

Xavier Boucherat / Motoring Feature/ 09-03-15

//Publication//

Telegraph Motoring

//Headline//

Need for speed

//Standfirst//

Danny Thompson is reaching the end of his racing career, but out on the Bonneville Salt Flats, there's one more score to settle...

//Blowquote//

If everything goes perfectly, he'll have traded millions of dollars for a thirty-second run in an empty desert.

//Body//

Each winter, Utah's Bonneville Salt Flats are flooded by an inch of standing water, rendering the State's iconic wilderness inaccessible. It's not until August, when temperatures start hitting forty degrees Celsius and the vast, shallow lake finally evaporates, that the true desolation of the flats unveils itself. Here is a place so unforgivingly flat, so utterly levelled by nature, that the curvature of the earth is clearly visible.

It's small wonder then that a certain breed of people have been using the flats to push motors to the absolute limit from as early as 1914, when 'Terrible' Teddy Tetzlaff hit 141 mph in his *Blitzen Benz*. Just over twenty years later, this record was doubled when English motorist and journalist Sir Malcolm Campbell hit 301 mph in his *Bluebird*. 1964 saw Craig Breedlove become the first man to hit over 500 mph on land, albeit in a jet-propelled car.

But there's one incident in the history of Bonneville that, over 54 years later, lies heavy on race-car driver Danny Thompson's shoulders, with all the unmistakable weight of unfinished business. It was 1960 when reporter, entrepreneur and hot-rod enthusiast Mickey Thompson broke the existing landspeed record of 402 mph in his four-engined *Challenger 1*, reaching just over 406 mph.

Were you to look, however, you would not find Mickey's name in the record books. Although successful on the journey out, *Challenger 1* couldn't make the return journey. Without a second reading, and thus an average speed, Thompson was ineligible under the punishing certification guidelines laid down by the Federation Internationale de l'Automobile (FIA). Eight years later he was ready to try again, this time in his *Challenger 2*, but rain would hide the flats once more beneath an ankle-deep lake, rendering the attempt impossible.

Danny Thompson is telling me this story over Skype, from his base in Huntington Beach, California. "My dad came to me in 1988, just after my son was born," he says. "He said, 'I wanna run this car again, but I don't think I'm gonna drive it. Do you wanna drive it?' Hell yeah. Absolutely. I wanna drive the car." Growing up, Thompson senior had forbidden Thompson junior from any sort of participation in the racing circuit, and what experience Danny had gained by this time had been solely off his own bat without any help from his

celebrity-status father. “So the fact that he came to me and asked me to drive this car was just, tremendous. We came to an agreement. He was gonna find sponsorship and run the front end of things, and I would take care of all the mechanics and drive the thing.”

Then, in March 1988, Mickey and his wife were murdered in their home – shot dead by two hooded gunmen in what the LA Times, Mickey’s former employer, described as one of Los Angeles County’s most enduring murder mysteries. Former business associate Michael Goodwin, the inventor of *Supercross* motorcycle racing, was eventually jailed in 2007 for orchestrating the brutal crime, in which prosecutors argued Mickey was forced to witness the execution of his wife, prior to his own murder.

“I let it sit for twenty more years,” Thompson says. “I just didn’t feel like doing it without him. It was a real father-son deal.” As the 50th anniversary of Mickey’s initial attempt drew closer, however, Thompson decided the time was right to contend with his father’s lifelong ambition. Moreover, he was going to do it in his dad’s forty-seven year old car.

I’VE BEEN THROUGH THE DESERT...

As far as eccentric ideas go, Thompson is in good company on the Bonneville circuit, home of the Southern California Timing Association (SCTA) ‘Speed Week’, which each year brings out up to six hundred cars and motorcycles from all over the country to compete in a multiplicity of landspeed attempts.

This is one of Bonneville’s big curios — the bewildering number of vehicle classes. Thompson’s class allows for unlimited body style and unlimited engine size, but no superchargers or turbochargers. It’s a strict piston and petrol affair, symbolic of a purity that many find lacking in events like the jet powered classes where the absolute landspeed record lies (currently held by RAF fighter pilot Andy Green at just over 763 mph).

