

Challenger 2.5: Danny Thompson Races Toward the Bonneville Salt Flats



On one of those misty July mornings that are more common than sunny ones in [Huntington Beach](#) this summer, two gray-haired guys face the opening of a garage in a nondescript industrial park, their hands outstretched as if receiving manna from the heavens.

The manna is actually a rectangle of metal frame connected by chains to a forklift steered ever so slowly by a younger man. Between the forklift and the older gents is a platform on wheels for the cockpit section of a

vehicle that will eventually weigh 5,500 pounds total—or about 1.5 times the weight of a standard automobile. The platform will allow the cockpit, which is just back from a nearby machinist, to be wheeled around the ThompsonLSR shop.

Just before touchdown, the older men call a timeout, kibitz, and then ask the forklift driver to rotate the frame a quarter turn forward so it doesn't slip off the platform. Without a crew of many more men, this task will rely on gravity and the brute force of two middle-aged chaps who could be crushed with one mistake, although they personally seem more concerned about maintaining the health of the cockpit.

An observer feels his heart stop when the dead quiet in the garage is interrupted before touchdown by the racket of wrenches that had been left inside the frame crashing like cymbals on the cement floor. A split second later: mission accomplished.

[Danny Thompson](#), in the catcher's position had that back area of his garage been a baseball diamond, has no time to celebrate. Time is of the essence if he is going to finish his space-age streamliner in time to test it in early October at the [Bonneville Salt Flats](#) in [Utah](#). But he needs help—morally, physically, especially financially—to reach his ultimate goal of driving Challenger 2.5 450 mph at [Bonneville](#) by October 2014, bringing the wheel-driven, land-speed record (the LSR of his shop's title) back to his family. Over the past two years, Danny has had two days off from his quest to finally finish what his racing-legend father [Mickey Thompson](#) couldn't complete back in 1988, back when Mickey pulled his iconic dragster out of storage, secured a crew and sponsorships, and asked Danny to go behind the wheel and bring back the land-speed crown to the Thompson clan.

"That was a huge deal," Danny says in his shop, referring both to racing history and his own chance for special father-and-son bonding with Mickey.

"Three weeks later, he was murdered."

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Alhambra-born [Marion Lee "Mickey" Thompson](#) was a champion racer of vehicles on and off the roads, and "The [Speed King](#)" achieved more individual speed records than any other person, living or dead. He's credited with being the first manager of Lions Drag Strip near [Long Beach](#) in 1955; fielding teams for the [Indianapolis 500](#); and creating the sanctioning bodies [SCORE International](#), for desert rally races, and [Mickey Thompson Entertainment Group](#), for other off-road vehicles and indoor motocross. He also helped to take motocross from dirt tracks in the middle of nowhere to large stadiums in big cities.

His Mickey Thompson Performance Tires company, whose genesis was the thin rubber tires he custom-made for Challenger I to go after the land-speed record in 1960, would go on to outfit Indy cars after the

business opened in 1963. A member of the [Motorsports Hall of Fame of America](#), the [International Motorsports Hall of Fame](#) and the [Automotive Hall of Fame](#), the [National Hot Rod Association](#) (which ranked Thompson No. 11 among the top 50 drivers from 1951 to 2000) dubbed him "the quintessential California hot rodder" when it inducted him into its Hall of Fame.

"The Hottest Hotrodder in the World," a December 1959 *Popular Science* article on Thompson, described Challenger I as "the fastest U.S. car ever built," seeking to achieve what no other driver of a piston-driven vehicle had achieved at that point: 400 mph. But the then-31-year-old [El Monte](#) resident was already dreaming up ways of taking his "gas-turbine job" up to perhaps 500 mph, something that still has never been done, save for jet-powered land-speed cars that are actually rockets on wheels.

Thompson kept pen, pencil and paper on his nightstand because, as his then-wife (and Danny's mother) Judy explained to *Popular Science* reporter [Wesley S. Griswold](#), Mickey would come up with his best ideas in the middle of the night. A high-school graduate with no formal training, he was considered a natural-born engineer, credited with having invented—through trial and error—the "slingshot dragster," which put the engine in the back of the car to create maximum thrust and traction, a design he'd parlay into Challenger I.

Griswold got at what a family effort going after the land-speed record has been for the Thompson family in this passage:

What is it like to cover the ground that fast?

"It's like trying to follow a road that is disappearing over the edge of the world," Thompson says.

