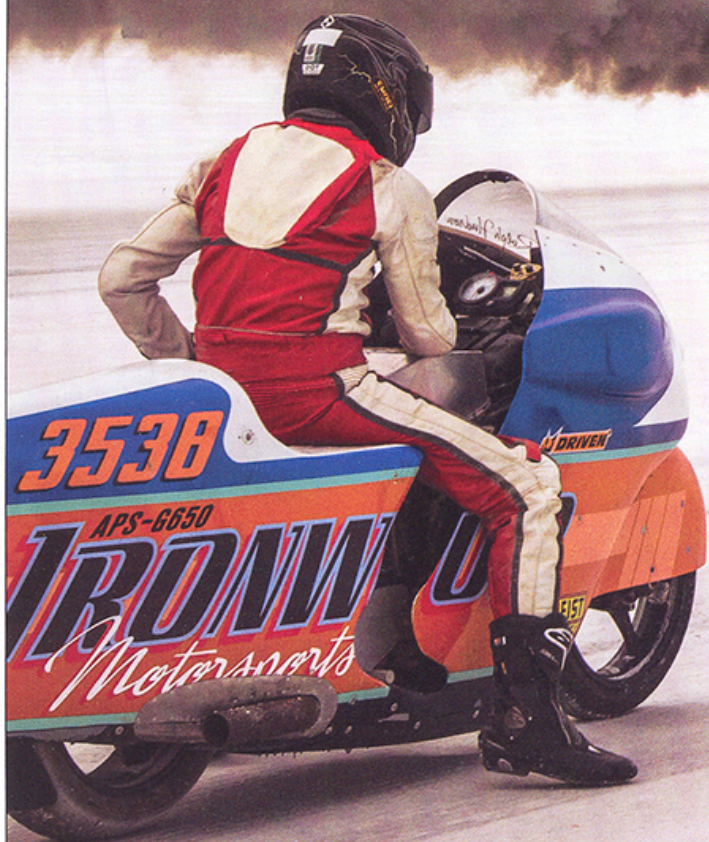
PURSUITS

Unforgettable Experiences

BY SHAUN TOLSON

Catching Salt Fever

You don't have to be a professional driver to set a land speed record at Bonneville.



LATER THIS YEAR, during the second week of August, Danny Thompson, seated in the cramped cockpit of his restored Challenger II streamliner, will look out through the windshield to the expansive stretches of the Bonneville Salt Flats ahead of him. Most likely, he will think of his late father, Mickey, and how close the elder Thompson came to setting a land speed record in his first streamliner more than 50 years ago.

Mickey Thompson eclipsed the record of 394.19 mph set by British racer John Cobb when he recorded a 406.6 mph run during his first of two passes down the salt flats in 1960. However, Bonneville records require two completed runs, where the average of

Every August, Speed Week at the Bonneville Salt Flats attracts a variety of competitors and vehicles, from diesel-fueled streamliners to aerodynamic motorcycles.



the two becomes a driver's official speed. Thompson's Challenger I suffered a broken axle during its second pass over the salt, which prevented him from breaking the record.

Eight years later, Thompson returned to Bonneville with the Challenger II, an aerodynamic vehicle that racing magazines touted as a "technological tour-de-force." By this time, turbine-powered cars had swept in and stolen some of the spotlight, setting record speeds of more than 600 mph, but Thompson was a purist and wanted to own and drive the fastest

piston-and-wheel-driven car in the world. Heavy rains forced the organizers to cancel the weeklong event in 1968, and the following year, Thompson's corporate sponsors stepped back from racing.

The project was shelved for the next two decades, but in late 1987 Thompson approached his son, a successful motorsports racer, and told him that he wanted to go after the land speed record again. Danny was to drive and his father would secure the necessary sponsors. Less than three months later, however, Mickey Thompson was murdered. Grieving and unable to focus on motorsports, Danny put the Challenger II in storage.

In 2002, Danny returned to Bonneville for the first time since the 1960s, and it motivated him to pick up where his father had left off. "I got that Bonneville taste again and it instantly hooked me," he says. "Once you go, you can't stay away."

Thompson went on to set numerous land speed records in a variety of cars, and some of those records still stand. He continued to push the envelope in various vehicles through the end of the last decade, but

Despite the fact that land speed racing is an amateur endeavor, the Bonneville races are professionally organized with starters, safety panels, and other officials.



on the 50th anniversary of his father's 406.6 mph run in the Challenger I, his focus shifted. Thompson recalled the Challenger II sitting idle in storage. He reflected on what the vehicle represented in regard to his father's legacy, and he remembered Mickey's desire to set a record with the car. So Thompson decided that he would resurrect the old streamliner, rebuild the engines and other mechanical components, and chase a top speed of 450 mph.

