

Mickey Thompson's Challenger 2: Chapter 2

BY LARRY EDSALL



Challenger 2.5 scale model

Photo: Larry Edsall

In 1960, Mickey Thompson, a racing pioneer and innovative genius who built cars for Indy, for drag racing, and for off-road competition, set out to become the first American to exceed 400 miles per hour in a piston-driven vehicle.

He built a Bonneville-style streamliner, the Challenger I, and used its quartet of supercharged Pontiac engines to cover a measured mile at 406.6 mph, nearly 100 mph faster than the 22-year-old world record.

Unfortunately, Thompson was denied the record because his car could not complete the second half of the required two-way run on the Utah Salt Flats.

Five years later, that record was broken by the Summers Brothers and their four-engined Goldenrod racer, which completed the necessary two-way run and boosted the wheel-driven record to 409.189 mph.

Undaunted but even more determined,

Thompson built a new car. Officially known as the Ford Autolite Special because of its pair of supercharged Ford engines, Thompson's Challenger 2 was rained out of its bid for a record run in 1968, and the entire effort was put on hold in 1969 when Detroit automakers withdrew their financial support of such motorsports programs.

Thompson went on to other racing endeavors, but early in 1988 he approached his son, Danny, and suggested they revive the quest, with Mickey preparing the car and Danny doing the driving.

"A month later, my father was killed," Danny recalls, tears still filling his eyes these 23 years later, as he announced his plan to update his father's car and to make an attempt late next summer "to finish my dad's dream and to fulfill my dream."

Thompson made his announcement at the recent Specialty Equipment Market Association (SEMA) Show, which annually brings together those who produce and those who buy automotive

aftermarket equipment around the world. Their wares fill all three huge buildings that comprise the Las Vegas Convention Center and overflow into the parking lots outside.

Though a closed-to-the-public trade event, the SEMA Show annually draws around 100,000 people and a couple thousand customized vehicles for one of the largest automotive events in the country.

Remarkably, the official wheel-driven land speed record Mickey Thompson pursued and Danny Thompson seeks has climbed only to 417.020 mph, though cars recently have exceeded 440 on one-way runs at Bonneville.

With financial backing from Mickey Thompson Performance Tires & Wheels and, he hopes, additional sponsors, a 63-year-old but remarkably fit Danny Thompson will equip Challenger 2.5 with a pair of nitro-fueled 500-cubic-inch engines he expects to provide 3000 horsepower to a set of M/T tires that already have been "spun" to 590 mph.

SEMA SHOW HIGHLIGHTS

The SEMA Show is a trade show produced by the Specialty Equipment Market Association (SEMA), a nonprofit trade association founded in 1963. Since the first annual SEMA Show in 1967, the event has been the leading venue to connect manufacturers and buyers within the automotive specialty equipment industry. Products featured enhance vehicle styling, function, comfort, convenience and safety. The SEMA Show and the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) vie for position as the largest in Las Vegas annually, by various measures.

SEMA CAR AND TRUCK AWARDS

The SEMA Award honors vehicles that specialty equipment manufacturers vote as best platforms for accessorization and that showcase this year's coolest products, in four categories: Hottest Car, Hottest Sport Compact Car, Hottest Truck and Hottest 4x4-SUV. The award also underscores the cooperative relationship between automakers and SEMA-member companies.

The 2011 SEMA Show had over 2,000 exhibitors, who manufacture thousands of products for every make and model, but this year they were investing heavily in the four winners, meaning consumers can expect to find more options for accessorizing these vehicles.

The winners, with examples (shown at right), are:

HOTTEST CAR: CHEVROLET CAMARO: Chevrolet and Hot Wheels unveiled a life-size Hot Wheels Camaro Concept, inspired by the Custom Camaro Spectraflame 1:64-scale toy from the original 16 Hot Wheels cars released in 1968. A Camaro SS was modified with classic Hot Wheels design cues, including flat-black graphics, red-line wheels and a dazzling metallic-green finish.

