

Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

Slide Job Sled

Normally I never watch television, not even the Speed Channel, but a few years ago I did watch and I was mesmerized. It was a Big Ticket auction for racing sports cars, everything from Carroll Shelby Cobras to the most mythologized Dan Gurney Ferraris and Maseratis. It was a High Llama bazaar, and it continued booming along nicely, with big bucks swirling and the richest buyers with the richest checkbooks writing out astounding numbers. And then, suddenly, the glitter proceedings began buzzing with excitement and fear, and everybody started gawking at the curiosity of the show, Mickey Thompson's gargantuan "Slide Job Sled."

At first I barely recognized it, and I doubted Mickey, were he alive, would have either. Nevertheless there the Sled was, better than six decades old, and looking like a ghost from the grave. The last time I saw it the Sled was a huge unpainted folly, but whomever was the gravedigger who'd found and restored Mickey's old brute had it so buffed out it looked like a candidate for one of the old Mickey Thompson Custom Car Shows in Los Angeles.

In other words, it was and nothing at all like the slovenly horror employed by Mickey to run Shelby and his pedigree Ferrari out of roadway at Palm Springs - or that Jerry Unser, the fearless hill-climber, parked on the front row of an Examiner Newspaper Grand Prix - or that Mickey's lieutenant Roger Beck had used to frighten anybody getting in his way.

And then, following a fast and furious two minutes of dueling fat checkbooks, the Slide Job Sled disappeared into its new home in an unnamed private collection, having fetched a 21st century price tag, 750 large.

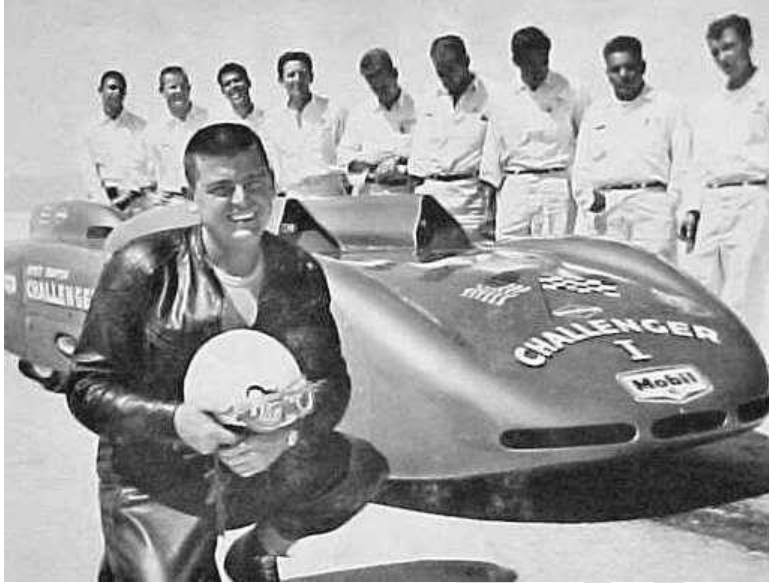
Very, very cool but also very strange.

Slide Job Sled wasn't a la-di-dah sports car like a zoomy and nimble Ferrari or Maserati. Slide Job Sled, put bluntly, was an overpowered ugly lump: a Kurtis-Kraft 500 front-engine sports car, crafted by the same old-school blacksmith who also tooled up most of the iron hulks of the Indy 500. Powered at first by a mastodon seven-liter Cadillac V8 -the biggest engine Mickey could find - it had been scheduled to win Mickey the 1955 Mexican Road Race on the terrible turnpike, the Pan American Highway, which began from the frontier of

Guatemala and finished at the frontier of Texas: 2,000 miles of soaring double-lane blacktop going up, down, and over the tall peaks of rugged volcano chains, plus zooming into thousands of deathtrap curves minus guardrails.

But Mickey and the Slide Job Sled never made it to Mexico to race in the elite division for unlimited sports car division, Mexico's fastest, because that mad marathon got cancelled first.

Mickey loved fast cars. At the time of the time of the March 16, 1988, ambush and assassination of himself and his wife by Michael Goodwin, Mickey, just 59 when he was murdered, had invented fleets of them, among them: his hell-roaring Top Fuel AA sling-shots;



didn't personally build.

his Challenger, the baby-blue and quad factory Pontiac-engine streamliner, first to exceed 400 mph - eight miles a minute - across Bonneville; his deadly Sears All State Indy car, which took the life of Davey MacDonald in the 1964 500; his Funny Car, raced by Danny Ongais and powered by Ford, which conquered drag-racing; and his dune buggies and pachyderm pick-ups, which excelled in the world's foremost automobile wrecking yard, vast Baja California. Among all these, what made the Slide Job Sled unique was that it was the only set of wheels Mickey

Mickey had missed the first three Mexicos of 1950, 1951, and 1952, but, having hoodwinked transport and sponsorship - a slow flivver six - from a Los Angeles Ford agency, arrived in 1953.



