

Take 5 With **DANNY THOMPSON**

You can't call yourself a hot rodder if you don't know who Mickey Thompson was, what he accomplished in his life, and what he meant to the racing and automotive world in general—if you aren't aware of specifics, Google him. Mickey was everywhere in racing—from the international glory of Indianapolis, to the relative obscurity of Bonneville and Baja. One of his only unfinished projects was the Challenger II Streamliner, also known as the Autolite Special since it was financed by Ford Motor Company. It was a land-speed race car with twin Ford SOHC engines (one of which was supercharged) and four-wheel drive.

The Challenger II was a high-tech follow up to Challenger I, which ran 406 mph in 1960 with four Pontiac engines (you can see that car at the Wally Parks NHRA Museum in Pomona, California). Challenger I broke on the return run and the salt was in too bad of a shape the next year to get the record, so Mickey tucked the car away. But in 1965, when the Summers Brothers went 409 mph for the record, it lit a fire in Mickey to go after them and he designed a new car—Challenger II.

The car made it to the salt in 1968 and made some promising test passes, but then the rains came and flooded the lakebed. Mickey planned to go back the next year, but that's when the automakers (including his main backer, Ford) pulled out of racing, leaving him with no financing to continue. So he put the car in a trailer, where it basically sat until 1988 when he got the bug again and got with his

son Danny (an accomplished racer in his own right and president of the Mickey Thompson Entertainment Group) to make another run at the record.

In your Google search on Mickey, you'll learn that he and his wife Trudy were murdered in their driveway that same year. That obviously took the thrill out of it for Danny, and he closed the trailer back up and essentially forgot about the car. But in 2010, on the 50th anniversary of Challenger I's 406-mph pass, Danny pulled the car out of the trailer and has had a narrowly focused, single-minded obsession to get the car back to the salt, working on it nonstop in a small Huntington Beach, California, shop. He and a skeleton crew are modifying the car to today's safety standards and changing some things in an attempt to have the world's fastest, piston-powered, wheel-driven car. As his website (ThompsonLSR.com) points out, it probably would have been easier to start over from scratch, but that wasn't the point behind this project. We sat down with Danny to find out what that point is, and how it's coming so far. **> Rob Kinnan**

HRM | What made you take your dad's project on?

DT | My dad came to me in 1988 and said, 'I want to run that car again, but I'm not going to drive it. Will you drive it? You work on it, and I'll find all the sponsorship and run all the front-end.' Of course, [I knew] he'd run everything else anyway, so I was pumped. Three weeks after we put the deal together, my dad got murdered, and I didn't have the heart to come back out and run it again. About 10 years ago, I started seri-

Danny Thompson sits in the same cockpit that his father, the legendary Mickey Thompson, did 46 years ago. He's pouring his heart, soul, and all of his money into finishing his dad's record attempt at Bonneville.



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ously thinking, 'I need to finish this.' My dad finished just about everything he did and was relatively successful at all of it, but he never finished this, and it was always a burning desire for him to come back. We were going to do it as a father-son deal, and that's what made it so cool. I want to finish his unfinished business, and in the process I get to go fast—it's a win-win deal. I can't wait. I've given up everything I have in the world to do this, and when they finally lower that canopy down and say it's time to go...it gives me goose bumps, I want to do it so bad. But mostly I can finish something that he didn't, and that's cool.

HRM | What kind of shape was the car in when you pulled it out of the trailer four years ago?

DT | It was in good shape, because he'd done a deal with somebody to buy it, and they took it all apart and repainted it and so forth. But they didn't pay for it, so it went back in the trailer. It never got run or anything.

HRM | What has been changed on the car since your dad originally built it?

