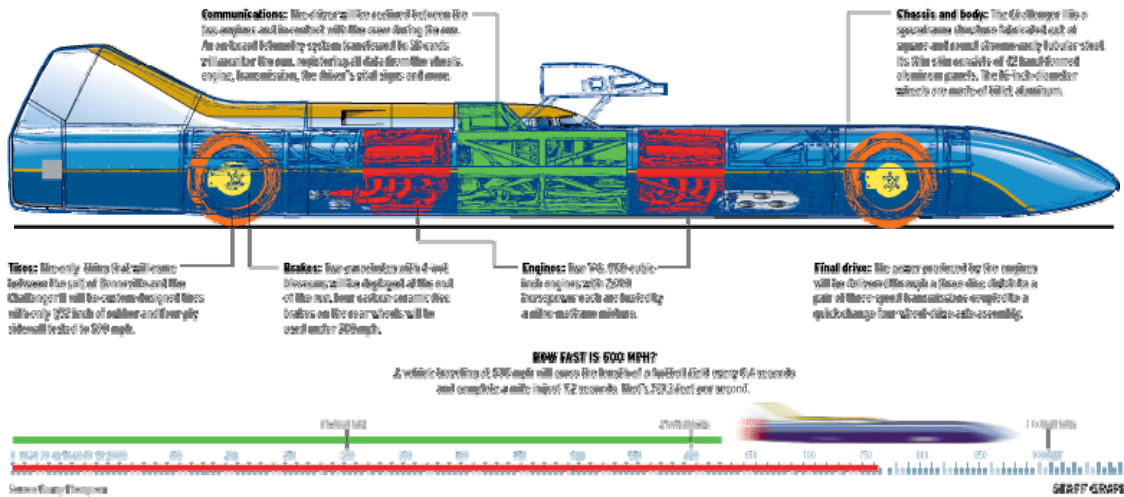
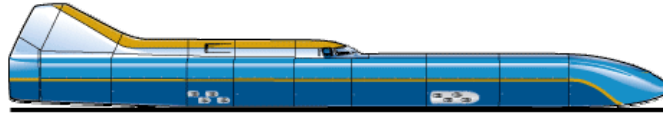


Going for the record

Next month at the Bonneville Salt Flats in Utah, Danny Thompson will attempt to break the land speed record for a piston-driven vehicle of 439 mph. Thompson will make the attempt in the Challenger II, the same vehicle his father, Mickey, built for his attempt at the world record before his death in 1983.



When Danny Thompson takes his metallic blue “rocket ship on wheels” to the Bonneville Salt Flats in Utah next month, he hopes to break a record across the barren white plain.

It has to be dry. But not too dry. Definitely no wind. Sunny conditions. Warm, but not too hot.

“Yeah, the conditions need to be epic,” said Thompson, who has been tweaking the Challenger II, a 32-foot piston-powered car dreamed up and built under the direction of his father, racing legend Mickey Thompson, also known as “Speed King.”

Danny would like to see the needle go over the 400-mph mark as he passes rips through the 5-mile run. That would put him in the company of just 11 other men – the only elite land racers on the planet to have accomplished such a feat.

But above all else, when the tires hit the salt flats and when he revs up the nitro-fueled engine, he knows he’ll get goose bumps, a major adrenaline rush – and a knot in the throat.

He’d be thinking about the one and only M.T., his dad, idol and biggest competition.

Born to race

Danny Thompson was born with the speed gene. He started racing when he was 9. But when he turned 11, his dad made him stop.

“He didn’t want me to get hurt,” Thompson said.

But nothing could keep him away from racing – not even his determined dad. So Danny continued on his own. He drove for Chevrolet and Ford. Later in his career, he was in races with Dad. But he was always the navigator. Dad would never let him take the driver’s seat.

Danny watched his dad as he tried to break the world land speed record for piston-powered cars. Mickey came so close in 1960 with Challenger I when he surpassed the 400-mph mark at 406 mph, but the run didn't make it in the record books because of a technicality.

Mickey didn't give up. He came back with Challenger II, ready to race in Bonneville on Oct. 28, 1968. But his attempt was foiled by a rainstorm, which turned the salt flats into a lake.

Challenger II sat in a garage for 20 years until one day in early 1988, when Mickey talked to his son about getting the Challenger back to the salt flats. Danny remembers the conversation.

"I was listening, but not really paying attention," he said.

Mickey talked about finishing unfinished business, surpassing the speed record.

And then he told Danny, "You're going to drive it."

Danny was 38 at the time. Shocked but ecstatic, all he could think was, "This is going to be really cool."

By late February 1988, father and son had talked about their joint venture. They discussed sponsorships, engine combinations, technical details.