HOTTEST SPORT COMPACT CAR: FIAT 500: Road Race Motorsports prepared this Fiat 500 for Zeitronix, with added performance for B-Spec racing, one fearsome little hatchback. The heavily-customized Italian track car has been totally stripped for weight and its engine tweaked for more power, a respectable 133hp. Power enhancements include a Road Race intake system, sport exhaust and tuned engine.

HOTTEST TRUCK: FORD F-SERIES: This super Ford Super Duty monster truck is the product of Odyssey Batteries by EnerSys®, through a new partnership with legendary monster truck innovators BIGFOOT® 4x4 Inc. EnerSys will provide ODYSSEY® batteries for the team's seven touring BIGFOOT monster trucks, in addition to its fleet of transporters and support vehicles. All will sport ODYSSEY® battery logos for the 2011 season.

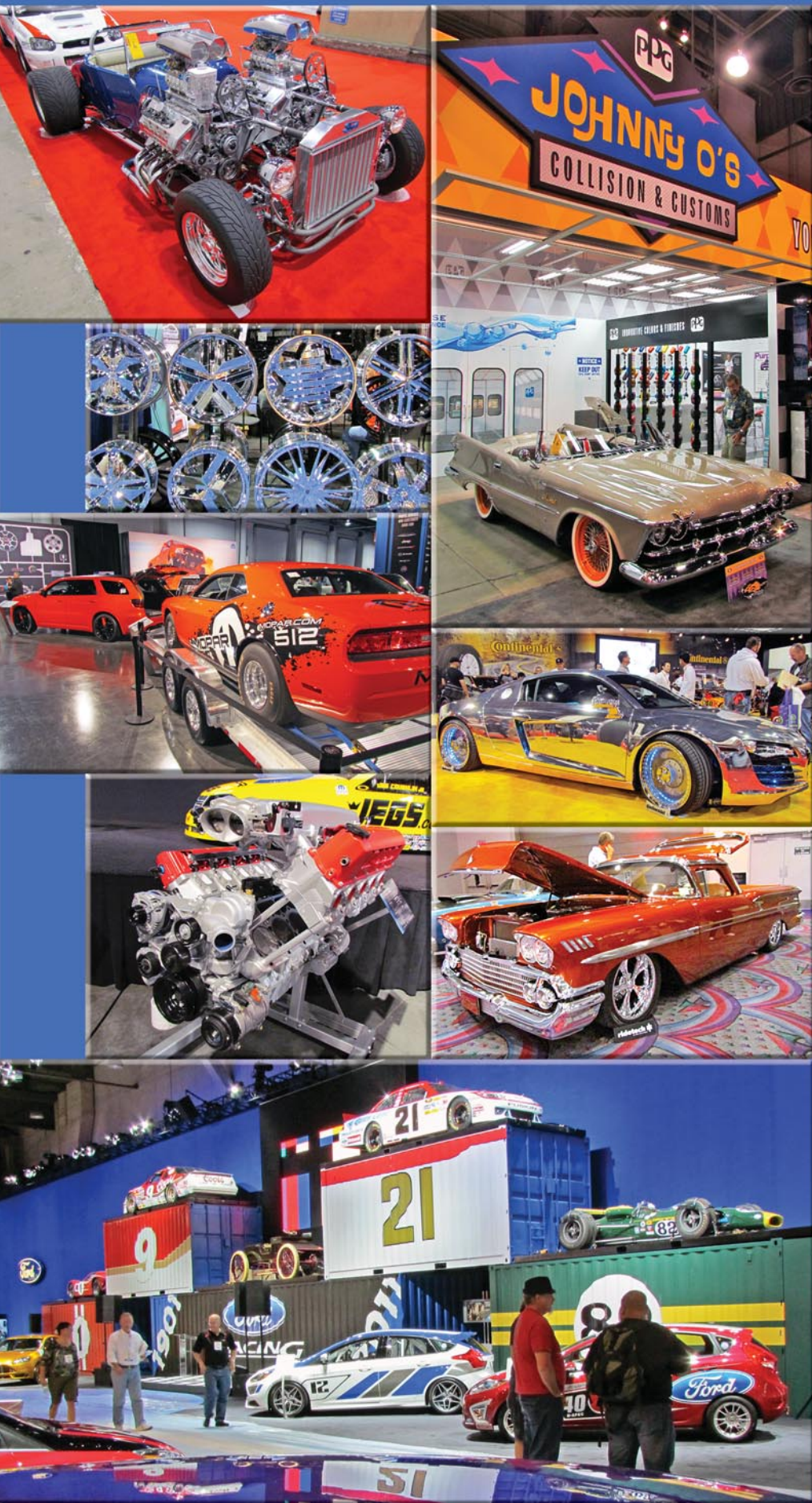
HOTTEST 4X4-SUV: JEEP® WRANGLER: BDS Suspension added more than a few touches to a 2010 Jeep Wrangler to produce this four-no-door beauty. BDS went with a "great outdoors" theme at SEMA, complete with campfire and tent. BDS Suspension engineers and manufactures high quality aftermarket suspension lift kits, leveling kits and accessories for 4x4 off-road truck and Jeep enthusiasts, with a lifetime warranty.



