

Old Marshmallow Foot

'You can do it, easy,' lead-foot Mickey Thompson promised. But his dizzy co-driver got lost on the Salt Flats trying to set world speed records, and all he got was his name on the car door

Bob Ottum

Looking back on it now—from the relative safety of a [New York](#) office building—I can see that it must have been a form of insanity. Maybe a touch of the dread [Utah](#) Salt Flats Madness (*Saltus crazicus*), which makes men think they can climb into powerful cars and break world speed records. Lord knows, there had been plenty of warning from friends. "Going to drive a car at top speed for 24 hours?" they said. "You are out of your gourd." And two old buddies from *The Sail Lake Tribune*: "You've been out there on the flats before and seen people drive," they said. "They crash a lot."

There were other auguries that any clown could have seen. I had to sign a paper that said [Ford Motor Co.](#) would pay me \$50,000 in case I was killed, up to \$5,000 in case I bent anything, and there was a blank to fill in that said, in effect, "Where should we send the dough?"

Then there was the moment when they rolled out this brutish-looking 1969 Mustang Mach I with three names neatly painted on the door. Anyone who understands hoodoo would have quit right then. It said: DRIVERS [MICKEY THOMPSON](#), RAY BROCK, BOB OTTOM. Swell. Except that my name was spelled wrong.

"Jeez, I'm really sorry about that," Mickey said. "Lissen. Blame my secretary. Blame me. The sign painter. We can fix that up with a little tape and a Magic Marker." Then he got right down to business. "I think at first you ought to hold

her at, ummm, say, 65," he said. "Just until you get used to driving on the salt. It's tricky."

Sixty-five? You mean six-five, right? My *mother* can drive 65. I walked over to the car and peeked in. The in-sides had been ripped out; all that was left were bare metal ribs, two bucket seats and the dashboard. No speedometer. Just a tachometer. That is when this sort of hard, small knot first began to form inside my stomach. On a speedometer 65 is one thing; on a tach 65 is something else. Like 6,500 rpm. I yanked my head around toward Mickey. "What exactly is 65 on this thing?" I said.

He consulted his dream wheel, a handy pocket calculator which calibrates a 10-mile track and various gear ratios. "Let me see here," he said. "Umm, it's about 160 miles an hour with that gear in it. We're going to have to average a little better than that to get the records."

I nodded thoughtfully and bared all my teeth, doing my [A. J. Foyt](#) imitation. "Yeah," I said. "Oh, yeah, well, of *course* we'll have to run somewhere around that. *Hundred* sixty miles an hour, right?"

"You can do it."

"I can do it. Hundred...uhh, sixty, you said?"

Mickey looked over at me. "Maybe we should have started you on Cortinas," he said. "Well, go ahead. Take it around a few times."

A few minutes later I was out on a far corner of the Bonne-vile Salt Flats, off somewhere near the old Donner Trail, trying to wrestle the car out of a spin. I had been spinning crazily for about half a mile; I also had been looking at the tach. It wasn't anywhere *near* 65. The crash helmet had tilted down over my eyes, and my dark glasses were sitting out on the end of my nose. My palms

were wet, but I didn't want to let go of the wheel to wipe them on my pants. All sorts of distractions like that. The car was on fire, for one thing.

But let us take it from the top, as Mickey always says.

[Mickey Thompson](#) is [America's](#) last great hot rodder, lone survivor of an age that historians will one day call the Vroom Vroom Era. It was a time when kids raced around [California](#) in fast cars that were Model A's in name only—all full of trick things under the hood. [Thompson](#) is a sort of guru of things that go; he is an innovator, an inventor, a souper-upper. He holds the world record for grinding an engine-block head so thin you could hold it up to the light and read *The New York Times* through it. It was Mickey who dreamed up, designed and built the first slingshot dragster, which, as everyone knows now, is just what [America](#) always needed.

He once built a world-land-speed-record car that had a different [Pontiac](#) engine to power each of its four wheels and it had so many gearshift levers, dials and gauges that there was hardly room for him in the cockpit. First time in the thing, with an anxious crowd watching, each of the engines drove off in a different direction. At 201 mph. Backward. "Still needs a little work," Mickey said.