And how does Mrs. Thompson, a young mother of two appealing youngsters, feel about her husband's obsession with speed?

"It's fine with me," declares [Judy Thompson](#). "I've always said that if Mickey were a flagpole sitter, I'd be right up on a pole alongside."

The writer went into that section of his story with an aside on what would prove to be the first of three times Thompson was snakebit trying to break the land-speed record at Bonneville. Unseasonably early fall rains in the northwestern Utah desert in 1959 softened the pavement-hard surface of the salt flats, spoiling Thompson's initial efforts to beat the 394.19 mph speed set by Great Britain's [John Cobb](#). Thompson had to be satisfied with 367.83 mph.

He did achieve international fame during his second effort in 1960, as the first American to surpass the 400 mph barrier, hitting the 406.60 mph mark that also broke Cobb's one-way record of 402 mph. However, the rules of Bonneville are that one's speed going one direction is combined with the speed

going the opposite direction, and the average of both represents the official speed. The Challenger I axle broke on its return run; with that half-trial, no record was set.

That sent Thompson back to the shop to create Challenger II. At the time, *Sports Illustrated* called it "a rolling textbook in sophisticated automotive design." An article in *Dragzine* stated, "Compared to the blunt Yankee hot rod character of the Challenger I, the Challenger II was a technological tour-de-force. . . . The two-engined vehicle, cigar-shaped and clad in a skin of hand-formed aluminum, was built at a blistering pace and rolled out the back doors of Mickey's shop after just five months of construction. Early function testing proved extremely propitious, and the crew celebrated trial speeds approaching 400 mph."

While jet-propelled cars took over Bonneville by 1968, lugging beasts that generations of kids would remember from pictures in the *Guinness Book of World Records*, Thompson returned with Challenger II for a third time, with an obsession to finally be recognized for having driven the fastest piston- and wheel-driven car on the planet. Unfortunately, heavy rains turned the salt flats into a lake. Foiled again.

He had every intention of returning the next year, but support from [Ford Motors](#), Gulf Oil and [Reynolds Aluminum](#) seemed to evaporate overnight, following the cue of America's big three auto manufacturers pulling back from racing in 1969. Thompson, who by then was consumed with his thriving businesses and the drag-racing and off-road scenes, quit racing and mothballed the land-speed project.

Challenger II remained in storage for the next two decades. Then, in late 1987, Mickey contacted Danny, who by then was a successful racing driver of his own, to say he wanted the land-speed record. Mickey's declining health would keep him from driving, so he agreed to take care of the financing and engineering, and Danny would pilot the car—to keep the record in the family.

The plans were set. But on the morning of March 16, 1988, Thompson was stopped at his Bradbury estate by an intruder, who shot and wounded him and dragged him into the driveway. A second gunman came out from nowhere to shoot and kill his second wife, Trudy, then walked back up to Mickey—who was being watched over by the first shooter—and executed "The Speed King" with a bullet to the head.

The Thompsons together were shot six times, but neighbors heard no gunshots, only Trudy's screams. Witnesses also said they saw two black men ride bicycles into the woods surrounding the Thompson home that were too thick for cars and trucks. Four hours after the shootings, a gray, 10-speed Columbia-model bicycle was found down the hill from the Thompsons' residence.

It remained a cold case for 13 years, despite Thompson's sister, [Collene Campbell](#), the former mayor of [San Juan Capistrano](#), pressing authorities for action. Then a couple who saw a television program about the unsolved mystery came forward to say they had seen [Michael Frank Goodwin](#), Mickey's former business partner, casing the Thompson home with binoculars before the slayings.

Goodwin was originally charged in Orange County Superior Court with the murders, but a state appeals court overturned that case on jurisdictional grounds. On June 8, 2004, Goodwin was formally charged in [Los Angeles County Superior Court](#). A judge in [Pasadena](#) ordered Goodwin to stand trial for the murders two years later.

Besides the couple who fingered Goodwin, the only witness to the killings was a 14-year-old girl. At the six-week-long trial, Goodwin's attorney presented testimony from a psychologist who said memories fade quickly and suggested a 13-year-old identification would not be trustworthy. Lacking direct evidence, the prosecution put on a circumstantial case, alleging that Goodwin arranged the slayings out of revenge. Both he and Thompson had become rich together staging motocross events in stadiums, but their business relationship soured, and the Thompsons won a legal judgment of more than \$700,000 against Goodwin. Witnesses would tell the court they heard Goodwin say before the double homicide he wanted Thompson dead.