Photo: Larry Edsall



KEEP RIGHT >>



SEMA SHOW

A TASTE OF SEMA

(Clockwise from upper left):

Double Trouble is the name given this hot-rod, two-engined, 1927 Model T roadster built by Gordon Tronson, a New Zealand native who lives in Las Vegas. And, yes, that's a blender mounted above the right-side V8.

PPG promotes its specialized automotive paint products by setting up a huge display, which this year took the form of Johnny O's Collision & Customs shop. Parked in the garage was the 1959 Imperial Speedster, automotive designer Murray Pfaff's idea for a Corvette and Thunderbird competitor Chrysler didn't build.

Tron is an Audi modified by West Coast Customs for Continental Tire. The car rides on 20-inch Custom wheels which, like the side vents, grille and interior, feature constantly changing LED lighting.

Chevrolet didn't produce its car-based El Camino pickup truck until the 1959 model year, so upstate New York resident Joe Cherry built his own. He calls the El Nomado because he started with a 1958 Chevy Nomad station wagon.

To celebrate its 110th anniversary—and Henry Ford's historic racing victory over rival automaker Alexander Winton—Ford's display featured race cars from the Henry Ford Museum, displayed safely out of reach atop shipping containers.

Someone at Chrysler's Mopar not only figured out how to stuff a Viper V10 engine underneath the hood of a Dodge Challenger, but how to put the newest cylinder heads on a previous-generation and more widely available Viper block. The result—as much as 800 horsepower!

Tow Hook is the name given to the orange-colored Dodge Durango that pulls the trailer carrying a race-ready and V10-powered 2011 Mopar Challenger Drag Pak. The Tow Hook was displayed at SEMA on 22-inch wheels and had other upgrades. We hear the Mopar Underground isn't quite finished, however, and is working to put a Cummins diesel into the engine bay.

This is just one of the seemingly dozens upon dozens of wheel displays at the SEMA Show.

— Larry Edsall



Photos: Larry Edsall



MANUFACTURER PROJECTS

(Say that five times, fast.) For years, the aftermarket was on its own, to acquire vehicles, reverse engineer and create their own add-ons. Vehicle manufacturers are now a big part of the game, with the savviest among them actively providing all their new-model specs and dimensions as early as possible, ensuring a variety of aftermarket offerings for enthusiast buyers at launch, good for all concerned. They also now create their own SEMA show cars, though we can only scratch the surface of the hundreds shown. Let's scratch.

MAZDA MX-5 SUPER20: Mazda's MX-5 Super20 from last year returned with Hyper Orange Mica paint, gloss black fixed hardtop, stripes, and an interior with color-matched roll bar, seats, stitching and suede inserts. Performance mods include upgraded ECU, header and exhaust, front and rear anti-roll bars, clutch, coil-overs and tower braces, rotors, lines, pads, and front brake ducts, black 16-inch Enkei twin-spoke racing wheels, Toyo high-performance tires and wheel spacers front and rear.