And while racing in the penny-ante division of small-stocks, Mickey had starred in a massacre not of his own making.

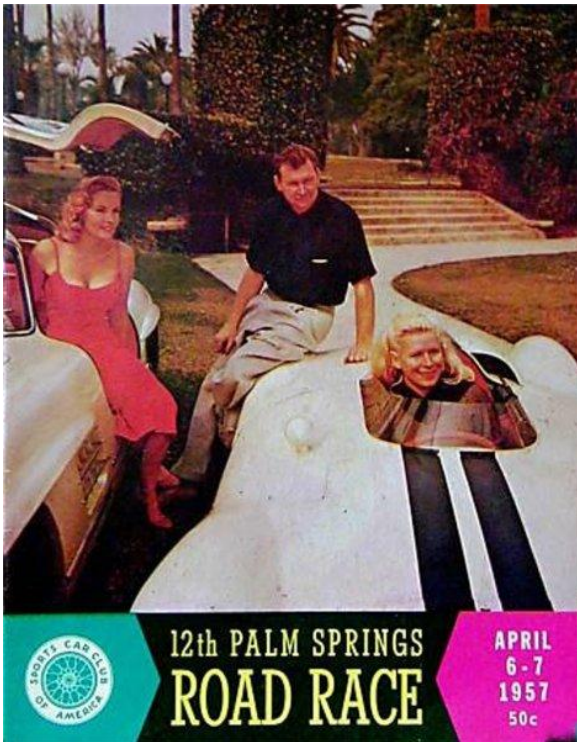
A mob of peons, many of them wreck-hungry, had sanded down a blind bend; the small-stocker just ahead of Mickey's had skidded and piled up; and, lusting for mayhem and gore, the peon mob had spilled

across the roadway.

Traveling 110 mph, as fast as his penny-ante stocker would go, Mickey had had nowhere to go, except into the mob. Ten or maybe a dozen peons died.

The following year, 1954, Mickey was back in Mexico with a fresh flivver six from the same supportive agency. On the first day, facing an entry list of 60, he won; on the second day he got slowed by a bent pushrod; and on the third day he and his passenger heaved out of control and turned turtle.

Later in that same 1954, Mickey purchased a dynamite piece of real muscle - the Slide Job Sled – so he could return to and win the Mexican Road Race in 1955. So his disappointment was profound when he discovered that the jefes running it had decided to cancel all further Mexicos.



Which left Mickey looking like a dunce. He'd spent lots of money - better than three thousand U.S. - purchasing it but now had no place to race Slide Job Sled.

Nineteen fifth-five passed, then 1956, and finally 1957, the arrival of the fateful season for Mickey and the Slide Job Sled. A sports car club was conducting a meet for amateurs on the desert airport at Palm Springs and, hearing about it, Mickey decided Why not?, and entered himself and the Slide Job Sled. Ever since the retirement of Gentleman Jim Kimberly, the fabulously wealthy Kleenex heir, Ferrari collector, and slow-poke sports car racer from the Florida Coast, the mantle of "America's Greatest Sports Car Racer," had been held by Carroll Shelby,"Ol' Shel, ex-poultry farmer - turned-Ferrari-master. Knowing that Shelby was going to be racing at Palm Springs, Mickey had made the decision to get in on the fun, go to the Springs, and blow off "Ol' Shel."

Commuting via the San Berdoo Freeway, Mickey and Slide Job Sled set out amidst a din of V8 Caddy bluster and burning rubber smoke. Gary Campbell Mickey's brother-in-law and best friend followed in a pick-up truck over-loaded with tools and spare parts paraphernalia.

Campbell had arrived an hour or so or so after Mickey and found his brother-in-law and the stewards having a bitter confrontation about the Slide Job Sled looking so slovenly. One

door was a different color from the other. Nothing else was painted at all. The numerals were black masking tape.



So, for entering a mongrel in a pedigree sports car show, the stewards, itching to disqualify Slide Job Sled, had decided to run Mickey through an emergency technical inspection which, annoyingly, Slide Job Sled passed. Permitted to run some practice laps at last, Mickey discovered that the airport was nothing but a jungle of slow corners, which he hated, but he stood on the gas anyway, jumping into all the right-and- left hairpins and

allowing the overpowered Slide Job Sled to lumber about in any direction it wanted.

Afterward Mickey had moved around the reservation attempting to make friends with the sports car people and discovered a tight society of pseudo redcoat phonies speaking in clipped accents. After looking over Slide Job Sled, one of them informed Mickey, I say, dear fellow, that's a jolly strange motor car you've brought with you.

Mickey was sure he and Slide Job Sled had come to the wrong party.