But later he unloaded the monster on the [Bonneville](#) Salt Flats and drove an historic 406.6 mph, faster than any motor-driven car had ever gone before—or has since. Unfortunately, to qualify for an official mark a car must make the measured-mile run in both directions through the clocks; Mickey ran one way, then turned the car around. It wouldn't run back.

But with all this, [Thompson](#) is still the best on the salt flats. There is something about the place that strikes a beautiful chord within him. The late Ab Jenkins and [Sir Malcolm Campbell](#) could drive like wild across that crystalline desert; [Andy Granatelli](#) and [Craig Breedlove](#) drive beautifully on the flats. But nobody drives like Mickey. "There is this thing," he will say. "I can *read* the salt;

I can see patterns and shadows in it and I seem to know exactly when a car will skid or hold on. I don't always hold on—but I can go to beat hell out there."

Mickey's full name is *Marion Lee Thompson Jr.* Imagine. Marion Lee. He is now 39 years old and wealthy, the dean of speed-equipment manufacturers. Years of nervous, compulsive candy eating and Cokes have changed his body lines from sports car to family sedan. Still, he crackles with nervous energy, and he continues to overpower problems because it is faster than solving them. He has a runaway crew cut and a smile that could disarm an angry water buffalo; it is the kind of Our Gang comedy, go-to-hell grin that makes women want to clutch him to their bosoms. Race Driver *Mario Andretti* has it; so does Skier *Jean-Claude Killy*. *Paul Hornung* used to try for it. *Joe Namath*, alas, has never come close.

Only Mickey would have the nerve to write the president of *Ford Motor Co.* and promise to make his new cars go fast. "How about some world speed records, you guys?" he said. And only Mickey could get them: *Ford* gave him three Mach I Mustangs right off the secret 1969 assembly line. Naturally it was all under cover.

"Lissen. I got this great new thing," Mickey said. He grinned, put one arm around me and pulled me into his confidence, his breath heavy with Coca-Cola. "I'm going to take these Mustangs out on the flats," he said, "and break a whole slew of records. And..." he jabbed a finger against my thorax, "...*you* get to drive with the team."

It is a well-known fact among my friends that I have never driven a car in anger. Old Marshmallow Foot, they call me around racetracks. But I was touched. "Jeez, Mick," I said, "I don't think I could..."

"Sure you could," he said.

"Uh, how fast?"

Mickey waved airily. "Oh, we're not going to go *fast*," he said. "We're going to go *steady*. The idea is to drive 24 hours, see, and get both speed and endurance records. You've been out on the salt flats many times. You could do it, easy."

That old demon pride took over. I squared my shoulders and drew up to my full height. "Sure I can," I said. "I've been out on the salt flats many times. I could do it, easy."

"That's just what I said," said Mickey.

And that is how, a few weeks later, we were standing out on the salt flats near the Utah-Nevada border, looking at this festive yellow [Mustang](#) with my name on the door. Misspelled. But the color was right.

Mickey had signed four drivers for the three cars: Mickey himself and a slender, handsome 26-year-old named [Danny Ongais](#), who were both professionals. Then there was Ray Brock, who is the publisher of *Hot Rod* magazine, and me. Brock has built, driven, tested and even raced cars for years. His magazine is strictly for knowledgeable auto buffs, and it carries articles with such titles as *Turbo Hydro Shift Control*. Brock is a very tough, yet strangely gentle, man, built along the lines of a much bigger [Harmon Killebrew](#), and he has gigantic, furry forearms. When he talks his voice sounds like it is coming from a cave.

Mickey gathered us around for a driver meeting. "Now here is what we're going to do," he said. "We're going to drive in shifts, about two hours on and two hours off, see, for 24 hours. It calls for superfast pit stops. Change drivers, add more fuel and away you go." He looked down at me. I was standing in Brock's shadow to escape the sun. "I don't know what the hell we are going to do when Ottum and Brock change," he said. "Tell you what: Ray will come boiling out of the car, see, and Ottum will jump in. And we'll slap a big pillow across Ottum's

lap to take up the slack in the seat belts."