DT | Everything. Engines, transmissions, the basic frame is the same, and the aerodynamics package is almost identical—except for the way we're bringing the air in. [My dad] brought air in through NACA ducts in the front and rear, which didn't work very well, so Tim Gibson has changed all that around, and then Terry Hegman has built some real nice little things, aerodynamic-wise, that shouldn't add any frontal area to the car but should work really well. The engine combination is certainly the biggest thing, from SOHC Fords to 500ci Hemis. And we run B&J Transmission three-speeds, where my dad ran B&M two-speed automatics. The [differentials] are the same, but the steering is probably the single hardest thing to capture. He had wagon wheel steering, where the whole [differential] turned like a wagon, and that's illegal at Bonneville now. We might have been able to push and get it grandfathered in—but I didn't like it anyway—so we changed all that. Gibson designed it, and it's phenomenal. We have five degrees of steering now, which is almost unheard of. And this is really cool, stuff my dad came up with in 1968—the way we turn it at the other end for an FIA meet, where you have to turn it

around really fast [to make a backup run for an FIA record]. We have four air jacks: we jack the car straight up, and we have a Lazy Susan that goes right under the driver's butt; we let the air jacks up, spin it around, and line it back up, put the air jacks back down, pull the Lazy Susan out, and you're ready to go. It takes probably two minutes to turn the car around, which means a lot because you have to add 60 gallons of fuel, redo the parachutes, all that stuff. And instead of repacking the 'chutes (which will be wet from dragging in the salt), we built canisters so we can slide a brand-new one in place much quicker than repacking 'chutes.

HRM | Tell us about the engines.

DT | Jerry Darien laid them out and did the cylinder heads and top-end stuff, and Richard Catton at RC Performance did the bottom ends. Darien's a regular A/Fuel guy. He sent all of the Force girls through his school, and he's a good guy—I can go to him with stupid questions, especially on this drag-race [nitromethane] stuff. I haven't been in drag racing in 25 or 30 years, and it's changed so much. I think this thing has 42 fuel lines! There are four nozzles per cylinder, you got bypasses, and bypasses for bypasses... it's complicated, so he's going to go with us. But horsepower shouldn't be an issue—traction is always the issue, trying to make the power get to the ground.

HRM | Speaking of that, your dad's old company Mickey Thompson Wheels and Tires is involved in the project with the tires. What are they?

DT | Yeah, Mickey Thompson did the tires, and they're the smallest of the three they offer, the 24-inch-tall tire. That's what the car was designed around originally; before Mickey Thompson even made tires, it was designed around a 23.5-inch Goodyear. We just got through building four new wheels, and they're so pretty—ooh they're so nice! We're building 12 more because you don't have time to change tires at Bonneville. There are 30 fasteners in the wheels, so unbolting all of those 3/8-inch bolts to change tires, and rebalancing, there's just not enough time. I want enough wheels set up so if you smoke a couple tires, I'll have them ready to go in the corner. Tires are always a serious deal. It's your last link.

HRM | How many people do you have working on the car?

DT | I worked on this car almost totally by myself for three years, but for the last six months I've had these guys. Frank Hanrahan and Lou Anderson are here every day, assuming we have money, and others that help are Tim Gibson (an aerodynamics and mechanical engineer); Terry Hegman does the bodywork; and SK Specialties does the machine work. So I have three people, including me, full time, and five people total if you count part time. That's why my progress has been so slow. But I couldn't find any money. Mickey Thompson tires stepped up initially and that allowed me to get engines and some stuff, and between that and me selling everything off... everybody was just off for three weeks because we didn't have any money. I sold another IndyCar and now we have money to go again. That makes it really hard because you're working with a skeleton crew or no crew, other guys come in and out depending on the money, and that part of it sucks.

HRM | How is the financing going?

DT | It's going terribly, and that's the hardest part about this whole project. Bonneville is really hard to find sponsors for because they don't have the three key ingredients that motorsports people look for, which are hospitality, spectators, and television. Bonneville has none of those. So when you go to a potential sponsor and they ask, 'Can you give us this and this and this?' Basically, you have to say, 'No, but I can give you history, a father-and-son story that's not so much gearhead-oriented but more of a family human-interest-type story.' And I can provide archival footage and so many things like that, but I just haven't been able to sell it, so I've been selling everything I own. I haven't taken a paycheck in three years. I sold the IndyCar and two cars out of the NHRA museum. Reluctantly, because you don't want to do that stuff, but you gotta feed the beast. I want to be out [in the shop], but most of the time I'm sitting here ordering parts and putting together sponsorship proposals. I think I wrote 150 proposals that I was turned down for. I went to all sorts of people, I went out of the box, I didn't go to the people that NASCAR does because they have exposure seven days a week on television. I've been to prophylactic companies, diaper companies—I went to