INVADER TC-3: The Tanom Motors Invader TC-3 high performance reverse trike, shown as prototype last year, is ready for production, with the Detroit factory tooling up for body panels using RTM (Resin Transfer Molding) and RIM (Reaction Injection Molding), as in F1 and IndyCar. Super lightweight and incredibly strong, the bike will also be available with the hood, roof, front fenders and storage compartment doors in carbon fiber.

HONDA HPD CR-Z RACER: Honda showed 12 modified 2011 Honda CR-Z sport hybrid coupes, including this HPD CR-Z Racer—by HPD, Honda's North American racing wing. Serious racing capability comes from a turbocharger and upgraded IMA™ hybrid system—for a combined 200 hp and 175 lb-ft of torque—plus performance clutch, limited-slip differential, circuit-tuned suspension, upgraded brakes and aerodynamic components. Two HPD CR-Z Racers were set to run at the 25 Hours of Thunderhill endurance race in December.

ZERO S MOTORCYCLE: Zero Motorcycles' first time at SEMA included its high-performance race motorcycle, developed with K Squared Racing, running in the electric bike racing series TTXGP and ePower. Shown is the electric 2012 Zero S street fighter, in either 6 or 9 kWh configuration—achieving a 76- or 114-mile range. Its broad electric torque band and acceleration reach a top speed of 88 mph. Brushless motors and regenerative braking recoup energy during deceleration, and a maintenance-free belt drive system makes it “just about the world's easiest to own form of transportation.”

KIA RIO: Kia showed off its growing motorsports cred—coming off their first two motorsports championships in history at the 2011 Continental Tire Sports Car Challenge (CTSSC). Built by Kia's racing partner, Kinetic Motorsports, the all-new 2012 Rio 5-door B-Spec track-ready racecar is set to compete in the newly established showroom stock racing class in 2012 against a variety of competitors.

HYUNDAI VELOSTER: Hyundai teamed up with ARK Performance to transform the new 3-door Veloster into a sleek rally car with a custom twin-scroll turbocharger (210hp). The modified Veloster has mechanical, interior and exterior modifications including an open wheel concept with aggressive fenders and Nitto tires. ARK will also develop a range of Veloster-specific parts. ■



LAST RIDES "YOU URNED IT"

A family from Tucson is taking the automotive aftermarket into the afterlife.

Last Rides Custom Urns had perhaps the most interesting if macabre booth at the SEMA Show. Christopher and Erik Enriquez of Tucson say their father, Jesse, comes up with rather bizarre ideas, though could anything the artist/fabricator/mechanic/woodworker have dreamed up ever been more bizarre than this?: one-of-a-kind urns that look like scale-model vehicles but are to hold the cremated remains of car guys (and gals).

“The idea behind ‘Last Rides’ came to us one night as we contemplated the current state of the economy and the expense that is incurred even at death,” they say. “Planning ahead would be the best way to avoid having loved ones make these difficult decisions. Since cremation was our choice, we decided to research what was available in funerary urns. After viewing hundreds of different urns, we realized that none we had seen expressed anything about us. Contemplation of that final journey and our enthusiasm for cars launched the idea of creating that special car that would provide our ‘Last Ride’ to our final resting place.”

After consulting with a client, the Last Rides family and its artistic friends sculpt from clay a scale version of the client's favorite vehicle—the one in which he or she would like to take his or her last ride. It may be a car the person restored. Or perhaps one they owned back in the day. Or even one they always dreamed of owning.

After sculpting, the urn is cast, then hand painted, and mounted on a wooden base. Cremated ashes are inserted into the urn through the bottom of the vehicle.

Christopher Enriquez says several customers have taken delivery of their Last Rides and have them on display in their home, office or garage on a sort of buy now, use later plan.

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Visit online: www.last-rides.com ■