Beyond the pull of the main events, however, lie the amateurs and hobbyists operating at the outer limits of the motoring spectrum. “What’s really cool about Bonneville,” begins Danny excitedly, “is you’ll see some stuff and think, ‘oh my gosh, there’s no way in hell that’s going to work, that’s the ugliest thing I’ve seen in my life, what were these people thinking?’, but on the flipside of that coin you realise, whoever this guy is, be he a doctor, a lawyer or a gas pump attendant, he’s been working on this car all year long and he thinks it’s the best idea in the world.”

Bonneville sees everything from monstrous, gas-guzzling hot-rods to three-wheelers to motorised bar-stools — and the future’s here too, with electric car team Venturi holding their own record at 307 mph. The way Danny sees it, the entire Bonneville culture is yet another product of that fierce independence of spirit so typically associated with our American cousins — that insatiable desire to just get things done, to make things happen, for better or worse.

There’s a problem though, and it’s a classic — unbridled passion alone rarely balances the books. The 2015 campaign is now at a critical point, with Thompson under enormous pressure to secure sponsorship, and re-hire his team in time for the summer season. “Right now I’m down to two more months of rent,” he says candidly. “If I don’t find sponsorship before then, we’re done.”

MONEY TO BURN

Currently at Huntington Beach, Thompson is, by necessity, a one man racing team. "I'm kinda the chief bottle dishwasher," says Thompson, and not without perhaps a hint of weariness. "I'm the driver, owner, fabricator, mechanic, sponsor finder – until I get my guys back, I'm everything."

Compared to the budgets for cars in other sections of the racing industry, Thompson is essentially on the hunt for pocket change. "Nascar will spend maybe 20m a year. Numbers for F1 cars are approaching inconceivable levels. Like Ferrari said one time – the budget is what it takes." As it turns out Thompson is only asking for a mere 750,000 dollars US – hardly enough to even pay the majority of his staff, himself included.

The sacrifices are numerous. Last year saw Thompson sell five of his dad's cars, some of which still hold records to this day. What was originally a one-year excursion to Huntington Beach has become a five-year stay, which has seen Thompson and his wife leave their home in Colorado.

"When you put this much energy into something, it comes at the expense of other things" says Danny's 26-year-old son Travis, who himself has assisted his dad with a highly successful social media campaign. "There is no rational case to make for what Danny is doing. If everything goes perfectly, he'll have traded millions of dollars for a thirty-second run in an empty desert. At this point, it's Mallory and Everest. For those who've remained involved, passion has burned all the cynicism away. If anyone felt different, we'd have given up years ago."

The pay-off arrived last summer, when *Challenger 2* took to the flats for its first full runs. The 2014 season saw Thompson, like his father, come agonisingly close to success. The outward run of their attempt for the national record saw *Challenger 2* hit 419 mph. "The record in our class for Bonneville SCTA is 392 mph. So we beat that record by 27 miles, but you have to do it twice."

Following a run, the SCTA allow four hours work on a vehicle, prior to the next day's run. Hopes were high, but a clutch failure on the return journey saw the car drop into neutral, forcing Thompson to navigate off of the course. "We didn't get to finish the return run, so we didn't get a record." History would go on to further repeat itself when the season's remaining events were rained out.

What success Thompson's team did achieve, however, appears to have strengthened their resolve. Summer 2015 will see them go for the same SCTA record, but then, if successful, Thompson will go after the same FIA certification that thwarted Mickey. The problem is, the French make the SCTA record look like a cakewalk.

CALM BEFORE THE STORM

"You have to be done with it all in one hour," says Danny. That's one hour to make the run down, turn the thing around, fill up the 50 gallon tank, change 32 spark plugs, adjust the valves, change the oil in both engines and make the run back. On top of that, the record has

to be broken by 1% to qualify, and the current record is considerably higher than the SCTA figure at 414 mph.

But gear changes, transmission changes and clutch changes have got Thompson excited to get back out there. "The hardest part is the waiting," he says. "I don't know how fast it's gonna go, but it's gonna go faster." He's reluctant to guess how fast though. "If I put a number out there and I don't hit it, then I'm an asshole!" he laughs.

"It's the end of my career," he concedes, but Thompson's not one to go gentle into that good night. "At the end of the day," he adds, "I just wanna be the baddest man at Bonneville. I wanna be the fastest piston powered driver ever. Whether or not I can do that, I don't know. But that's what drives me."

//Boxout//

THE TECH SPEC

Engines: 2 x Hemi V8, 2000hp

Length: 32 feet

Width: 34 inches

Powertrain: 4 wheel drive

Fuel type: Nitro-methanol blend

Fuel required for run: 50 gallons – over the course of a run the car will lose 500 pounds in weight.