"Aww, Mick," I said, "a *pillow*, for crissakes?"

"Well...uhh, well, I suppose we'll just have to take the time to tighten the god-dam belts down to half their size for you. But, then, when Ray gets back in we'll have to loosen them all the way again."

"Oh, we'll make it," Ray said.

Brock and I practiced jumping in and out of the car, adjusting the harnesses. We got it down to 24 seconds.

In addition to the yellow [Mustang](#) there was a blue one, which Mickey had set up for straightaway record runs, and another one the color of a good Beaujolais. All were production models, and everyone associated with the test runs had to sign a paper saying he wouldn't release any of the design details.

All right, no details. But this much I can say: one of the new Mustangs could sneak right under your arm if you happened to be standing on the street trying to hail a cab. Their noses turn down and their tails turn up. There is an air-scoop arrangement in front that could swallow anything up to the size of a medium spaniel. Best way, without giving away any secrets, is to tell you to squint your eyes and look at a [Ferrari](#) Berlinetta. Thank you, [Ford](#) Styling. And remember, you read it here.

The cars sat there and shook with horsepower. The yellow one carried a 302 cu. in. engine, about 450 horses; the red and blue models were jammed full of 427 engines—Ford likes to call them Cobra-jets—with about 575 hp. When one started up you could hear it roar in pain all the way past the horizon, and for days the people in nearby Wendover, [Utah](#) walked around shaking their heads and blinking their eyes.

Mickey fished around in a pile of boxes and got me a crash helmet; when I tugged it on, the sides pinched my upper teeth, where I have a great deal of bridgework, until my eyes watered. "Just about right," he said. No wonder race drivers go so fast. So they can finish and take those helmets off. The flameproof coveralls had not arrived for the team, so Mickey worked his way into an extra pair owned by Danny, who has a 28-inch waist. Mickey has a 44-inch waist. Just before driving each time, he stood on tiptoe and turned purple while his chief mechanic zipped him up. Rest of the time he walked around with the uniform unzipped, his fuzzy belly comfortably out, a slight heat rash starting to form in the open V. "I used to could wear this size," he said.

The [Bonneville](#) Salt Flats are savagely hot and so murderously white that a few minutes spent without dark glasses makes everything go all soft, like a Renoir oil. In the Miocene Epoch the flats were the bottom of a 1,000-foot-deep, 200-mile-long, 100-mile-wide lake. There are now 3,000 square miles of hard-packed salt beds left—the place is 35% bigger than [Delaware](#), but then, what isn't?—and the horizon plays crazy tricks. The mountains off to one side seem to float in the middle of the day and mirages keep popping in and out. "Beware of the sun bouncing off that white salt," warned Eric Rickman, *Hot Rod's* chief photographer. "You get a surprise sunburn from bouncing rays. Look," he tilted his head back to show us, "only place in the world where you can sunburn the inside of your nose."

To set up the record runs-, survey crews had laid out a 10-mile oval somewhere out toward the middle of the desert. "There are a pair of two-mile straight-aways," Mickey explained, "joined by three-mile curves at each end. A pure 10-mile circle would be easier to drive, but the salt's not in good enough shape for that this early in the season. So you'll have to be careful on those curves; just throw the car into them and bend her on around. Let the rear end drift out a little. It'll do it anyway at high speed."

He had parked his big **MICKEY THOMPSON ENTERPRISES** trailer out along the south straightaway, slightly inside the course. **Ford** had wheeled out a 60-foot house trailer to use as headquarters; **United States Auto Club** had its own portable timing-shack trailer parked farther down the line, with clocks and electric-eye speed traps set up. The crew of mechanics threw down huge flats of plywood on the salt, laid out their tools on them and—presto! Instant pits. Everyone walked around goggle-eyed from the heat and at times seemed to be moving slowly, dreamily, as men under water.

Then, suddenly, Mickey was ready. Co-driver Ongais was ready. Brock, with his giant arms and mountainous calm, was ready. Not me. I was still thinking about that 65 business on the tachometer, and occasionally I would wander over to the yellow car and look at it, trying to imagine it belly-up on the salt beds. But the assault on world speed and endurance records was under way.