To date, financing the project has proven to be Thompson's greatest hurdle. The Challenger II is equipped with two 2,000 hp engines, which cost

about \$300,000 apiece. He's still seeking corporate (or private) sponsors, but the venture is a harder sell today than it was for his father during the early 1960s. Nevertheless, Thompson, who's now 64, believes this will be the year that he finishes what his father began. "Bonneville was what put my dad on the map, so doing it with his car, it has a special meaning," he says. "I could've built a new car and it would've been much easier, but doing it with his car is what we think is right."

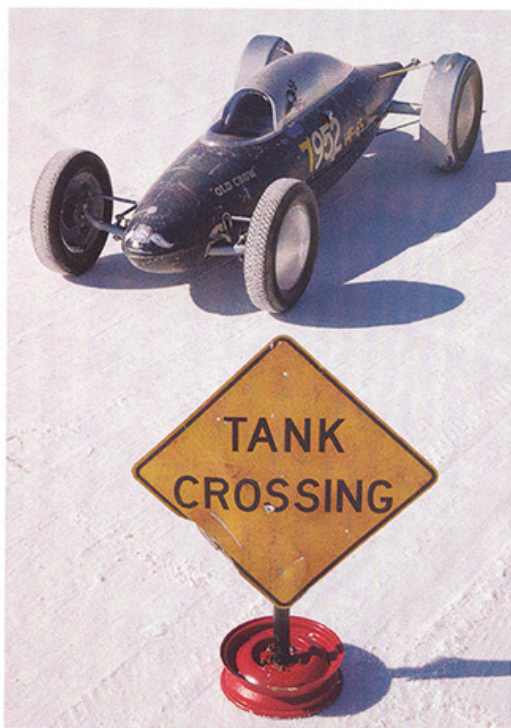
To the casual observer it may seem as though the Challenger II and its brethren streamliners represent the epitome of land speed racing. In reality, those



Mickey Thompson, the first man to surpass 400 mph in a piston-driven car, made his debut run at Bonneville in the Challenger I in 1960 (above) and returned to challenge a speed record in his updated streamliner, the Challenger II, in 1968 (top).

aerodynamic masterpieces are a small segment of the vehicles that make the pilgrimage to northwestern Utah each summer. The community of participants is tight-knit and welcoming, and within Bonneville Nationals Inc.—the governing body of land speed racing at Bonneville’s salt flats—there are hundreds of classes and records to chase. In fact, those who want to get involved don’t even need a car. All they have to do is show up.

MARTIN MENNE IS no stranger to acceleration or adrenaline. The 50-year-old real estate professional (and recreational pilot) spends his free time either inside the cockpit of a Beechcraft King Air C90B or racing his 2012 BMW M3. Two years ago, during a closed-road charity fund-raising event in Idaho, Menne registered a top speed of 175 mph in that M3. For years, the San Jose resident toyed with the idea of heading to Bonneville during the annual Speed Week in August. When Menne finally made the trip about five years ago, he was hooked almost immediately. “Land speed racing is the most underexposed,” he says of the various types of motorsports. “You flip through the TV channels, but you never see land speed racing and



