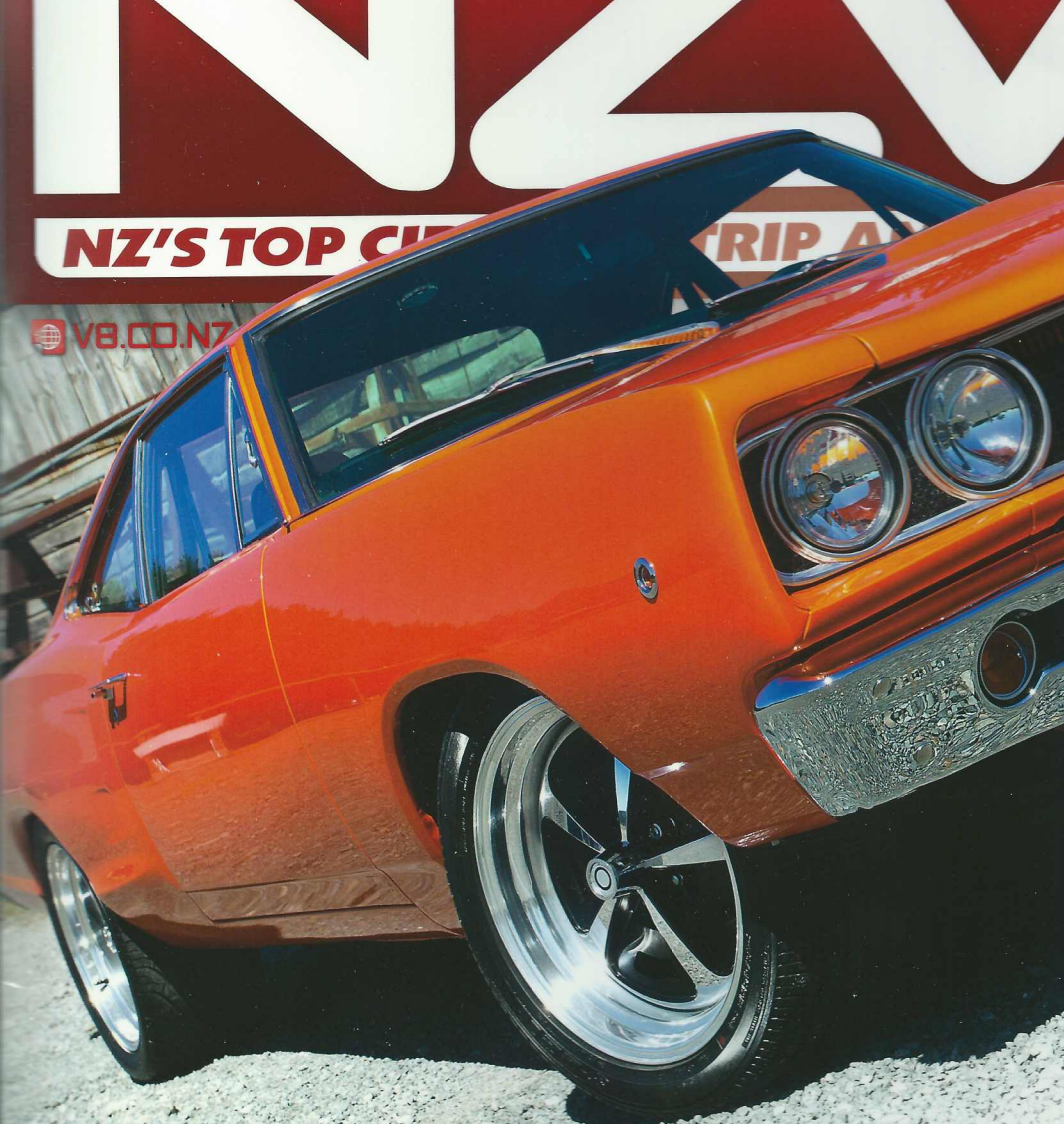


# NUMBER

NZ'S TOP CARS TRIP AROUND

V8.CO.NZ



# 496

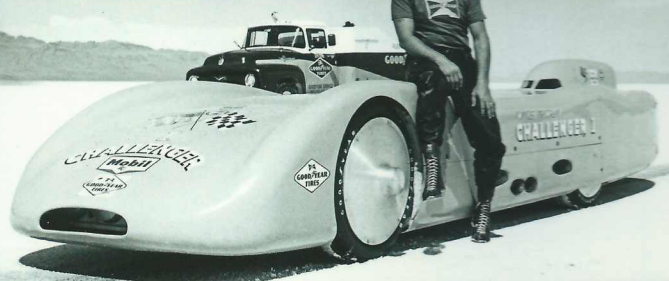
CUBIC INCHES OF  
**MOPAR**  
PERFECTION