On Sunday Mickey assembled the crew and announced that he had sneaked away late the night before, alone, for a sort of communion out on the desert. He also had driven the red car 185 miles an hour while communing.

"Man, it is reeely slippery out there on the No. 3 turn," he said. "I came skidding around that thing like you wouldn't believe. The sun and heat pull up the moisture from the salt, and it lies on the surface, see? I had her all hung out for about five miles, man. It's the greatest. Now you guys try it."

It was decided we would practice in the wine-colored car. "There ain't any spare practice engines for the yellow one in case someone screws it up," Mickey said, looking purposefully at me. "That's the engine we go for the record with. So you got to learn fast."

His face impassive—good drivers always have impassive faces; they practice the look secretly at night in front of their bathroom mirrors—Danny Ongais took Brock out in the **Mustang**. They came back in, ceremoniously changed

places, and Ray began to drive. We stood nervously and squinted across the salt until we lost the car in the shimmering heat waves. Then it materialized, wavering on the skyline and finally roared up. Brock pulled off his helmet. What hair he has left was matted wetly on his head. He was grinning widely.

"Started off at 5,400 rpm right off the bat," he said. "And first thing, I spun it out, and next thing you know I was running backward. The course is not exactly in ideal condition. Huh. The salt is too grainy. Slippery out there."

I painfully buckled on my helmet and climbed in with Danny.

As I was hooking up seat belt, crotch strap and shoulder harness, Mickey leaned in the window. "Run it up to 4,000 rpm before you shift gears," he said. "It's geared for very high revs. If the sumbitch wants to slide, just take that wheel and *pitch* it into the corners. You got to feel it with the seat of your pants."

I nodded, the helmet wagging back and forth on my head, flicked on the ignition switch, then the start switch. We slammed away, howling into the first turn. Danny leaned back, folded his arms and began to watch me.

Coming off the second turn I had it down through the gears, and the tach began to inch up past 4,300. Ongais nodded approvingly. He should never have done it.

The inside of the course was marked off with four-foot-high stakes driven into the salt. I sighted down the stakes and planted the wheels as close to them as I could; they began flashing by in a blur. Then it hit 4,500 rpm and a bit more than 4,500. Third turn coming up. The noise was fantastic; the car sounded madder than anything I had ever heard. Let's see now. Pitch it into that corner. So I took a deep breath and cranked it hard into the No. 3 turn. It was like making a turn on tapioca pudding. And we started to slide. That is, before we start-

ed to spin.

The **Mustang** whipped out of control, the back end snapped around, and suddenly we were going backward. Then it snapped around again in another 360◊ turn, and all my intestines got up and walked over to cling to the right side of my rib cage. I was sure we were going to roll over and maybe ruin the roof line. The crazy thing kept spinning wildly; another and another, until I could see the mountains flashing by the window every second. Then I began to notice other things. The stakes were flying up, across the hood and over the roof. I was faintly aware that the cockpit was somehow attracting salt. Ye gods, the place was *full* of salt. It hung there thickly in the air like a white mist. I licked my lips and began to fight the steering wheel. No chance, the car was not having any of that nonsense at the moment. Then, finally, it stopped spinning and sat there, all hunched down inside its own little swirling salt storm. I looked out the window. We were way off the course, and there were stakes lying scattered all around where they had been snapped off and tossed. Then flames started to streak out from beneath the hood.

I turned to Danny, who was blinking. "Look," I said. "We're on fire."

"Oh, Jesus," he muttered and began flicking the latches on his harness. I started unlatching everything I could get my hands on until the seat belts felt undone. Then I clambered out.

Ongais undid the latches and pulled the hood up. The flames were shooting up from what appeared to be about 82 carburetors. He swapped at them with his hands and finally blew them out. He looked across the car at me. "You spin," he said, "you must always put in the clutch so the engine isn't running frontward while you're running backward. It catches the car on fire, see?"

"Yeah," I said, "I noticed that."