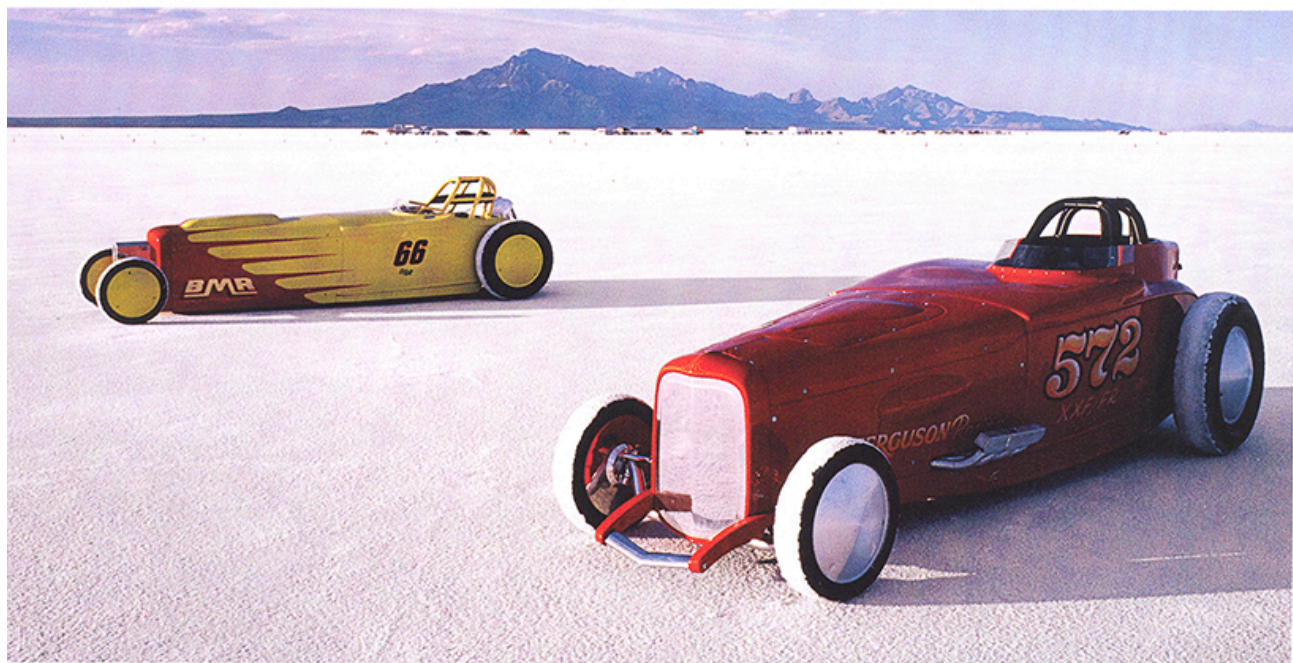
Martin Menne (above) got his feet wet land speed racing in a Chevy Sprint, but it wasn't long before he graduated to more serious automobiles. In addition to attracting aspiring racers, Bonneville also attracts some of the original roadsters and tank-style automobiles (top) that were built for land speed racing during the mid-20th century.

TOP: PETER VINCIGLI; BOTTOM: HOLLY MARTIN

people have very little understanding of what it's all about. If people understood what goes on out there, they'd be so drawn to it."

Menne's first trip to Bonneville was strictly as a spectator and he reprised that role the following year. However, after two years as a bystander, Menne was itching to get behind the wheel, and he learned that there are plenty of seasoned veterans who are eager to welcome novices into the fold. "Most of the people have been there themselves and they want to promote the sport," he says. "So if you're intrigued by it and want to participate in it, and if you come in and you're a good person, there are opportunities [for you] to say, 'I'd love to drive in a car. I'll kick in some money to help cover the costs. What do you think?' It's very welcoming that way."

As a rookie, Menne made his way to El Mirage, a dry lake about 50 miles northeast of Los Angeles, which has hosted land speed racing events for more than half a century. There he connected with Monte Warnock, a longtime land speed racer whom Menne had first met at Bonneville. Warnock often takes newcomers through the paces of land speed racing in a Chevy Sprint named the Salted Peanut. Menne spent his first season driving that car at El Mirage—which many salt flats racers use as a test track for their racecars and as a venue to have their vehicles inspected—and at Bonneville. He says it's an ideal car for newcomers learning proper land speed



The salt flats attract Shelby Cobras (top), vintage Norton motorcycles (middle), and various custom-built roadsters, all of which vie for land speed records.

TOP AND MIDDLE: HOLLY MARTIN; BOTTOM: PETER VINCENT



“You’re climbing in like you’re ready to blast off to the moon . . . you’re strapped in, your motor is running, and you have starters giving you a green light to go . . . it’s a fun rush when you’re doing it.” —MARTIN MENNE

racing protocols and procedures and it introduces them to the thrill of land speed racing without complicated machinery. “Starting in a lesser car, you can let ‘er rip and go as fast as you can. With the Peanut, you just go pedal-to-the-metal as fast as you can go; you never lay off until the end.”

Menne never eclipsed 112 mph in the Peanut during his first season, but he says that high speeds aren’t necessary for high excitement. “With the rules for entry, you [have to] wear a full-blown fire suit, the car is fully

roll-caged, there are fire suppression systems and netting on the windows,” he says. “Even though you’re going 110 mph, you’re climbing in like you’re ready to blast off to the moon, which makes it kind of fun. You’re strapped in, your motor is running, and you have starters giving you a green light to go . . . it’s a fun rush when you’re doing it. It’s just as much of a rush no matter what the car is.”

Thompson agrees. “Even if you’re in a 100 mph car, if you’re pushing it over the limits it’s equally exciting,”



While some multimillion-dollar, corporate-sponsored streamliners compete during Speed Week each August, most vehicles, like the two above, are less intimidating. Many are even built in home garages.

TOP: HOLLY MARTIN; BOTTOM: PETER VINCENT

he says. “[There are] guys who come back every year hoping for one more mile per hour. They work on it [their idea for improving a car’s performance] all year. It might be so backwards and upside down or stupid or brilliant, but it’s their idea and they can take it up there and see if it works.”