**200MPH**  
FORD CUSTOMLINE



# MICKEY THOMPSON

THE MAN BEHIND THE NAME



JUNE 2015  
ISSUE  
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+ RETRO '47 CHEV SEDAN // WILD GASSER CONCEPT // NOSTALGIA DRAGS  
OUT OF THIS WORLD WALKINSHAW // CENTRAL MUSCLE CARS AND MORE



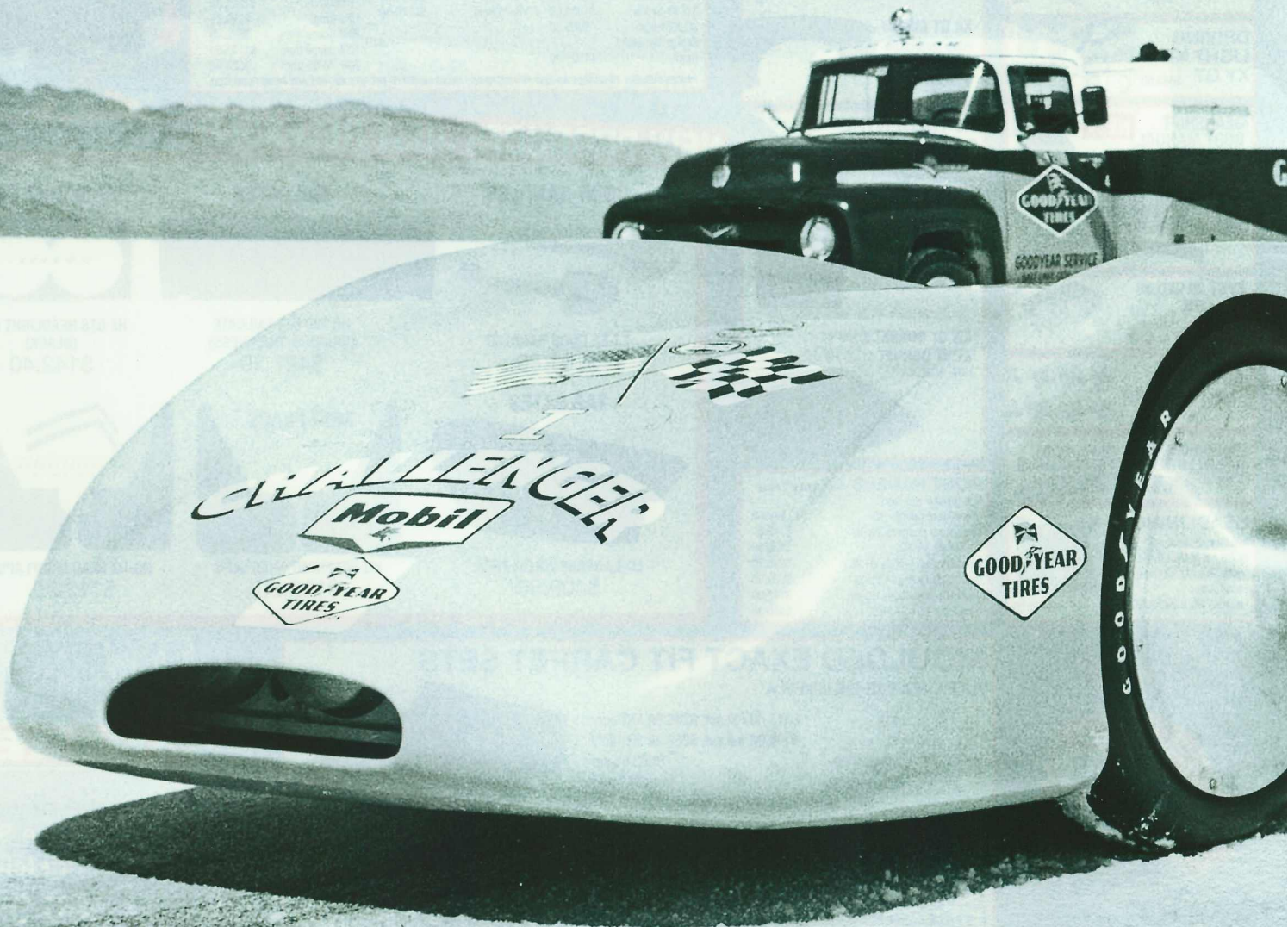


**MICKEY THOMPSON**  
INNOVATOR // RECORD BREAKER // LEGEND

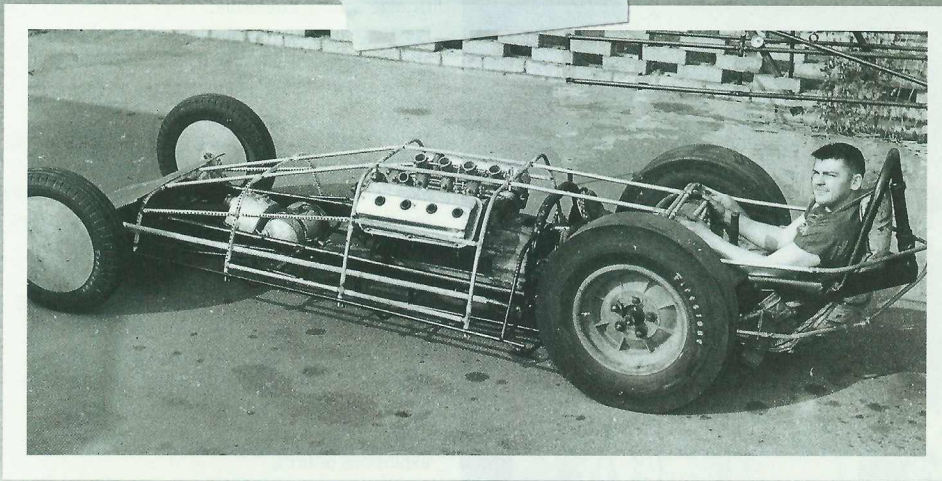
# WHO IS MICKEY THOMPSON?

We uncover who the man is behind one of the most legendary names the automotive world has ever seen

WORDS: STORMY BYRD AND ANNA MARCO PHOTOS: DANNY THOMPSON, HOLLY MARTIN, AND ANNA MARCO







A J Foyt, Don Garlits, Dan Gurney, Richard Petty, Parnelli Jones – ask any of these racing champions about Mickey Thompson, and they would all acknowledge his contributions to the world of motorsport.

## WORK ETHIC

Born in 1928 in San Fernando, California, Marion Lee Thompson Jr (aka Mickey) grew up during the depression era of the 1930s. He and his younger sister Colleen learned the value of hard work and prudence early on from their father, Marion Lee Thompson Sr, a detective. That work ethic would fuel one of the greatest automotive innovators of our time. With a mechanical mind and restless hands, a 14-year-old Mickey acquired his first car, a 1927 Chevy, for US\$7.50. Even before he had a driver's licence, he was creating a vehicle to his own specifications. In high school, he met Judy (who'd become his first wife), and together they would street race and terrorise West Covina locals. Mickey, competitive as he was, couldn't stand losing, so he put her in the car so she could win too. The pair would set records at the El Mirage and Muroc dry lake beds, driving in the Mobil Economy Runs. Eventually, they would help build and run the greatest drag strip of all time: Lions Associated Drag Strip.

## QUEST FOR THE UNACHIEVABLE

To put Mickey's life in chronological order would be impossible, the man was never at rest. Judy fondly recalls Mickey kept a pen and paper next to the bed, as he would wake up in the middle of the night with a new idea or innovation and had to sketch out details of his musings. Fritz Voight, another mechanical genius and friend of Mickey's to the end, was one of the few who could keep up with his insatiable quest to push the boundaries of what was thought to be unachievable at the time.

In any given month, Mickey could be found at Bonneville, the drags, the dry lakes, Indy, off-road and road racing or winning the Baja 1000. In 1960 he did a short stint on the water but crashed, seriously injuring his back. During the 1950s to early '60s he was holding a job at the Los Angeles Times newspaper, building and designing race cars, setting records and running a muffler shop in El Monte, California. >







Orange County, California.