We started the car again. It sounded all right, maybe a bit like it was hurting. And we drove back into the pits.

Mickey was pacing about unzipped with his stomach out. "Don't worry about the fire," he said. "Just don't do it again. By the way, you were going 145 miles an hour when you lost control. You like the ride?"

On Sunday evening Mickey got zipped up again and took the red car out. He came flashing around in 2:52.3—142.68 mph. Then 152.41 mph. Then 158.0 mph—a new unofficial world record. But he pulled in and yanked off his helmet. "Ain't a man *alive* can drive that course out there now," he announced. "I mean, I *never* spin out, but I had that car sideways; I mean, flat sideways, on the backstretch, and it went on and on and on. And all I could do was just sit there looking out the *passenger* window, man. Finally it broke loose and spun to beat hell. And if I spin out, everybody will. Time for a conference."

We decided the course would never hold up for 24 hours of pounding with the red car. Instead, we would postpone the Class B run. We would practice again Monday night, and Tuesday night we would all try for a 12-hour Class C record with the yellow [Mustang](#).

That settled, we got back into [Ford](#)'s regular-people cars and drove straight to the Utah-Nevada State Line Casino. It is the first whoopee city heading west from [Salt Lake](#); there are rows of slot machines, a crap table lined with high-rolling cowboys and a band up behind the bar playing and joshing with the customers. It was jammed with road-wrinkled tourists and, somewhere in there, our mechanics. They had beaten us. We knew, because there was a little trail of salty footprints—white against the bright green carpet—leading directly to the bar.

On Monday evening Mickey's crew began setting out flares, little red cannisters about the size of bowling balls, with wicks that burn like candles. The sun went

down, leaving a cerise-and-mauve afterglow and, finally, it got so dark that to step away from the light security of the trailer was to become lost forever.

Mickey and Danny clambered into the red car and ripped away into the blackness. It was then that a [Newport Beach, Calif.](#) moviemaker named John Holstrom, who was filming this heady drama for [Ford](#), saw the tight, dramatic shot he had been looking for.

As the car poured fluidly around the fourth turn and down the straightaway toward us, his crew raised the camera and flicked on a monster quartz spotlight—aimed right into Mickey's eyes.

"I went stone blind—poof!" Mickey said later. "I knew just roughly where the pits were, and I tried to keep the car from plowing into the trailer and wiping everybody right out."

The [Mustang](#) screamed by in a low, thin streak, then careened off the course, knocking out a couple of smoke pots and some more stakes. He finally got it controlled and rolled back in from the desert with a new series of dents and broken headlights from the stakes. The cars were starting to look lumpy. There was a spirited talk about the lights—with gestures—and John promised not to try for quite so much drama.

Mickey was clearly up tighter than ever about bringing home the world records for [Ford](#). "You're going to have to practice in the blue straightaway car," he told me, while we're putting headlights on the other one. Here." He reached over and put something down beside me. "Put a damn fire extinguisher in it this time, and don't burn yourself to death, will ya?"

I nodded soberly and started it up. Then I roared clear of the pits, that comforting pool of light and, suddenly, everything went stark black. I began to blink sort of earnestly; I have driven on lonely country roads at night and seen more.

But this time I was determined to do better. I looked around for the stakes and flares—the stakes were all shadowy and indistinct, and the flares finally showed up as little pinpricks of light. I got it going faster, listening to that building scream of power. There was no way to tell the course from the rest of the world. And it was, as promised, slippery.

The thing about racing is: a driver will do anything, *anything* to drive well past the pits where everybody can see him. Mechanics and crew chiefs can always tell if a driver is not stepping down on the gas; the car gives a special sort of whine. "Awww, old Balloon Foot is only just *stroking* it," they will growl, and turn away in disgust. Or, "Lissen to that," they will say; "old so and so ain't even got his foot in it." I came around the final turn and, seeing the lights of the trailer off on the horizon, knew that the time had come to get my foot into it. I did. I had not counted on the Mickey effect.

