

Legacy Reclaimed

DANNY THOMPSON IS MAKING A TRIUMPHANT RETURN TO CALIFORNIA'S CAR CULTURE. HIS BAJA 1000 WIN IS JUST THE START.

Danny Thompson inside Challenger 2.



Enroute to a 2011 SCORE Baja 1000 victory.

DIRKA DURKA PHOTO

Danny Thompson walked through the hustle and bustle of last November's SCORE Baja 1000 Tech and Contingency Day nearly unnoticed by most in the massive crowd. Considering his place among off-road royalty, that aspect of his return to one of the places that made him and his lost father famous may have seemed, at least on the surface, a bit less than regal.

Not that the 62-year old son of Mickey Thompson was there to be recognized at all. He was there to race. Just like the old days.

Considering this self-imposed 30-year absence from the scene that he, his late father and Sal Fish had such an important hand in creating, the lack of instant recognition or more fanfare may not only have been expected, but perhaps appreciated by the 2011 Tecate SCORE Baja 1000 entrant.

It wasn't many hours later that an elated prodigal son and former off-road racer came back to the Ensenada finish line a winner, co-driving the Colorado-based Class 7-2 Mason-built Chevy with owner Reid Rutherford and Benn Vernadakis. It was the first victory for a Thompson in Baja since his father captured the overall way back in 1982. It was Danny Thompson's first Baja 1000 title ever, shared with longtime veteran Bob Bower.

While the triumphant return to the off-road family of this long lost son may seem like the "happily ever after" finish to our story, it is, in fact just the beginning of Danny Thompson's recent resurfacing within the greater California-based car culture that produced so much of the history and glory that became the Thompson family tradition.

ROCKY MOUNTAIN EXILE

If you are wondering where Danny Thompson has been for all these years, one simply has to look back at the mid-1990s. In the years following the tragic murder of his father Mickey and stepmother Trudy at their home in 1988, it was Danny, a former factory racer for Chevrolet and then the Ford Rough Rider team, who took over the helm of the Mickey Thompson Entertainment Group (MTEG). Despite his best efforts

and those of his dedicated staff, the series ran its final race in 1994, and the company went bankrupt just two years later.

It was in 1995 that Thompson and wife Valerie moved the family far away from the racing scene, shifting their life's view from the concrete jungle of greater Los Angeles to the lofty altitudes of the Rocky Mountains near Telluride, Colorado. Almost predictably, Danny put away most of his family's long list of race toys, and worked in high-end metal construction for custom homes and buildings in the area.

By that time it had already been more than a decade since he had seen a Baja race, although he had a huge personal interest in the events themselves. While Danny had co-driven for his father on many occasions, he had also helped his dad's fledgling SCORE International business during its earliest days. His job on many occasions was to mark the Baja race course, a skill he also taught a new manager Mickey brought to the organization. His name? Sal Fish.

"I taught Sal how to mark the courses for the very first time," Thompson said with a grin. "I mean, taking Sal Fish out of the office from *Hot Rod* magazine down to Baja was like taking a girl scout out on a camping trip. It was pretty amazing. He wasn't up for that whole camping deal at first.

While off-road racing took a back seat for Danny's entire time in Colorado, in 2003 he returned to the driver's seat on the legendary salt of Bonneville. It is on this seemingly endless, horizonless patch of nowhere that Mickey Thompson built so much of his reputation. He wasn't called the "Speed King" for his exploits in Baja or the Mint 400.

Some years ago Danny pulled out one of his father's most prized possessions, an ultra-sleek streamliner called "Challenger 2," out of storage and into the warm light of his home shop. It was there that he formulated the plan he hopes will become reality in 2012 – an outright challenge for the piston-powered land speed record.

It's time for a short motorsports history lesson here. The need for man to create and drive machines that are faster than anything else that has come before is an inherent need, one that dates back to 1898 when Frechmen Chasseloup-Laubat drove his electric-powered

"Jeataud" to a the first wheel-driven land speed record – a whopping 39.34 mph. Henry Ford himself notched the first piston-powered record in 1903, driving his homebuilt Ford 999 Arrow to 91.35 mph.

Move the clocks to 1960. Off-road pioneer Mickey Thompson was squarely in the midst of forging his faster-than-life reputation. In addition to being a drag racing champion and innovator way before he hit the dirt of Baja, Mickey also set more speed and endurance records than any other man in automotive history. His most remarkable land speed achievement came in 1960, when he strapped himself into his radical four-engined Challenger 1 and became the first to eclipse the 400 mph mark. That record was never finalized as Thompson and his team couldn't back that performance up with a return run due to mechanical issues.

In 1965, the Summers brothers used four Chrysler V8s in their legendary Goldenrod streamliner to push the mark to 409.189 mph. The late Thompson returned to the salt in 1968 with his more radical Challenger 2, going into the 400 mph range before weather thwarted that year's record attempt. It took another 20 years for the Summers brothers milestone to be broken, this time in 2008 when the Burkland/Burkland streamliner used two supercharged Chrysler V8s to hit 417.020 mph.