FOR THOSE WHO yearn for a chance to challenge a land speed record on the salt flats, their journey starts with an annual membership with Bonneville Nationals Inc. (BNI). As members, they’ll receive a rules and records book, which is an important resource for anyone building a car from scratch. According to JoAnn Carlson, the media liaison for the Southern California Timing Association (SCTA)—a volunteer organization consisting of 12 individual clubs dedicated to land speed racing—many participants *do* choose to build a vehicle from the ground up. “You see some of those big streamliners that have wealthy owners and big sponsors, but this is almost all mom-and-pop stuff,” she says. “We all build our vehicles in our garages at home.”

Before a participant can go after a speed record, of which there are hundreds—everything from a mid-30s mph record on a 50 cc motorcycle to more than 400 mph in a streamliner—they must first obtain the necessary licenses. Six licenses exist, which are capped at certain speeds. A “D” license, for example, requires drivers to successfully execute runs (including parachute deployment and other protocols) at speeds between 125 and 149 mph; while “AA” licenses allow drivers to achieve speeds between 250 and 299 mph. Unlimited licenses are reserved for drivers who seek speeds in excess of 300 mph. According to Carlson, some newcomers have gone through the entire licensing gamut in four or five days and a few have even set land speed records in the process.

Carlson says the sport’s popularity is growing. Last year, she processed about 2,000 BNI memberships, which she says is close to a 100 percent increase over the numbers of participants when she first joined the SCTA 11 years ago. Carlson believes much of that can be attributed to the 2005 film *The World’s Fastest Indian*, which chronicled the journey of Burt Munro, a New Zealander who attempted to break a land speed record on a vintage Indian motorcycle in 1967.



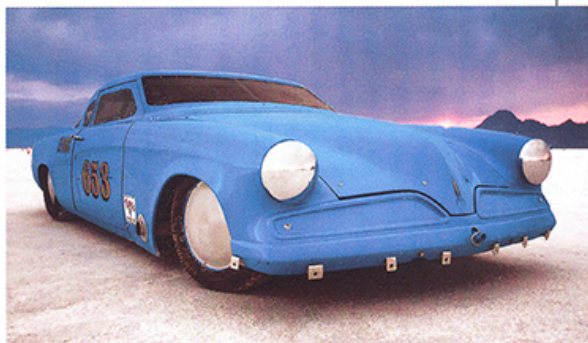
Hundreds of land speed records exist and many don't require participants to streamline their vehicles.

HOLLY MARTIN

Doug Macmillan, a fellow Kiwi, can relate to Munro's story, but his interest in land speed racing began long before filming of the movie began. In 1997, while still living in New Zealand, Macmillan decided to set a land speed record, simply because he believed that he could. Using his company car, a 1991 Honda CRX that he modified slightly with a fiberglass train for the undercarriage (to improve aerodynamics), Macmillan worked with the local city council to close a seven-mile-long public road for the day. From there, Macmillan successfully piloted his CRX to 149 mph to set a land speed record in a stock engine. Even more impressive, he did it on an uneven road lined with telephone poles, hedges, and fences.

Macmillan has since moved to Southern California and taken up land speed racing at El Mirage and at Bonneville. "The good thing about racing on the salt flats, there's nothing to hit," he says. "Most of the spins are flat spins and you have hundreds of miles of salt flats and a parachute that stops you pretty quick."

Here in the States, Macmillan runs Hondata, a Los Angeles-based company that specializes in tuning hardware and software for Honda and Acura vehicles. Macmillan cofounded the company with his wife, Miriam, and they both participate in land speed racing. Miriam currently holds a land speed record of 238 mph (with an overall top speed of 244 mph), which she achieved last year in a turbocharged 1991 Honda CRX equipped



with only a 1.5-liter engine (Doug served as her crew chief). To put that in perspective, in 2006, the Honda Racing F1 team brought a Formula 1 car to the salt flats and recorded an average speed of almost 247 mph. "Here we are a few years later in a production car—basically a shopping basket on wheels—with a budget of several million dollars less than the team, and we're knocking on the door of their speed record," Macmillan says. "We'd like to have the fastest Honda period; we're gunning for 250 mph next year."

"I like to think that I applied a bit of Kiwi ingenuity to what we've done," he continues. "You don't go faster than your competition doing the same things that they're doing. You have to snap on your thinking cap and do something different." □



Custom hot rods (top) will make the trek to Bonneville each year, as will modified modern-day production cars, like a 1991 Honda CRX (above), owned by Doug and Miriam Macmillan. The car currently holds a land speed record of 238 mph.

TOP: HOLLY MARTIN; BOTTOM: DAN KAPLAN