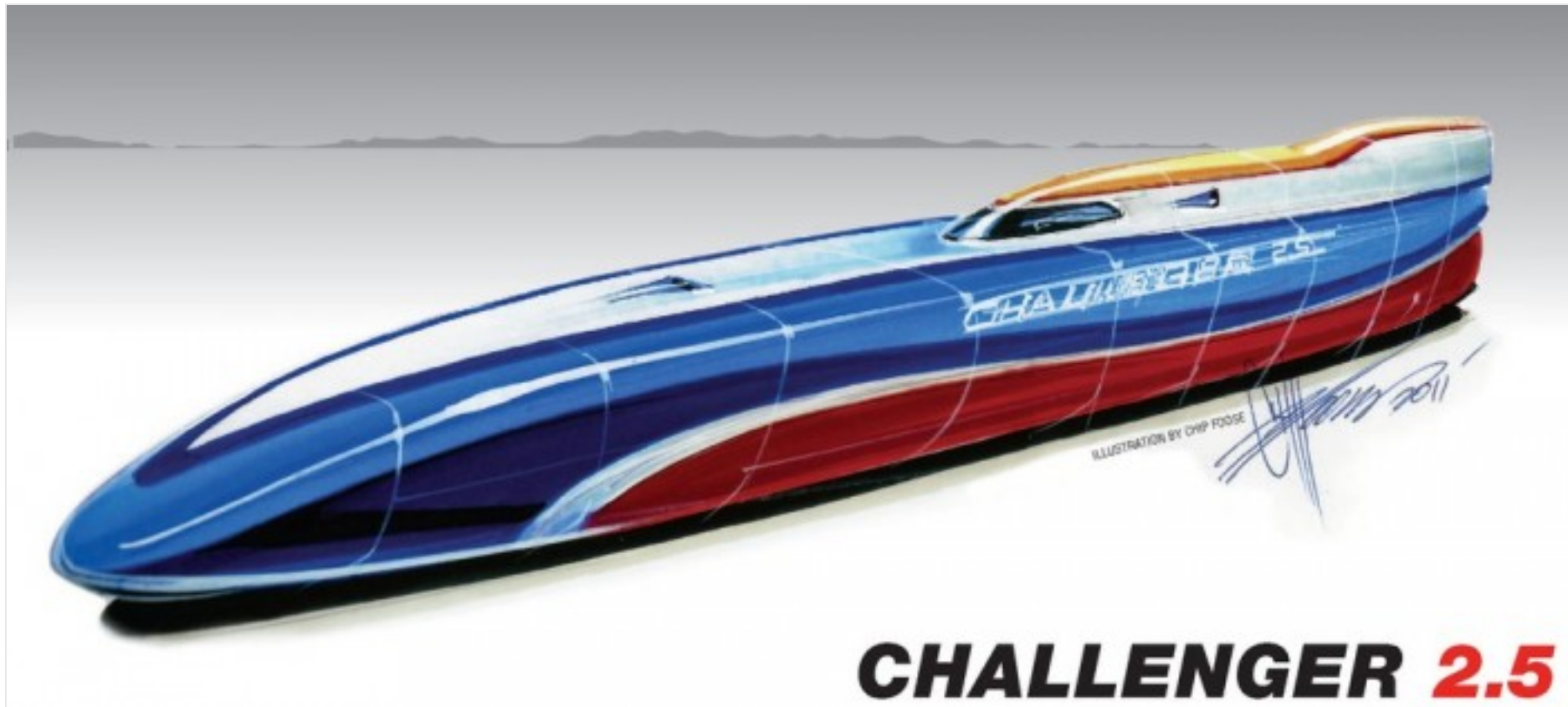


Like father, like son? Danny Thompson aims for wheel-driven land-speed record



CHALLENGER 2.5

Illustration by Chip Foose, courtesy Mickey Thompson Performance Tires and Wheels

While [Craig Breedlove](#) has renewed public interest in the absolute land-speed record, there's still plenty of activity directed toward a land-speed record that many hold to be the actual measure of the world's fastest car – the piston-engine wheel-driven land-speed record. And now Danny Thompson, son of the late Mickey Thompson, has announced his plans to break that record, finishing the job his father started more than 50 years ago.

“My dad always had a burning desire to accomplish that task,” Danny Thompson said. “But he had so much going on, he never got back to it. I’ve been wanting to complete this project Dad started all these years, to tie it up and finally put the Thompson name on that record.”

Making that possible will be major sponsorship from an appropriate source: Mickey Thompson Performance Tires and Wheels, which announced last week that it will donate \$300,000 to support Danny Thompson's effort.

[Mickey Thompson](#) made headlines around the world on September 9, 1960, when he piloted his four-wheel-drive, four-engined [Challenger I](#) streamliner to a speed of 406.60 miles per hour on the Bonneville Salt Flats. That speed allowed him to lay claim to the title of fastest American on wheels, but he lost out on his bid to break the world land speed record – and thus bring the record back to America – when one of the four supercharged Pontiac engines grenaded on the return run.