The defense contended the killings occurred during a botched robbery attempt. But Trudy was still wearing \$70,000 worth of jewelry when she was found, and she and her husband had \$4,000 in cash on them.

On Jan. 4, 2007, the jury found Goodwin guilty of two counts of murder. He was sentenced to two consecutive life-without-parole terms. The judge also denied a defense motion for a new trial. Mickey's first wife, [Judy Creech](#) of Huntington Beach, was in the courtroom for the verdict, as was her son Danny, who later told *The Orange County Register's* [Frank Mickadeit](#) the jury's decision made him feel "100 pounds lighter."

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Mickey Thompson never wanted his only son to race.

"That's because of the 10 guys who were closest to him, eight died racing," Danny Thompson recalls as he holds a space-age part from Challenger 2.5.

But the younger Thompson would not be denied. He began racing motocross behind the old man's back. "I didn't want my ass kicked," he explains with a laugh.

He'd win his first 18 consecutive events on the circuit. But at a dirt track in the [Mammoth Lakes](#) area, Danny turned around in the pit area to find Mickey glaring at him. The son would go on to win his first two races that day—before crashing in the third. It didn't matter: his father supported and accepted him as a racer after that. Mickey even allowed Danny to be his co-driver in off-road races in [Baja](#). But, as fathers and sons are wont to do, they "buted heads. A lot."

Danny decided to rebel by going into Formula racing, something Mickey opposed out of safety concerns. *Justified* safety concerns: During his racing career, which also included stints with Supervees and CRA Sprint Cars, Danny would break his neck, both legs and—three different times—his back.

On the highlights side, Danny won the opening night of the Mickey Thompson Off-Road Grand Prix and was a paid driver at different times for Ford and Chevrolet. He retired from racing in 1995, the same year he moved his family to [Colorado](#). He has served as president of the Mickey Thompson Entertainment Group and later as a consultant to entertainment, promotional and safety firms. He was a Ford representative, and he still does promotional work for Mickey Thompson Performance Tires, which is now owned by Cooper Tires. A large illustration of the logo of his dad's old company hangs in the ThompsonLSR shop.

Does Danny think, in the words of [Lightning McQueen](#), the "need for speed" is in his blood?

"It absolutely is."

But Challenger II had to wait. Overcome by grief immediately after his father's death in 1988, Danny had put the car and Mickey's other belongings in long-term storage. He would not see the car for another 15 years.

He had only been to Bonneville as a child, but he began thinking about the salt flats in 2002.

"I've done all sorts of other things," he says. "I've driven Formula cars, off-road stuff, motorcycles. I drove a Ford for three years; I was a paid driver. But I came back to Bonneville. It's like where a son was born, and a dad died. I kind of stopped going there voluntarily after my dad died. But I asked myself, 'What do you do now?' As I got older, I started thinking about Bonneville again."

Danny was invited in 2003 to drive a newly restored small streamliner that had once belonged to Mickey. He'd go on to become a world-record holder in multiple classes. In 2007, he built and piloted the world's fastest [Ford Mustang](#) in partnership with Hajek Racing.

In 2010, the 50th anniversary of Mickey's remarkable 406.60 mph run in the Challenger I, Danny came up with the idea to bring Challenger II back to the flats. With all the advancements in engines, materials and technology, it would have been easier to build a rig from scratch, but Thompson wanted to honor his father's faith in the streamliner. Danny left Colorado and set up his shop in Huntington Beach for the Challenger II remodel.

"I'm getting goosebumps just talking about it; I want to do it for him," he says nodding toward a large black-and-white portrait hanging in the garage of his father at Bonneville. "I want to finish what he almost did when he went 406.6 in '60. Now, we're going to do it."

Keep in mind that since 1947, only 11 people have gone faster than 400 mph in a car that wasn't a jet rocket on wheels. And while Danny has driven dragsters, he has never been in a missile like the one he's itching to ride 450 mph in Utah. The closest he came was three years ago in a lower-class vehicle that, once it hit 264 mph, flew 25 feet into the air for more than 1,000 feet before it rolled seven times. (Do a YouTube search for "Danny Thompson racing crash.")

"That's something I never want to experience again," he says, shaking his head. "Driving on salt is like driving on snow and ice. You're slipping like heck."