Pure acceleration was Mickey's choice of drug and Santa Ana was his fix. It was at Santa Ana that many of Mickey's innovative ideas came to fruition.

The year 1954 was a turning point for drag racers. Mickey believed if the driver sat behind the rear axle (with the rear end narrowed) it would not only put more leverage over the rear tyres for traction, but greatly enhance the steering characteristics if the car also employed dual rear tyres. Mickey would approach A1 Tires to develop the first drag slicks. People laughed, however, Mickey had the last one as his slingshot design ruled the roost until 1971, when Don Garlits redesigned the rear-engine dragster to work properly, thus saving many men from a fate determined by clutch explosions or fires.

Mickey's greatest achievements came upon a straight line of salt in Wendover, Utah, an ageless, dried lake bed of brine where he walked with the gods of speed. On these sacred grounds, where some men took their last breath, Mickey eluded that which comes knocking for one's mortality. Without a doubt his greatest accolade came on September 9, 1960 when his four-engine Challenger 1, took back the fastest speed ever recorded from Englishman John Cobb, who held a one-way speed of 406.6mph. Mickey didn't back up the time as he broke parts on that run, but that wasn't the point, 406.6 belonged to America again. Mickey held over 360 land speed records, some of which still stand the test of time.

## THE MAN VS MYTH

Larry Ofria (Valley Head Service) sums it up simply, "If Mickey liked you, you were a friend for life. If not, there was no changing him." It was Mickey who helped Larry in the late '60s when business was at its lowest. Thompson sent Larry work and also introduced him to Smokey Yunick. Larry and Smokey would develop legendary part numbers to grace General Motor's shelves, and

## SANTA ANA TO THE BEACH

One of Mickey's legacies was The Beach. While working at The Times as a newsman, he was chosen by the Lions Club International to be the first manager of a new race track it had sold bonds for in 1955. The place was called Lions Associated Drag Strip, aka Lions, near Long Beach, California. While holding down his numerous full-time jobs, Mickey would dig fence posts and pound nails. Judy worked the gate and tower doing time slips, along with recording the day's activities. Lions was a testing ground for Mick and Fritz's ideas, too. The feared Ford Cammer Mustangs driven by Danny Ongais, Arnie Behling and Pat Foster were created there. 'Famous Amos' Satterlee tuned the Ford-powered technically advanced funny cars to many national victories as well. Mickey's implementation of Hemi, Ford, and Pontiac heads powered Art Chrisman to many victories. Lions was Mickey; he nurtured it from inception, and in 1964 turned it over to the capable hands of old friend and mentor CJ 'Pappy' Hart, when Thompson left to re-open Fontana Drag Strip.

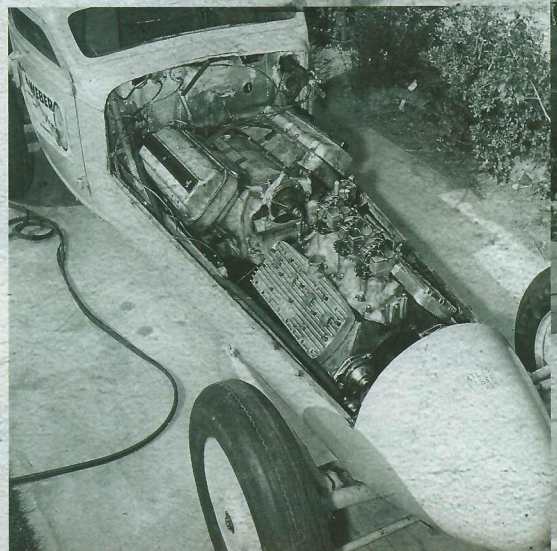
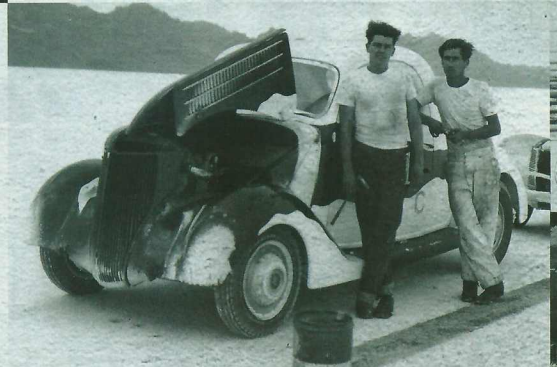
## MICKY THOMPSON ENTERPRISES

