

# WORLD'S FASTEST SPORTS CAR

**1971 TRIUMPH GT6 FROM TUCSON HITS 305.596 MPH**

Story and photos by Larry Edsall

Keith Copeland of Tucson was traveling an estimated 250 miles per hour when his car blew over backwards on the Bonneville Salt Flats in the late summer of 2008. Copeland was seriously injured in the crash. Indeed, his recuperation needed a year and a half. But recuperate he did. And when he did, he approached his long-time race car-building buddy and fellow Tucson resident Mark Hanson to build him a new racer.

Hanson agreed, but with one major provision. Hanson had not designed the car that crashed in 2008, but he insisted he create this new car, and from end to end.

"I've helped Keith for six years," Hanson said at the Goodguys Rod & Custom Association's annual season-ending Southwest Nationals car show at WestWorld in Scottsdale, where the new and record-setting car was among the most unusual of the couple of thousand hot rods and custom vehicles on display.

"We learn something each time we race," Hanson added, "and we learned a lot in his crash."

Copeland's goal was to set a world land speed record while exceeding 300 miles per hour.

Copeland and Hanson would prepare their new car for the BFMS category. That's B as in blown, F as in fuel, M as in modified, and S as in sports car category.

To fit within the rules as set forth by the Southern California Timing Association, which governs such speed record racing, Hanson sought a small car with exceptional aerodynamic airflow off its rear end. However, rules allow for some seri-

ous modification to the front of the car, and the addition of stabilizing fins to the rear, for that matter.

Hanson's quest came down to two vehicles, though neither certainly was built originally to set any sort of land speed records.

Car One was a three-wheeled and boat-tailed Messerschmitt, one of Europe's tiny and so-called bubble cars of the post-WW2 era. Car Two was a 1971 Triumph GT6, a 95-horsepower British sports coupe.

Hanson really liked the idea of modifying the Messerschmitt, but the SCTA would not accept the three-wheeler. Hanson was undaunted. Though not designed for anything approaching Bonneville-level speeds, Hanson knew the GT6 "has a really good posterior, especially once you chop the top off the car."

While the back end of the car would remain basically in stock form, well, except for adding some sheetmetal stability fins and the parachutes needed to slow the car at the end of its runs, rules allow extreme modifications ahead of the firewall, and thus the Black Salt Racing team's GT6 looks unlike anything British Leyland ever built.

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For one thing, the wheelbase was stretched from 83 to 130 inches. For another, a 360-cubic-inch Brodix-block V8 engine was installed, and topped with a pair of turbochargers. Power—1400 horsepower—from that engine goes to the front wheels, not those at the rear.

Hanson, who owns a company called StrangeFab Metalcrafts, sheathed the front end in swoopy, aero-efficient sheetmetal.

Hanson said he opted for front-wheel drive because “I’ve never seen a carriage with a horse pushing it.”

He also said that because of the FWD setup, the car tracks as straight as a dart, a very important characteristic in a vehicle capable of speeds in excess of 300 miles per hour.

By the way, Hanson’s operation

demonstrates that you don’t have to be big to be good. He works out of a two-car garage, where he also builds bodywork for off-road racers, rock crawlers, road racers and drag racers, and does other metalworking projects.

It took Hanson nine months to build the car, then another two days to find a way to get the low-slung vehicle into the trailer that would carry it to Bonneville for the Speedweek speed runs in 2010.

The car hit 275 mph on only its third run down the salt. Though unofficial, that speed exceeded the existing record of 237.87 mph set by nothing less than a Ferrari Enzo.

In the fall of 2011, just a few weeks before the Goodguys season finale at WestWorld, the Black Salt team was back

at Bonneville. This time, Copeland did 313 mph, only to have rain stop his mandated return run and bid for the official record. But he achieved both those goals the following day, and secured the official C/BFMS record at a two-way average of 305.596 mph.

The Black Salt team plans to return to Bonneville late in 2012, and already has begun tweaking the engine and making some modifications to the car. It has set a goal of taking its record to 340 mph, a speed, Hanson notes, that presents an interesting challenge.

“At 340 mph,” he explains, “the air under the car goes supersonic,” and thus creates its own sonic boom, “and we’re not sure what’s going to happen when it goes ‘BANG!’” ■