The USAC timing shack, followed by the big trailer, flashed past on my left in one quick burst or light, and then—like Mickey, like Ray and Danny—I went blind. The sudden change was too much. When my vision cleared—aside from a few spots of amber lights dancing around the edges—I spotted a flare on one side of the car and another flare on the other. Best thing to do, I figured, was to get the left wheels right up next to those flares and try that.

Crafty idea. After all, how was I to know that the crew had set the flares 10 feet *inside* the track so nobody would run over them? I discovered this little situation when I noticed some stakes whizzing by on my right, which meant that I had a seven-foot-wide car careening down a 10-foot corridor. Then one of the mileage markers loomed up dead ahead. I managed to skid past that one, nicking it with the car's tail, and settled down to look out for the others. Sure enough, they came flashing by, big and easy to read in the headlights.

One said: 3 MILES.

Then: 5 MILES.

Then: CALL YOUR OFFICE.

And: REPENT.

Finally I got back to the pits and climbed out. "I can't see a damn thing," I told Mickey.

"I sort of got that idea," he said.

One of the Autolite sparkplug men had the dream wheel. "How fast did I go?" I asked.

He figured it up. "Little better'n a hundred," he said. "That ain't much."

We were now up to our hipbones in broken headlights.

On Tuesday it was decided that Mickey and Danny would drive the shifts through the night, and that Brock and I would take over about dawn. Even if we drove slower, the earlier speeds held by the experts would be high enough to still get the records.

The run started at 11:04 p.m. Mickey zipped up, took an aspirin and took off.

In about three minutes and 45 seconds he showed everybody—the crew, the rank amateurs, Wendover, the [Ford Motor Co.](#), the world—what driving on the salt is all about. The incomparable Mickey, his crew cut all mashed down under that helmet, his bulldog sort of jawline all thrust out—his car in perfect tune and balance—howling along. The crew pulled up camp chairs, sat down and looked at one another and grinned. "Now," said Charlie Jackson, "yer going to see some plain and fancy driving, old buddies."

First lap was 152.606 mph. " 'Cause of that standing start," Charlie explained. "Now wait for the next one."

Second lap was 165.824 mph. and the car seemed stretched out across the night. First five laps averaged 164.640 mph for a new world record. The first 10 laps averaged 163.890 mph—6.897 miles over the world record—and the yellow car continued to whoop along.

Fourteenth lap, Mickey whipped in, took on one glass of water and 28 gallons of gas (he was getting 5.4 miles to the gallon at that speed) and went out after more marks. He got them. At 12:52 a.m. Danny got in and continued the pace.

"Man, it's like driving on slush," Mickey said. "But we are getting the records." He unzipped and flashed the grin.

Then, at the 500-mile mark—with 40 world records set—it was suddenly all over. The course had become impossible; there was every chance that one false move out there would spin the car to somewhere just outside [Baton Rouge](#).

But Mickey had done it again. "Lemme see," he said. "Every record in class from 25 kilometers to 500 miles in both standing and flying starts. [Goodby, [Craig Breedlove](#) in the 1968 AMX.] Then the one-hour standing-start record with a speed of 158.866 mph—that's 5.6 mph over the old one. And..."

And plenty of others. His 500-mile standing-start mark was 159.518 mph—3.2 mph faster than the old record. "And just wait," Mickey said, "until the salt gets better and you see that *red* car go."

Still in driving uniform, he went up to the State Line Casino, ordered a drink, waved hello to everybody, bellied up to the blackjack table and won \$700.

Brock and I sat there, staring moodily into our drinks. He had his big arms planted on the table.

"Well," I said, "let's see. I hold the world's speed record for company station wagons."

"And I," said Brock, "must hold the world records for 1969 Mustangs being driven at great speeds—sideways. Too bad we didn't get to drive. But I'm glad ol' Mick got the records."

We ordered more Scotch and thought about it some more. Then Brock brightened. "Listen," he growled in that bear-voice, "I've just got a great idea for the title to my story in *Hot Rod*. And I'll tell you if you promise not to steal it."

I looked up at him reproachfully. "Steal your headline?" I said. "Never."

"O.K." Ray sighed and wrapped one hand around his glass. "I'm going to call my story.

At Least I Got My Name on the Door."