But three weeks later, on March 16, Mickey and his wife, Trudy, were murdered in their Bradbury home. It wasn't until nearly 19 years later that his business partner, Michael Frank Goodwin, was convicted of the murders.

The sudden death of his father devastated Danny and his mother, Judy Thompson Creach, who had been divorced from his father.

Challenger II went into storage in 1988. It didn't see the light of day for the next 22 years, until the 50th anniversary of Mickey Thompson's original 406-mph run.

A dream lives on

In 2010, Danny brought the Challenger II to his Huntington Beach shop. As the landmark anniversary approached, Danny was thinking hard.

"I wanted to be the son who finishes what his father started," he said. "This record is what put my father on the map. My dad was this man who never went to school. But he was a genius, an innovator."

Mickey was not afraid to fail and to try again, his son said.

“He taught me not to be scared. When I got down on myself or wondered how I was going to get something done, he was the one who never let me give up. I decided that I wanted to bring back the Challenger II – for my dad – and for myself. It was always a father-son project.”

During the past four years, this tiny spark of inspiration has burgeoned into an all-consuming conflagration. It has taken over Danny’s waking moments.

Danny knew it wasn’t going to be easy as he started the extensive process of restoring, retrofitting and updating the car. He now has a band of loyal volunteers, friends of his and Mickey’s, who drop their daily routines to get a piece of this action – to share some of Danny’s passion.

Among them is Richard Catton, owner of RC Performance in Huntington Beach, who works on the Challenger II’s engines. And he doesn’t charge a dime.

“You see Danny’s energy and his spirit and you become infected with it, too,” he said. “There are so many of us who give time to this project because there’s no ego or squabbling. Just pure camaraderie.”

A costly process

Even with all the volunteer help, the cost of resuscitating Challenger II has been astronomical. Danny already has put in more than \$2 million.

“I’ve sold everything I have,” he said. “I’ve emptied out my retirement accounts. I will have to work for the rest of my life.”

He works at least 14 hours a day, seven days a week, purely on Challenger. For the past two years, he has taken only Christmas Day off.

He has tried different ways to raise funds, including Kickstarter, which brought in a little over \$23,000 from 128 people. He has had people walk into his garage and hand him \$5. A local truck driver donated \$1,000, and a farmer from Illinois sent him a check for \$2,000.

Danny hasn’t been shy about contacting sponsors. He even talked to a company that makes adult diapers.

“Why not? I’m in that demographic,” he said, laughing. “If I poop my pants doing this, that would be perfect for them.”

On a more serious note, he added, he has been touched by the generosity of the people, but he has been waiting a long time for a big corporate sponsor.

Physically, Danny needs to stay in good physical condition to be able to drive the Challenger. He must be able to squeeze and scrunch his slender, 5-foot-7 frame into a space tighter than the front seat of a car.

When he drives Challenger, he's in a semi-reclined position and needs to cross his arms to operate some of the controls. He wears a helmet that gives him fresh air to breathe so he doesn't have to inhale engine fumes. There's no air in the vehicle, and on a hot day the temperature inside can soar to about 120 degrees. And yet this is his happy place, where everything is peaceful, almost Zen-like.

"It's like I'm sitting between a 4,000-horsepower sandwich," he said. "It's heaven."

'It's not if, it's when ...'

Danny Thompson's family is with him in this endeavor. Valerie, his wife of 27 years, sold T-shirts during their last run in Bonneville, and his 26-year-old son, Travis, who works for Apple, does his social media and website work.

Travis Thompson said his father's desire to break the speed record is "unbelievably strong."

"This project has been very hard for him and he carries a lot of it on his shoulders," he said. "But his desire to succeed is very powerful and winning is very important to him."

Both Danny and Creach are confident the record will be broken.

"It's not if, it's when," said Creach, who at 85 went to see her son hit 317 mph in the Challenger II during its second run in Bonneville last month.

After he got out of the car, he hugged Creach and gave her a tight squeeze.

"I shed a few tears of joy," she said. "It's true Danny started this in memory of his father. But now this is his project. He owns it."

Danny thinks it's weird that his plan to break the record two weeks ago during Bonneville Speed Week was marred by a rainstorm, just as his father's was in October 1968. But he is determined to head back in mid-September for Mike Cook's Bonneville Shootout.

His first goal is to go past the 400-mph mark. His bigger goal is to beat George Poteet, the man who holds the land speed record for a piston-engine car at 439 mph. Poteet set that record during last year's Speed Week.

"I think the Challenger II can even do 500 mph," Danny said. "I'd like to find out."

For now, he looks at a news clipping of Poteet's accomplishment.

“Just for motivation,” he said with a smile, eyes twinkling. “Failure is not an option for me. I’m doing this.”