

Racer aims to set land-speed record

In honour of his pioneering father, one speed-demon has set his sights on being 'the fastest person out there on the salt'

JIM LEGGETT, Special To The Gazette

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Behind a nondescript garage door in an industrial park, not far from the idyllic surf of Huntington Beach in California, is a time machine.

Crafted by hand decades ago by racer extraordinaire Mickey Thompson, this slender mechanical beast is being resurrected, modified and improved by Thompson's son, Danny. He's a successful race driver in his own right - against his father's initial wishes.

"That's because of the 10 guys who were closest to him, eight died racing," recalls Danny Thompson, who has won the Baja 1000 as well as a number of IndyCar races, Supervees and CRA Sprint Cars. Racing is a dangerous sport and Danny has broken his neck, both legs and his back - three different times.

Even race fans may not know much about the successes of Danny Thompson because his father's larger-than-life character, engineering innovations and racing victories cast an impossibly large shadow.

The older Thompson developed many things taken for granted in motorsports today, such as wide slick tires and air jacks to raise a car. A successful builder of Indy cars, drag cars and off-road trucks, Thompson was also a race promoter and track owner. He brought motocross racing out of the desert and into big city stadiums, creating a whole new sport.

Back in 1959, Mickey was looking to break a land-speed record of 394.19 miles per hour (634.39 km/h) set by Great Britain's John Cobb on the Bonneville Salt Flats, and he built the famous Challenger I. Unfortunately, early fall rains in the northwestern Utah desert softened the usually pavement-hard surface of the salt flats, spoiling Thompson's initial efforts. He 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 406.60 mph, which also broke Cobb's oneway record of 402 mph.

However, the rules of Bonneville required a return run in the opposite direction within one hour, and the average of both represented the official speed record. The Challenger I broke an axle on its return run.

Mickey went back to the drawing board and came up with the Challenger II and raised his sights to the 500 mph mark. By this time the target had been reached but by cars powered by rocket engines.

Thompson was determined to do the same but with a wheel-driven car.

But when it came time to make his record attempt, heavy rains turned the salt flats into a lake.

Mickey had every intention of returning the next year, but support from his sponsors - Ford Motors, Gulf Oil and Reynolds Aluminum - disappeared with America's big three automakers pulling out from racing in 1969.

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 on his own, to say he wanted to go for the landspeed record. With Mickey's declining health preventing him from driving the car himself, he agreed to take care of the financing and engineering, and Danny would pilot the car and keep the record in the family.

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The plans were set, but just three weeks later, on the morning of March 16, 1988, Mickey 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 of 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 final bullet to the head. Mickey's former business partner, Michael Frank Goodwin, was tried, convicted and sentenced in the murder plot.

Mickey's son stayed away from the salt flats for decades until he was invited in 2003 to drive a newly restored smaller streamliner that had once belonged to Mickey. He'd go on to become a world-record holder in multiple classes.

The 50th anniversary of Mickey's remarkable 406.60-mph run in the Challenger I came in 2010, and 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 new car from scratch, but Thompson wanted to honour his father's faith in the streamliner. Danny left his home in Colorado and set up his shop in Huntington Beach for the Challenger II rebuild.

"I'm getting goosebumps just talking about it. I want to do it for him," he says, nodding toward a large

blackand-white portrait hanging in the garage of his father at Bonneville.

Danny began the Challenger 2.5 project on his own, but has since been joined by a small but dedicated team.

The new version of Challenger II is about three feet longer and a larger vertical stabilizer has been built for the higher speeds. The power will come from a pair of dryblock, nitro-fuelled Hemi V8 engines in an all-wheel-drive configuration.

Overall horsepower will approximately double that of the original Ford SOHC 427 motors, from 600 front engine and 1,200 rear engine to an even 2,000 each.

"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 car will weigh about 5,500 pounds when we are finished. That calculates to 515 mph."

Thompson is aiming for a test run in October with a goal of 320 mph. The run for the record-breaking 450 mph, if all goes well, will be during Speedweek at Bonneville in August.

For more information, visit: www.thompsonlsr.com.

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