But it was too late to leave, so the two of them competed in a Saturday prelim to the Sunday main event, and Mickey was long gone in the lead until the V8 Caddy's rocker arms ate themselves and Slide Job Sled and Mickey were stranded off in the Springs' Back 40.

Mickey misunderstood the rules of amateur sports car racing and mistakenly believed that – ruptured motor and all – in order to race on Sunday he must get out and push Slide Job Sled to the finish line.

So he started pushing. But it was a very hot day in the desert and Slide Job Sled weighed a ton and looked it. Very soon, with the sun beating down on him, Mickey became a prime candidate for heat exhaustion.

Gary Campbell arrived, offering to push in place of his brother-in-law. Mickey considered it. But decided no, that might result in disqualification. So Mickey staggered on pushing. And pushing. And pushing. And pushing.

All the time the race's stewards watched Mickey's discomfort from the cool shade. And not until Mickey's arrival at the finish line did the sadists inform him that he'd misunderstood the rules; that he hadn't needed to push at all; he could have raced without pushing.

Mickey and his faithful brother-in-law were up all Saturday night replacing shattered Caddy rocker arms. They arrived back at the track sleepless and late, and Mickey was on the receiving end of a harsh lecture about missing the drivers meeting.

Mickey exploded. "A drivers meeting??" he gasped. "That must have been a small convention. Where'd they hold the sumbitch – in a phone booth?"

Stationed on all hairpin corners would be marshals waving courtesy flags, signaling Mickey to move over and make room for 'Ol Shel and his prancing red stallion.

Mickey bristled. He'd be lining up last, on the extreme rear end of an over-crowded pack, 35 sports cars strong, and under orders not to pass any of them until he reached the starting line.

That was the final provocation. Belting himself in Slide Job Sled, Mickey decided, let's put on a show and bash up this little tea party. By the time he'd reached the starting line, Mickey had passed everything but Shelby's bright red Ferrari, and was preparing to jump on top of it too.

'Ol Shel heard Mickey coming before he saw him and wasn't prepared to surrender.

So, plunging together for the first corner, the pair had batted together past the point of no return. Corner one's eye wasn't wide enough to accommodate both of them. Somebody was going to have to surrender and lift first.

It was 'Ol Shel – wisely. Had he not, Mickey had been preparing to throw at him a dive-bombing – a ferocious, sprint car-style, slide job.

Racing the gears, Mickey roared on, lengthening his lead. But Slide Job Sled's V8 Caddy heart had grown molten, and more rocker arms had de-tuned. Slide Job Sled and Mickey had to quit their first and only amateur sports car race while still in the lead.

California sports car racing turned professional, with a big 1958 newspaper Grand Prix at Riverside International Raceway, but Mickey, out-practicing, unavoidably T-boned the backyard bomb of Akton Miller which packed even more tonnage than Slide Job Sled. Result: Mickey blew out a kneecap and, for the next newspaper GP the following year on a joke

parking lot track at the Los Angeles County, had to find Slide Job Sled a fresh and brave chauffeur.



rocker arms soon disabled it.

Again the Slide Job Sled sat collecting cobwebs because Mickey began using his quad-engine Challenger at Bonneville to hunt for a bigger target, the Land Speed Record. Thanks to profitable friendship with Bunkie Knudsen, major domo of the Pontiac corporation, Mickey seemed to have been gifted with sufficient V8 Pontiacs to blast past his goal of 400 mph.

Mickey came close – very, very close - didn't make it, lost interest, and, with so many V8 Pontiacs lying around decided to put one of them in Slide Job Sled. Its new driver was a lieutenant of Mickey's named Roger Beck, a former champion of hooligan jalopy derbies, whom Mickey suggested should take his old hooligan licks out of cold storage and put them to work in Slide Job Sled.

Roger followed instructions and got Slide Job Sled running really fast. But one thing puzzled him, and it was the reason why traffic in front of obediently parted like the sea.

It was all because of Mickey. He'd warned everybody that Roger was the craziest maniac in the racing business. He'd ram Slide Job Sled right over the top of them if they didn't give way.

After a Pontiac V8 out of Challenger ventilated during another Riverside GP, Mickey and Roger work hard installing a fresh one. But they left the ventilated Pontiac V8 unprotected and out in the open, and all I could think of was, that is one of only four iconic, 400 mph Pontiac V8s out of Challenger, surely the ultimate trophy to possess! But, sadly, I lacked the strength to filch it and carry it to my car.

Mickey's choice was obvious: Jerry Unser, hill-climber of dynasty from Pikes Peak. Accustomed to making life-and-death choices in the tall Rockies where one missed swerve meant tumbling over a three-mile-high precipice, Jerry loved the wide open spaces of L.A.'s County Fairgrounds.

Jerry parked on the front row, and the Slide Job Sled led under the bridge to the first corner, but the old bugaboo of mangled Caddy