



First a reminder - DLRA Speedweek is March 23-27, 2015. It is our 25th Anniversary and entries are now open.

Now for a story on the ultimate Hot Rodder.

Mickey Thompson first raced at El Mirage, a dry lake bed near Los Angeles California at the age of 15 in a model A ford at the speed of 79mph. At that time he almost beat the class record and got a reputation for having the fastest car at school.

Mickey raced at El Mirage then Bonneville in the early 1950's with a competition coupe powered by two Flathead V8 Fords which were later replaced by a single Chrysler Hemi. In 1958 Mickey was returning from the Drag Racing Nationals with his dragster in tow and decided to make a stop at the salt to see what was possible. He managed to break the existing record, one that had been held for seven years, by 25 mph with a speed of 294mph.

It was at this point Mickey decided to build a car capable of over 400mph. He became obsessed with beating Englishman John Cobb's 394mph record and bringing the land speed record back to America. Challenger I started as a chalk outline on the shed floor. Four Pontiac engines were chosen because of their tight V which enabled the car to be slimmer. The engines were coupled to 4x 1937 Cadillac gearboxes. The running gear went together well; the biggest concern was tyres that could cope with the big speed and parachutes that wouldn't try to turn the car when deployed.

August 22nd 1959, Challenger I ran 351.95mph with a two way average of 345.33. This gave Mickey four world records but John Cobb was still faster. Challenger I's four Pontiac engines were then fitted with superchargers and the body got a stream lining makeover. Mickey returned with Challenger I to Bonneville on September 9th 1960 taking the car to a speed of 406.6mph making Mickey Thompson the fastest man on the planet.

Mickey wasn't happy to rest there, although he had gone faster than anyone on earth, a tail shaft problem prevented him from making a return run in the required time, stopping him from claiming the official record.

Mickey was determined to go faster and began planning, in 1968 Challenger II was born. No chalk drawings on the shed floor this time. The car was powered by twin 427 Ford engines mounted into a hand formed aluminium body. Challenger II was built in 5 months.

1969 saw the big three American Auto manufacturers pull back on car racing sponsorship. Lack of funds saw the Challenger II project shelved. Mickey, still firmly believing Challenger II was the fastest vehicle ever built, contacted his son Danny in 1987. Danny was and still is today a successful racer in his own right. Mickey offered to finance the resurrection of Challenger II if Danny was willing to drive. January 1988, Challenger II was taken out of storage and plans made for a 1989 attempt at the land speed record.

On March 16, 1988 Mickey and his wife Trudy were killed by two gunmen at their home in California. It wasn't until 2007 that someone was found guilty of their murders. Grief stricken Danny packed up Challenger II and placed it in storage.

That was, until Danny was invited to drive a car that once belonged to his dad at Bonneville. Danny liked the Bonneville experience and returned every year breaking records in the Hajek Streamliner.

And now, Challenger II has come out of storage. Danny Thompson has made some changes - the 427 Fords have been replaced by a pair of Nitro fuelled Hemi's that burn 50 gallons of Nitro Methane on a successful run resulting in the car weighing 200kgs less by the end of the run.

The new Challenger II is a 4WD. One Hemi drives the front wheels and the other drives the back. The engines are mirrored so the front engine is mounted backwards in the chassis coupled to twin three speed gearboxes.

So far Danny Thompson has taken the family car, Challenger II, up to 419mph with more to come!

Today, Challenger I has pride of place at the NHRA museum in Pomona California. The museum is a must see for hot rodders visiting California.

See you at the salt,

**Norm Hardinge**



■ Danny's Challenger II rebuild is powered by twin nitro-fueled Hemis



■ Below the tail are two 400 mph chutes for the end of the run



■ The Original Challenger I is on display at the NHRA Museum



■ Mickey Thompson

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