Breedlove came along in 1963 to do what Thompson couldn't, at the same time introducing land-speed racing to the jet age. Another pair of Americans, the [Summers brothers](#), followed in 1965 by setting the wheel-driven land-speed record at 409.277 MPH. Thompson, meanwhile, made a few more runs with Challenger in 1962, but wouldn't mount another serious campaign on the wheel-driven land-speed record until 1968 with the Challenger 2 streamliner, also known as the Autolite Special. With a pair of Ford SOHC 427 engines in tandem (one supercharged, the other normally aspirated), the Autolite Special was narrower than its predecessor by two feet but still featured four-wheel drive. It tested at up to 411 MPH, and Thompson boasted that it was capable of 500 MPH, but poor weather prevented him from running it that year. Thompson sold it once, then bought it back, but the Autolite Special hasn't returned to the salt in the last 43 years.

According to Danny Thompson, Mickey had started to formulate plans to put Danny in the cockpit of the Autolite Special for another run on the record just a month before he was murdered in 1988. "After that, it just didn't feel right running the car without him," Danny said. Still, he held on to the Autolite Special and about 10 years ago began racing other cars at Bonneville – to date, his best run has been in a streamliner at 263 MPH. "I've got a lot of experience around 250, but none at all at 400. At that speed, it'll be all about how well the car handles."

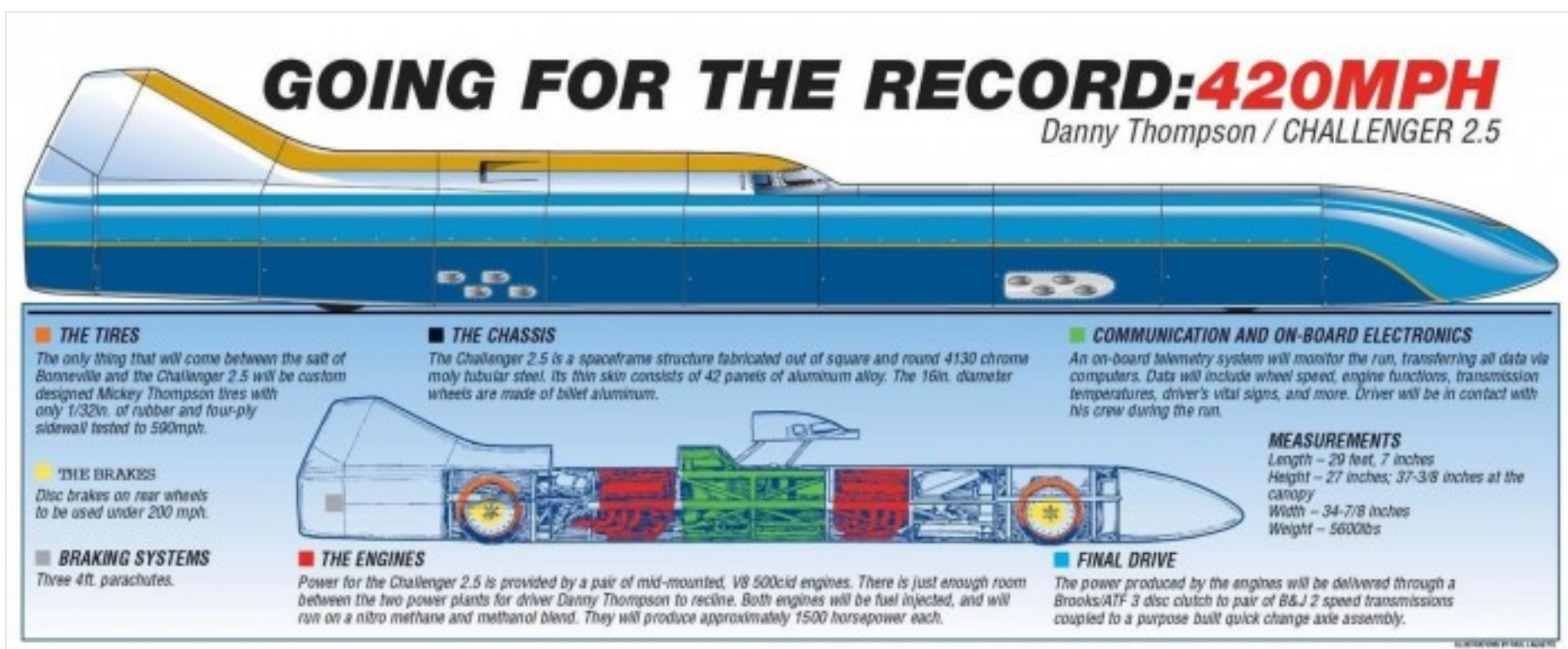


Illustration by Paul Laquette, courtesy Mickey Thompson Performance Tires and Wheels

The car will be the old Autolite Special, updated and renamed the Challenger 2.5. The four-wheel drive, tandem-engine chassis and aluminum streamliner body will remain mostly unchanged, but Danny will replace the SOHC 427s with a pair of Richard Catton-built fuel-injected Chrysler Hemi V-8s, tied together with a driveshaft and fed with a 30 percent mixture of nitromethane. "It did 400 MPH before, so we're confident that it's aerodynamically sound to run 400 MPH again," Danny said.

The record he'll be aiming for sits a little higher nowadays. His stated goal is to surpass the 417.020 MPH mark set by Tom Burkland in 2004 in the [Burkland 411 streamliner](#). (The unsupercharged piston-engine wheel-driven land-speed record currently sits at 414.316 MPH, set by Charles Nearburg in the [Spirit of Rett streamliner](#) last year.) Danny Thompson said he plans to have the Challenger 2.5 at Bonneville in 2012 to make its shakedown runs, then go for the record at Bonneville in 2013.

Missing Plug-in 