To label Mickey an innovator would be like saying Tesla plays with electricity. Thompson is a man who thought outside the box; in fact, he set it on fire and pissed on the ashes to put it out. Along with his sidekick, genius Fritz Voigt, he would not only build but drive some of the fastest cars on

earth, eventually manufacturing M/T Speed Parts: crankshafts, bearings, forged rods and pistons, manifolds, valve and timing covers, rear end housings, engine kits, wheels, Hemi cylinder heads for big block Fords and Pontiacs, and flywheels to name a few. A local Top Fuel racer, Jack 'The Gray Ghost' Ewell, would run Mickey's speed emporium/supermart in Long Beach, California, and as the money from his finely crafted speed equipment came in the front door, it went out the back of the shop in some form or another (with wheels on it) to break records. A testament to his mechanical prowess, M/T Speed Parts still grace race cars despite being 40-plus years old! Time had no grasp on Mickey, he lived 30 hours in a day. If he wasn't on the dirt, salt or asphalt, he was an entrepreneur. You can't fit Mickey's life neatly into some sort of time capsule. In addition to M/T Enterprises, he even partnered with Smokey Yunick in a South American opal mine to help fund his quest for speed. He did not waste time on vacations, and to facilitate valuable nanoseconds, he learned to fly rather than drive. It's rumoured that when friends accompanied him on trips, they would need a week to recover.

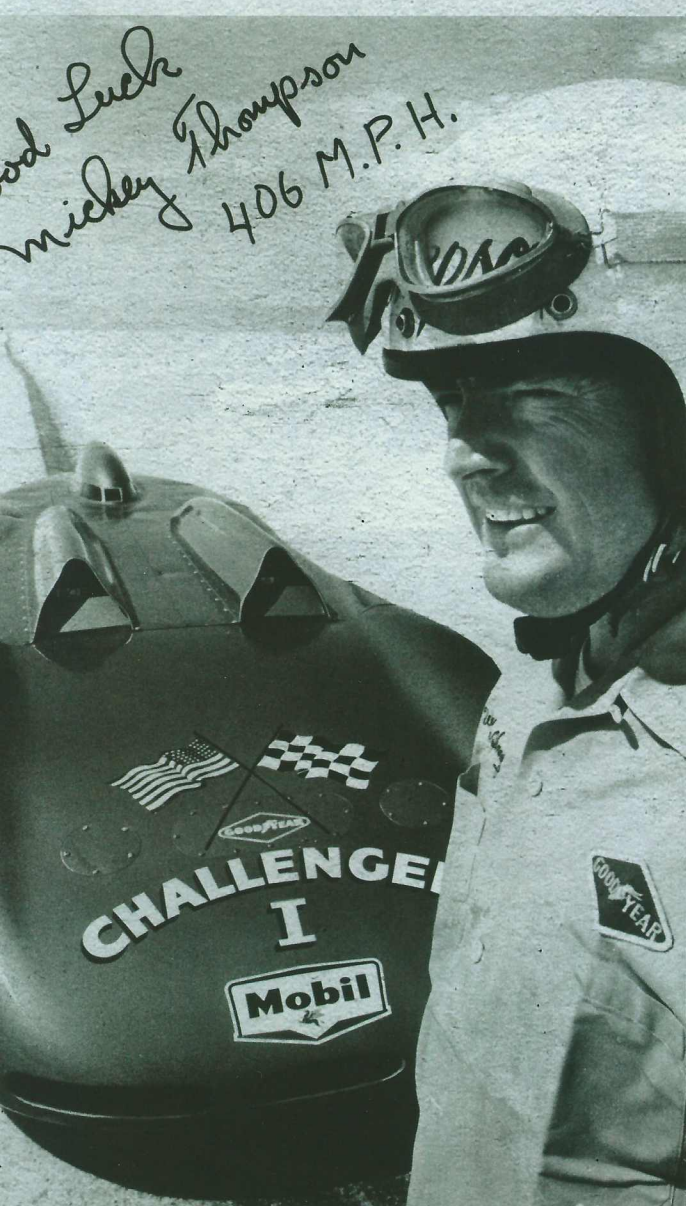
## DIRT, ASPHALT AND SALT

As with many young men in the early days of rodding, Mickey did his share of street racing. To avoid the authorities, he made the trek to El Mirage dry lake to fill his need for speed. In 1950, Pappy Hart opened Santa Ana Drags (the first commercial drag strip in the USA) on what now is John Wayne Airport in