Tyres: Prototype nylon weave – these use 1/32 of an inch of rubber. Any more would see them spin off due to heat expansion.

Breaks: Primary stopping power provided by dual parachutes, complemented by ceramic disk brakes.

Xavier Boucherat / Motoring News / 23-03-15

//Headline//

Auto Trader IPO is biggest since Royal Mail

//Standfirst//

The auto-classifieds site now dominates the digital marketplace, nearly two years after the end of their iconic print publication

//Body//

Auto Trader have floated shares on the London Stock Exchange. Unconditional dealing will commence on March 24th, and will see shares make an official appearance on the market priced at 235p each. Conditional dealing has already begun.

The 235p price-point values the business at £2.35bn, making it the biggest initial public offering since Royal Mail shares were made available, and the largest the City has seen this year. Predicted interest in the stock suggests Auto Trader will quickly take a place in the FTSE-250.

The high-profile launch is testament to the Manchester-based company's dominance of the digital automotive marketplace. First appearing online in 1996, the site now attracts some 35 million visitors each month. When announcing their intention to float, the group claimed 92% of UK consumers were aware of the brand, that 65% of used car transactions in the UK involved cars on Auto Trader, and that 80% of UK car dealers were now advertising through the site.

First appearing as a print publication in 1977, Auto Trader ran their final print issue in June 2013, with circulation figures having fallen from 368,000 at its peak in January 2000 to just 27,000.

"This was driven purely by the consumer and their behaviour," said Nigel Wonnacott of JJ Marketing on the transition from a print publication to an online service-driven operation. "We were seeing more and more research online, a greater expectation of stock aggregation in one place on the internet, and a steady decline in readership. It was managed extremely successfully." Indeed, he suggests, the move away from print has freed up resources that have seen the company arrive in a position where they hold 50% of the market share, and almost twice as much stock as the nearest competitor.

Auto Trader itself remains a unique proposition, with much of its competition coming in the form of community-driven sites that lack its specialisation and strength of branding, helped in part by the legacy of the magazine. Challenges remain however - eBay Motors share a connection with the world's largest marketplace, essentially guaranteeing them a substantial portion of the market. Meanwhile Gumtree, the UK-based classifieds site, continues to push into the used-motor market across all major social media platforms, with a heavy focus on the site's ease of use - a possible dig at the sheer amount of options and customisation that face Auto Trader users.

The question now facing Auto Trader is where to go next, and what shape any future developments may take. Despite healthy figures, a report in The Times claimed that Auto

Trader site traffic had actually dropped by 19% in 2014. Wonnacott explained the focus now lay on involving the retail audience, and pulling more dealers into Auto Trader's own marketplace.

"We need to help them navigate a path through the new digital world in which consumers operate," he said, "providing them with the tools, products and services that help them win – in choosing the right stock, pricing it competitively to the live market, and selling it quickly."

Like many internet-based companies, success in the future will be dependent on the effective collection and use of user data. Searches leave behind huge data trails.

"These can then be mined, collated and turned into intelligence that keeps the dealers ahead of the competition," said Wonnacott. It can be difficult to get some dealers to see that the world has changed, but those that have embraced the new digital revolution are those that are thriving."

//Picture Ideas//

- Shot of a flash car in the City, perhaps outside the Gherkin, could try and get this myself or scour creative common.
- Hi-res covers from the magazine could be sourced from the site.

//Captions//

A - Auto Trader's arrival in the City is hard to ignore.

B - Auto Trader find themselves far more able to serve people online than in print.

//Pull Quote//

"We were seeing more research online, an expectation of stock aggregation, and a decline in readership. It was managed extremely successfully"

//Digital Treatments//

- A tablet edition could feature a line-graph / timeline charting the rise of the digital automotive market, showing where markets such as Auto Trader, eBay motors, Gumtree Motors, Pistonheads etc. all came online along with other events such as the cessation of the Auto Trader print-publication. Along the X-Axis could run the years, and if we could get hold of the data, the Y-Axis could show how many cars were being sold on an annual basis.
- Failing this, we could have a slideshow of infographics for each of the main competitors, with facts and figures for each superimposed on top of their respective logos.

//Sketches included for Print and Tablet editions//

//Ends//