For decades, the promise of Challenger 2 lay dormant, its exquisitely formed chassis and Nye Frank-shaped body kept for much of its life in one of several dark, cold steel shipping containers holding Mickey Thompson's treasures that Danny kept on the property surrounding his Colorado ranch. After spending years upon years thinking about the concept, in December of 2011 Danny carefully hauled the narrow, 30-foot-long Challenger 2 back to the land of its birth. It now sits on a specially made rolling stand in the shop of Huntington Beach, California, automotive artisan Steve Davis. Davis has built cars for the likes of Don Prudhomme, Tom McEwen, Kenny Bernstein and many others.

Danny and Valerie Thompson moved back to California last May, all in an effort to realize his ultimate quest - to retrofit the original Challenger 2 with twin 500 cubic inch injected Hemi engines and a new drive system. The goal? To return to Bonneville this September,

WINNING TEAM:

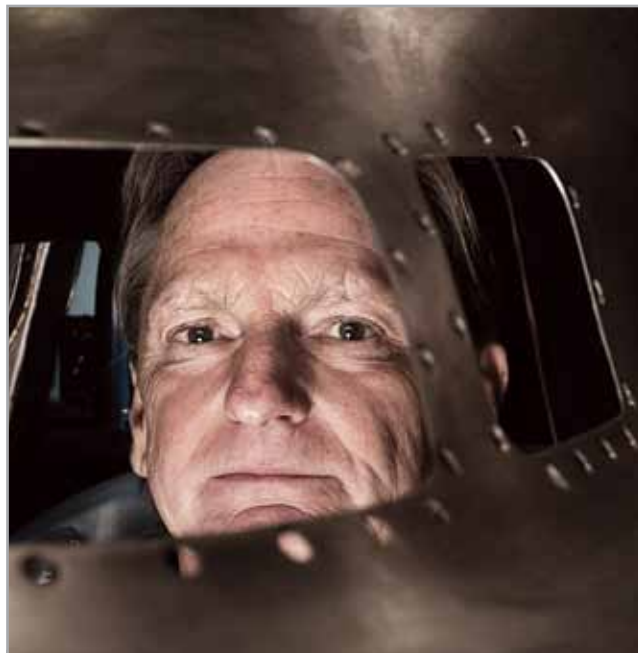
Winning team: Thompson (second from right) and co-driver Bob Bower (left) helped Reid Rutherford's (center) team earn a Baja 1000 victory.



break the current record and finally complete the dream his father started so long ago.

A SIDE TRIP TO BAJA

Danny Thompson the off-road racer made his appearance in Baja thanks to an invitation from Colorado friend Rutherford. It was an opportunity



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—Danny Thompson



A drawing of the newly refurbished Thompson streamliner penned by modern hot rod legend Chip Foose.

that Thompson couldn't turn down, especially after seeing the beautifully crafted Mason-Chevy he would pilot for the last third of the 2011 Baja 1000.

Together with Bower, Thompson spent some time prerunning the course, getting back into the rhythm of that place he had buried in his heart.

"The last time it was in Mexico was 30 years ago. I remember the roads being long, relatively smooth and fast and just fun. That last section coming in was just brutally, brutally rough. And I look at it a bit differently because I used to lay out the courses in Mexico – that was my job at SCORE. It was always a situation where you'd want to go straight across the land and cut off all of the turns, but the *ejidos* always had a lot of horsepower there, and I'm sure they have much more...that made it obvious as to why Sal (Fish) is now forced to go along fencelines, and make all those turns. You have to remember in the old days we used to race across their front doors; they were the most incredibly gracious people for letting us do that. But now, they have become a bit more...um, cultured, I would say."

Thompson said he was dazzled by the energy of Contingency day, the growth of Ensenada and just how much fun it all was – well, at least most of it. "It all brought back memories, both good and, well, not so good. I forgot just how much I hated waiting for the truck all night and sleeping in the back of a truck (laughs). But, when I got in the car it was like putting on an old shoe, it all came back right away."

A broken front shock made Thompson's leg a bit more difficult than he expected, not to mention the fact that the terrain from Urupan to Ojos "was just devastatingly brutal." He also had a bit of an issue

trusting his GPS unit, saying "you have to remember that my dad and I did really exclusive, extensive rally-type maps with notes that were on rolls of paper. They were even driven by the car's front wheel."

While Danny was "incredibly intrigued with the speed and dedication needed to run in the Trophy-Truck division, he appreciated his winning experience much more than he realized going into the race. He also shared that, for now, his head is back on target – looking ahead to a time when he can wiggle himself in the Challenger's tiny cockpit and wick Mickey's dream up beyond 420 miles an hour.

Thompson's quest is more than a passion to break one of land speed racing's most hallowed achievements. It is much more. The effort is perhaps the ultimate tribute from son to father, a quest to fulfill Mickey Thompson's unfinished business on the Bonneville Salt Flats.

"I have never won the Baja 1000. I have won the Baja 500, but never the 1000," he

concluded with a distinctive note of satisfaction in his voice. "Reid and his family were so gracious to let me return and come back to taste a bit of glory from my past. They want to do more in the future, but right now it's all about getting the Challenger 2.5 project up and to the finish line...that's my life's focus right now. That's how it should be." **DS**