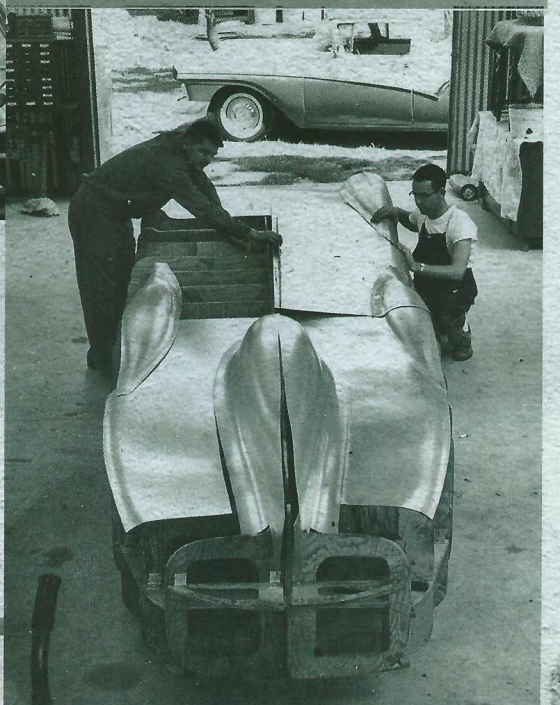
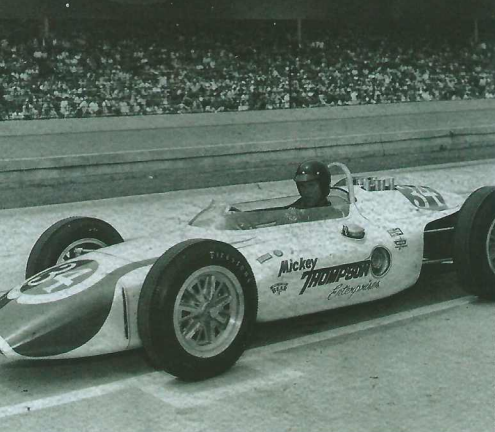
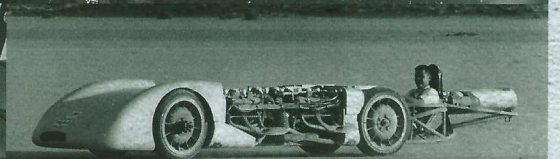
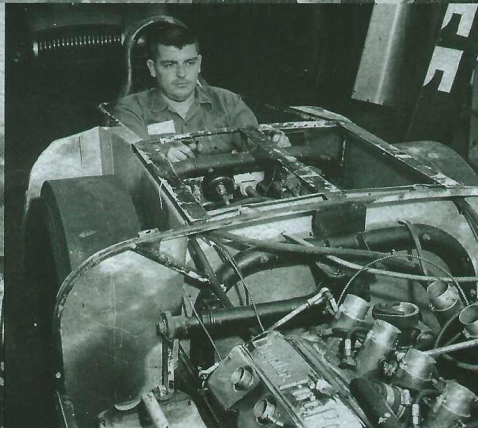