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ON THE SALT IN 1968

HOT ROD gave readers a preview of Challenger II in the Dec. '68 issue before Mickey Thompson took it to Bonneville. In our photos, the car was shown with "Challenger III" painted on the side, though the text explained it would run as the "Mickey Thompson Autolite Special." Here are the car's specs as we reported in 1968.

Length: 30 feet

Width: 51 inches

Frontal area: 8 sq-ft

Ground Clearance: 2 inches

Weight: 5,200 pounds

Engines: (2) Ford 427ci SOHC (rear engine was blown)

Horsepower: 2,070 hp

Transmissions: B&M Torque-Flite Three-speeds

Axles: Quick-change

Final-drive: 1.6:1

Steering: Wagon-wheel with hydraulic linkage

Shocks: Koni-branded coilovers

Wheels: 19-inch forged aluminum

Top Speed: First Gear: 220 mph

Second Gear: 320 mph

Third Gear: 500 mph (theoretical)

Backup driver: Danny Ongais

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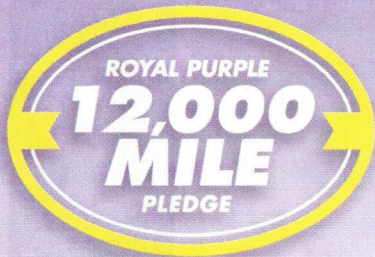
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RODDIN' @ RANDOM



Depends. I'm 64 and fit their demographic perfectly. I'm going to go 450 mph and if this thing scares the s**t out of me, I want a diaper on! I thought it was a great sell, but it didn't work. I've been all over the gamut pushing this thing, but [nobody has] bit.

HRM | Have you tried a Kickstarter or similar crowd-funding program?

DT | I did a whole Kickstarter deal and we gained \$40,000 in the first two weeks, and then it flattened out. We were giving away a lot of stuff, even the naming rights to the car. In hindsight, it probably wasn't a very good idea because we were giving a lot away for not enough money to finish the project, but it was going to get us a lot farther down the road. We still don't have a major sponsor, so there's 32 feet of signage available on the side of this car.

HRM | How much do you need to get it to Bonneville?

DT | We need \$350,000 from this point on. We're not going to make any money, and that's not going to cover me in any way, but that'll get my guys there. I figure Speedweek will cost \$25 grand in towing, fuel, hotels for enough people, et cetera. For an FIA event, it's going to take 12 to 15 people to turn this thing around in one hour, because you have to have two guys on fuel since you're going to use 60 gallons of fuel to go five miles. Then at least two guys on engines pulling spark plugs, adjusting the valves, changing the oil in both dry-sump tanks, checking the oil pans to make sure there's no nitro in them...so it adds up pretty quick. Speedweek won't be that bad. I don't even plan on running that fast, just go up and make laps. I have to do probably three laps before SCTA will even let me go fast, to make sure the car's safe and it steers and turns. I want the first pass to be 400 mph, but...it's going to be tempting since I'm not the smartest guy in the world and mashin' it is what I like to do. And with these engines, there's no water in them so you have to run them full throttle to get enough fuel through them to keep them cool. So we'll run full throttle to maybe the three-mile mark, maybe only the two-mile mark, until they give us the OK.

HRM | What's the ultimate goal with the car?

DT | Speed Demon. You gotta beat Speed Demon's 439-mph record. We're in different classes, but at the end of the day I want to leave there being the baddest guy. I want that HOT ROD Top Time trophy. Look, the hair's standing up on my arm again! This year at Speedweek, I'm not shooting for that. I've

been upside-down there going really fast, and I know it can bite you really bad, so we're just going to sneak up on it. If we got five laps during Speedweek, I'd be pretty happy. Three weeks later, we can go back for the USFRA meet, and then the week after that is the Cook FIA shootout, then three weeks after that we got the World Finals. In a two-month span, you got your whole year, and if you don't get it by then you have to wait till next year.