Not that it'll stop him from getting into the cockpit of Challenger 2.5.

"I need to finish what he started," Danny repeats of his father. "Plus, I want to go fast *really* bad. I'm six years older than he was, but I'm full of piss and vinegar."

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When the Challenger 2.5 project started, Danny was alone. He isn't anymore. You'll just about always find him with two Orange County fabricators in his garage. Two machinists from [San Diego County](#) drive up at least twice a week. Specialists from other nearby shops get some of the work. [Tim Gibson](#), an aero engineer going back to his days at [Boeing](#) and later a crewman for former drag racer [Kenny Bernstein](#), has stepped into Mickey Thompson's shoes as the project engineer.

The outward appearance will be similar to the Challenger II, although as Danny shows me a small model of the 2.5 in the shop, he explains the tail will stick out farther and swoop upward. Otherwise, the chassis, aerodynamics and hand-formed aluminum skin will be the same. Huntington Beach custom painter [Chip Foose](#), whom you may recognize from *Overhaulin'* on the Velocity channel, will transform that skin, which on this day is piled up in a corner of ThompsonLSR and resembles the dull side of aluminum foil.

Instead of twin Ford 427s, 2.5 is powered on either side of the cockpit by a pair of dry-block, nitro-fueled [Hemi](#) V8 engines in an all-wheel-drive configuration. The engines are dry blocks or waterless, so all cooling is provided by the fuel. (I'm told that since my visit, vents have been added to the front to cool the engine even more.) Overall horsepower will approximately double, from 600 front engine and 1,200 rear engine to an even 2,000 per. In other words, Challenger II was 1,800 horsepower; 2.5 is 4,000 horsepower. It's estimated that to go 10 mph faster requires 110 more horsepower, Danny explains.

"We're trying to pierce a hole in the wind."

The front of the streamliner will house two 30-gallon, aluminum fuel tanks holding just enough nitromethane for one full-speed pass. The car ends its runs nearly 500 pounds lighter due to fuel consumption.

Thompson showed off the twin three-speed gear boxes that will link the engines together and counterbalance output, a marked improvement over what he calls the original "split gas pedal and Mickey's intuition" mechanism. Danny then holds up the original pedals and shows how, with his feet, Mickey would use "feel" to propel his machine forward.

"There's no way I would get in there with that," Danny says with a laugh.

The tires—custom-made by Mickey Thompson Performance Tires, of course—are a prototype nylon weave backed with banded steel. There is only one-32th of an inch of rubber, as any more would spin off due to heat and expansion. They will expand three-quarters of an inch during a super-speed run, Thompson explains.

Primary stopping power is provided by dual parachutes that deploy 4-foot blossoms. Four carbon-fiber disc brakes are in place "just in case."

The team will be aiming for speeds around 350 mph in this October's planned test run. But adding horsepower and speed is not nearly as difficult as raising money for a project estimated to cost \$4 million by the time all is said and run.

Nothing on the streamliner has come off the shelf; everything is a one-off built specifically for that car. Danny points around his shop to a \$6,000 part here or a \$17,000 part he's lacking over there.

"We're really struggling financially," he confides. "That's why I went to [Kickstarter](#). I'm hoping to raise \$200,000. I can spend \$50,000 a week really easily."

Yes, Mickey did not have the luxury of crowdfunding back in the day. Danny's Kickstarter campaign (at kck.st/18xEkT4), with 29 days to go as of Aug. 11, had 107 backers pledging \$20,502 toward the \$200,000 goal. The page breaks down what donors at different levels receive for their contributions, from custom stickers and hard-to-find Mickey Thompson decals for those who give \$25 or more to one's company logo on Challenger 2.5 and honorary crew-member status for those in the \$10,000 club. Rewards are scheduled to be distributed by December.

Thompson is also kicking up public interest by allowing voting through his often-updated thompsonlsr.com site on naming the streamliner and the paint scheme Foose is to apply after testing and in time for the record runs.

The major engineering and construction hurdles have been cleared, and fabrication, plumbing and electrical work remain. Besides paying for needed parts, having more money would increase the number of people who would be working in the shop, which would make it easier to achieve the deadlines Thompson has set.

If he doesn't jump out of his skin before then.

"It's a bitchen project," he says with a broad smile. "It's a project of my dad's that I get to finish. . . . It's a labor of love."

Cue the twinkle in his eyes.

"And I'm going to get to go real fast!"