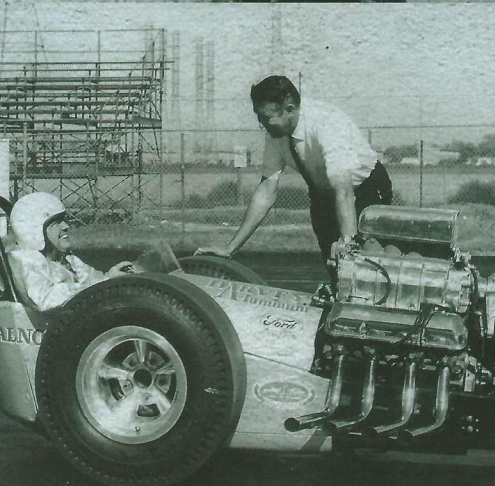
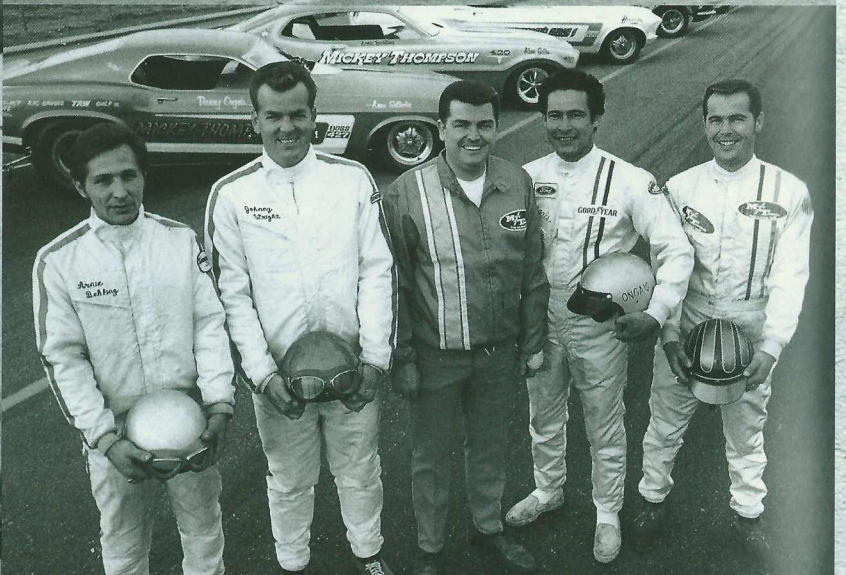
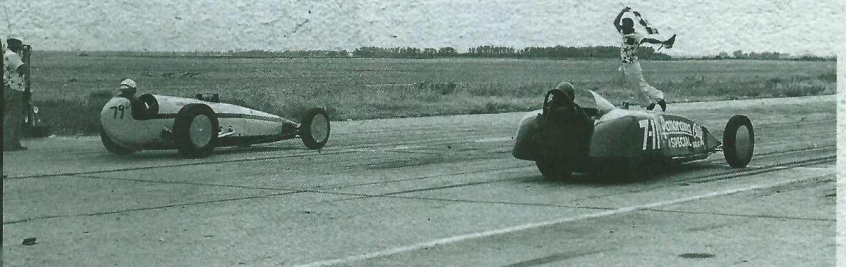