HRM | How was your relationship with your dad over the years?

DT | It went back and forth. He raised me to be like him, so I was equally as hard-headed as he was, and the racing deal was always the issue because he wouldn't let me race. I was really close to going to Indy. I had won an SCCA Formula Atlantic championship and was second in Super Vee, so I was getting all that kind of experience and had a chance to go to the speedway, but he didn't want me to go there. Davy McDonald got killed in 1964 driving for my dad, and he did all sorts of things to stop me from going, but right there at the end he came to me and asked me to drive this car.

HRM | Did you ever go to Indy with your dad as a kid?

DT | One time, but I was little. I went to Bonneville a couple times, but it was serious work then. There weren't motorhomes in those days—you hung out in the station wagon when you went. When my dad went in 1960, with Fritz [Voigt] and my mom, they took my dad's '59 Pontiac station wagon and towed that Challenger I on an open trailer. I was sniveling the other day about not having enough horsepower in my pickup truck to haul this thing up there. When I saw a picture of my dad in the station wagon with the Challenger I—which weighed almost 8,000 pounds—I thought, 'I better just shut up and stop whining.'

HRM | What happens if you don't get the sponsorship to finish this car? Are you going to keep going?

DT | I'm committed. This is happening. Whatever it takes, I'm head down and in too deep now to quit. I don't know what I'll have to do—sell myself on the corner, maybe—whatever it takes. But no matter what, we're going to run this year. I've got enough money right now I think to finish the car. I don't have enough money to get there, but I have enough money to finish the car. But I'm head down and stupid. Nobody said I was smart, just determined and pas-

OLD RACE CARS

We were talking with Danny about some of his father's old race cars, some of which Danny still owns and some of which he's been selling to pay for the Challenger II effort, and we asked what ever happened to Mickey's titanium-chassis Mustang Funny Car that was on the Mar. '71 cover of *Car Craft*. He told us, "I don't know what happened to it. There were so many of those cars that stuff didn't mean anything when you were done with it in those days. You raced it, then you moved on to the next car and sold everything off that car—gauges, everything. Nobody realized they'd be worth anything in the future. Most of those cars sat outside my dad's shop in Long Beach for 30-some years, without even a cover on them."

Of his dad's cars, Danny still has three IndyCars and three off-road cars. One of those IndyCars is his favorite, the '64 all-titanium car that weighed less than 1,000 pounds and had a full body, sort of what a LeMans prototype looks like today. Typical of Mickey's relationship with USAC at Indy, his car was far different (and in this case, potentially much faster) than the competition, so USAC made him change so much on the car that it was no longer competitive. Danny also restored his dad's '62 IndyCar that was Dan Gurney's first ride at the speedway, and then donated that car to the Indianapolis Motor Speedway Museum.

sionate at what I do. The passionate part runs in the family, I guess. The smart part, [Dad] would have figured out how to finance it and have somebody else pay for it [laughs].

HRM | How does your wife put up with this lifestyle?

DT] Pretty well. I mean the door's open every night when I go home and my clothes aren't out on the lawn. It's hard for her because she's had to give up everything, too, so she's a saint as far as that goes.

HRM | What if you don't run the number?

DT] Then you go back until you have success. And by no means do I think this is easy. There have only been 11 people in the entire world that have gone over 400 mph in a piston-powered car. It is not easy. So I'm not going up there thinking we're going to kick ass and take names. I'm going up there respectful and we'll take our place in line and do the best we can. We know aerodynamically it's good because it ran almost 400 mph in 1968. And mechanically, I think we have all the right combos. You look at all those guys going fast. Look at Speed Demon [with George Poteet and Ron Main]. I think George has like 35 runs over 400 mph. And Nish, they've been running that combination for 10 years or something. The problem with Bonneville, to fall off the trailer and go fast is almost unheard of because your window of opportunity is basically two months, and if you don't get it done you wait a year. Am I anticipating doing well? Yes. Am I going to make a claim to how fast we're going to go? No—500 mph is a pretty magic number, but I don't know if it's achievable with a piston-powered car. The record in my class in BNI is 396 mph and 414 mph in FIA, but George is the pinnacle at 439, so to me you gotta run 1 percent over 439.

