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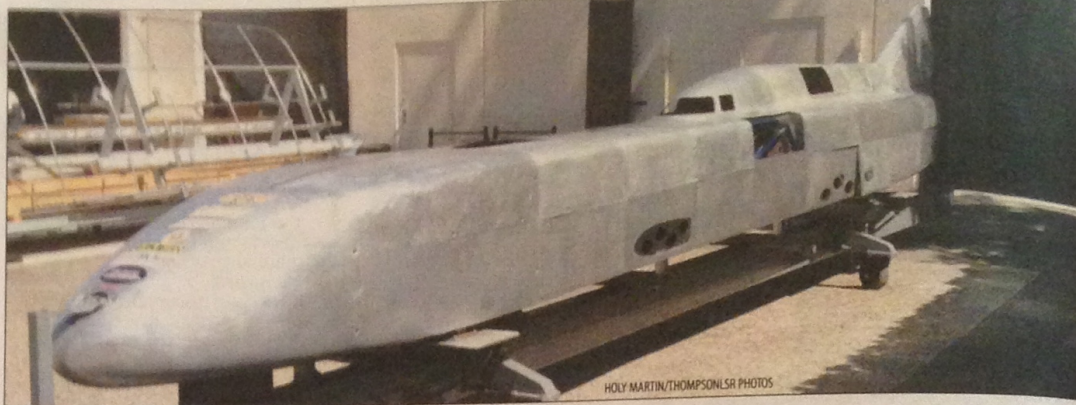


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HOLY MARTIN/THOMPSONLSR PHOTOS

By Danny Thompson

## Bonneville Is A Little Like Heaven

The world's fastest speedway is part of the Utah desert. Where once there was a salt lake now sits 30,000 acres of glistening white flatness, the perfect track for racers who need as much time and space as possible to push their vehicles to the limit.

It's called the Bonneville Salt Flats, but to me it's a little bit like heaven.

People interested in pushing the limits of speed have been coming here for generations. The 110th anniversary of the first official record, set by an American named Teddy "the Terrible" Tetzlaff, will take place next year. But it took a Brit to really put this dusty corner of Western Utah on the map.

Malcolm Campbell spent years bouncing back and forth between Florida's Daytona Beach and Britain's Pendine Sands with his Blue Bird, looking for the perfect place to make a 300 mph run. He found the salt flats in 1935 and put his name in the record books and Bonneville on the map.

The world's longest commercial runway is less than 3.4 miles long. Bonneville's short course measures more than five miles. A few days before an event, a truck drags the track to smooth the salt and get rid of any obvious debris. The best time to run is usually in the morning when the ground and the air are both still cool. Those conditions result in a firm surface that is similar to a typical road, albeit with less traction.

People don't typically come to the salt to set quarter-mile records. As the air heats up, the ground loses some of its firmness and becomes a little bit slushy. That's not ideal, but drivers eager for track time take what they can get.

Bonneville's unusual traction requirements mean that cars tend to be a little bit heavier than you'd suspect. Wobbles that can't be addressed with aerodynamic changes are often tackled by adding weight and it's not unusual to see teams adding pounds as they experiment with different formulas.

Tires are strange as well. Tread is totally absent and the rubber is applied so thinly it can seem painted on. The fastest cars rely on a nylon cross-weave, which is better at resisting the enormous heat generated during a typical run. Anything more than the most minimum amount of rubber can fling free as a result of momentum and expansion. Universally present are the famous "Bonneville hubcaps," which look like perfectly smooth flattened orbs that are attached to the wheels.

Driving at Bonneville can be a disorienting experience. The sheer emptiness of the landscape

leaves racers without any decent visual reference points, so it's easy to get confused and wander off the track. For many years a single black line was painted on the salt to keep drivers oriented.

Environmental concerns caused officials to move away from that and install a new system that relies on large orange mile markers. They technically have numbers on them, but the rough ride makes them difficult to spot as you fly past, so I count them as I go.

Fast hands, which have served me well over the years, are a good way to get into trouble on the salt. Successful movement is slow and gradual, which can make the quickest moments of your life feel like they're coated in molasses. But that discipline is important. I took a tumble in a Mustang a few years ago and was in the air for nearly 1,000 feet before I touched down again. Needless to say, at record speeds, proper safety equipment is a priority. Deep breaths don't hurt either.

If you like interesting people, you'll love competing on the salt. I've been a race car driver all my life and I've never encountered a friendlier group of intensely competitive people. That's partially due to the diversity of the field, which encompasses everything from high-speed streamliners like mine to electrical cars and motorcycles.

As different as the owners of all these vehicles are (and believe me, they are different) they all have at least one thing in common, which is a desire to take their equipment and make it go faster than anyone has ever gone before. Bonneville is generally raceable for a three-month span beginning in August and these passionate people organize their lives around that window. They sacrifice their nights and weekends, their vacations and their paychecks, in the pursuit of success.

My adventures on the salt didn't begin until 2003, but Bonneville has been a big part of my life for much longer than that.

In 1960, my dad, Mickey Thompson, was the first American to drive over 400 mph. He did it in a streamliner called the Challenger I, which he built in the small garage behind his home. My favorite part about that story is that his run made the cover of the *Los Angeles Times*, where he had been working at night as a pressman to pay for the parts he needed to finish the car.

He became the fastest driver in the world that day, but he didn't get his name in the record books. Official recognition requires a two-way run and the car broke down on the return trip. Of course, being Mickey, his dry spell didn't last



MICKEY &amp; DANNY THOMPSON

long. He went on to hold more speed and endurance records than any other person in history, but he never forgot the big one that slipped through his fingers.

And that's what has been keeping me busy for the last two years. The Challenger I became pretty well known, but it's successor, the Challenger II, has been more of a mystery. It was constructed in 1968 and was a collaboration between my dad's crew of Southern California hot rodders and Ford's Kar Kraft specialty shop.

A two-engined vehicle, the Challenger II has a long, narrow profile and a beautiful skin of hand-formed aluminum. It was assembled by some of my fabrication heroes, and went nearly 400 mph in testing, well ahead of its predecessor at the same point. My dad tried to run it for a record in '68, but he was rained out and decided to mothball the project when it became clear the major sponsors weren't going to stick out the delay.

He and I actually tried to run it together in '88, but as I'm sure many of you know, he was murdered before we could complete the project.

The 50th anniversary of my dad's original 406 mph run was in 2010. I'd been retired from racing for a while at that point and decided that completing my dad's life's work was something I really wanted to do for the both of us.

I pulled the car out of storage and have been working on it ever since at my shop in Huntington Beach, Calif. We're getting pretty close now and I plan to have the Challenger II running before the end of the year.

Thank you for letting me share some of my thoughts about Bonneville and I invite you to learn more about my project if you are interested. There is plenty of information available at [thompsonslsr.com](http://thompsonslsr.com).