Good Luck  
Mickey Thompson  
406 M.P.H.



Larry is forever grateful. Mickey had a finely tuned bullshit meter and didn't have time for nonsense, however, when it came to seeing talent he helped the greats in their careers: Dale Pulde, Danny Ongais, Butch Mass, Jack Chrisman and Butch Leal to name a few. It was Mickey who started SCORE (short course off-road racing series) in the early '70s. Mickey also played on The Bricks, Indy would see some of his innovations, such as America's first mid-engine stock block to

qualify, and wide-profile low aspect-ratio tyres. He was tireless in off-road racing and would eventually (with his second wife Trudy) bring off-road racing to local stadiums, where the general public could see the Baja 1000 in a smaller and quicker environment. Mickey and Trudy formed the Mickey Thompson Entertainment Group. Unfortunately this new endeavour would also take Mickey from us all too soon, as his business partner was an unsavoury character. >

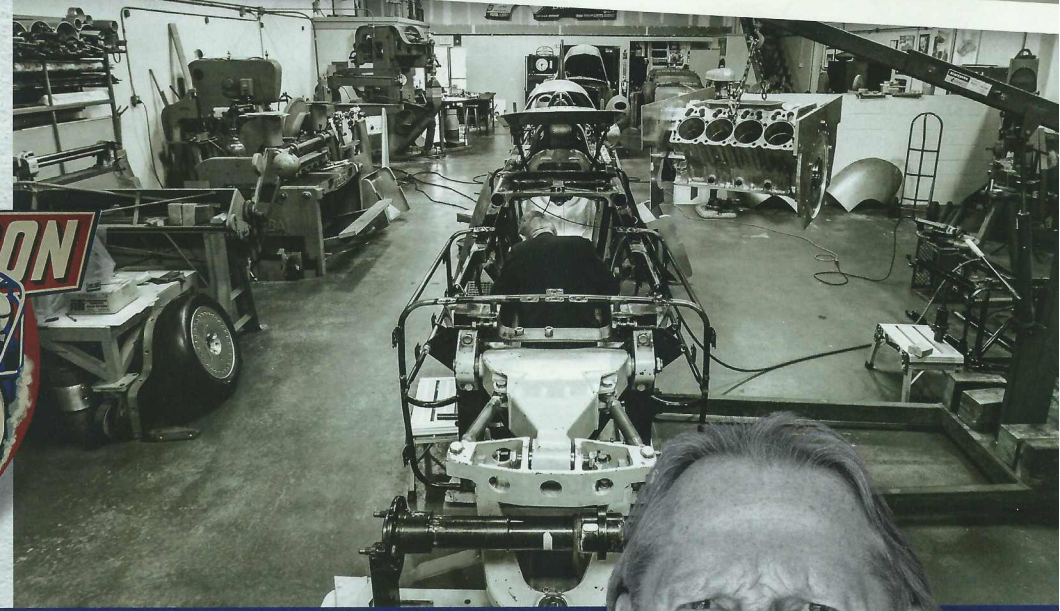
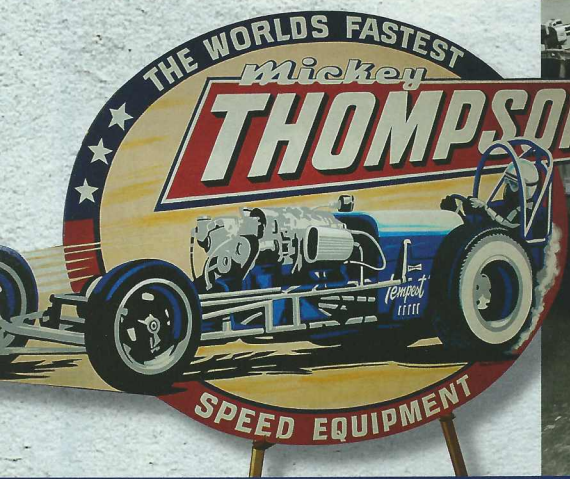




## END OF AN ERA

Mickey Thompson Entertainment Group would be Mickey's last hurrah. In March, 1988 'The Mick' and second wife Trudy were tragically taken from the automotive world he helped create. On behalf of her brother, Colleen Campbell Thompson never gave up on bringing the gunman to justice. Finally on January 4, 2007, the accused was given two consecutive life terms for his actions. Sadly, the world will never know the limitless ideas and innovations the sleepless Thompson had tucked away in his internal Rolodex. If a man's soul is a reflection of life's moments, then they define us. However, Mickey did not live for moments, he lived life in between them, where billions of nanoseconds exist. He embraced and nurtured them rather than letting them slip through his fingers like faded memories.

Marion Lee 'Mickey' Thompson – December 7, 1928 to March 16, 1988 – lived more in one month than most people do in a lifetime. At the time of his passing, Mickey's passion for speed and excitement had never waned for a moment.



## THE LEGACY CONTINUES

Mickey and Judy's son, Danny Thompson, was born in October 1949 with the Thompson gene. He started on his own career path at the tender age of nine, winning the Quarter Midget Championships in his first year. In his teens, he parlayed his driving skills to Formula Atlantic cars, moving to sprint cars, and then stadium racing at his dad's venue. You saw the pride in Mickey's face when Danny kicked arse over the competition. Although some say Danny carries his father's torch, we believe he found his own book of matches and lit his own way. He's a Thompson after all, and it's in his blood. The salt beckons him as it did his father, and he earned his own place in history

when he made the prestigious Bonneville 200mph Club in 2003. In 2008, at the 60th Anniversary of the Bonneville Speed Trials, Danny drove his Thompson-prepped Mustang to a new world record similar to what Mickey's 1969 Mustang did 40 years earlier, and 20 years after his passing.

Mickey had forged plans to put Danny in his old Autolite Special LSR car to test the salt, but after losing his dad, Danny said it just didn't feel right without him. Danny's quest today is to seek sponsors and break the 445mph-plus mark in his newly-designed Challenger 2.5 Streamliner.

See [www.thompsonlsr.com](http://www.thompsonlsr.com) for more on Danny and his need for speed. **vs**