HRM | What if he comes back and goes faster?

DT] He will, that's what's going to make it bitchin'. It'll be like the jet-era of the '60s, and this year will be the most competitive year for 400-mph piston-powered cars ever. I think there are potentially eight cars that can be there. It's making the hair on my

arms stand up again! Oh, man, to be beside all those guys—it's a humbling deal.

HRM | What experience do you have at the salt?

DT] I've been going up there a lot of years, but I didn't start running until I drove Don Ferguson's lakester, then I drove the [former Mickey Thompson] Pumpkin Seed. I set records in that car, which was cool because I donated the car to Jim Travers to rebuild. I didn't have time to do it, but I got to drive it and got in the Two Club in it. We set the record at 253 mph and it went 280 mph out the back door. But to get a black hat, which is a 400-mph hat...I've been up there 10 years and I haven't even gone over 300 yet. Sir Malcolm Campbell went, what, 300 mph in 1935 or something? It's not easy, and I'm humbled before I get there.

HRM | Did you or your dad ever follow the jet cars of Bonneville?

DT] I have drawings of a jet car that he did. It was typical of my dad; it had been thought out. It was a conceptual drawing called U.S. 1, I think. He lost interest because that was during his IndyCar days and drag racing, and that's when Funny Cars were coming in and he was all tied up with Ford then. When Eric Arneson wrote that book [*"Mickey Thompson, The Fast Life and Tragic Death of a Racing Legend,"* available from Motorbooks.com], we emailed and talked on the phone a bunch of times every day. I grew up

in that whole era, but it was never a big deal to me. I didn't think anything of it, that's just what he did. This guy's dad's a plumber and my dad does this. When we went through everything for the book, I thought, "This has to be bulls**t. One person can't do all this stuff." But I was there and I knew that it all happened, and I'm like, "Holy guacamole!"

HRM | Who all worked on this car when it was your dad's?

DT] Art Chrisman had a hand in it—he was the Autolite Spark Plug rep. And it was a who's who of fabricators: Nye Frank, Tom Jobe, Bob Skinner, Quin Epperly, Pat Foster was the crew chief. Li'l John Buttera, and Louie Techenoff. My dad went to Tom Hanna to build a body for the car and Hanna was too busy doing dragsters, so my dad hired Nye and Jobe away from him. When I first started working on this car, every time I'd cut something up I'd go, "I'm sorry [wincing]." I'm taking a grinder to a beautiful heliarc weld going, "Don't strike me dead!" But this is the coolest thing I've ever done. I'm 64 going on 18, and this car is keeping me young. I took Christmas Day off last year is all. I work seven days a week. I get here at 7 in the morning and usually leave 7 at night. This is what I do. It's all I do.

HRM | So Bonneville will be like a vacation?

DT] It'll be so nice. Just sitting down inside getting ready to go. For my age, [working this hard] is probably not a great idea, but would I be on the couch? I can't retire, s**t I spent everything I got here. I gotta work till I die anyway, so I might as well do something that I love. I'm tired and all that and I get up at 4:30 a.m. and train before I come in, but I can't wait to get here.

HRM | Late at night, when no one is in the shop, do you ever sit in the car like a little kid and make engine noises?

DT] Oh yeah. I ate lunch in that car for a month. I had a guy come into the shop one day and I was sitting in there eating sushi with the canopy down, and he walked right by me, he didn't see me. Finally, he walked back to the front of the car and was just sitting there looking out the door, and I said, "Can I help you?" He jumped about 15 feet and looked all around and still couldn't find me. So, yeah, I make vroom noises!



In the '60s, Ford did this scale model out of wood for wind-tunnel testing of Challenger II.