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ZT-T returns
to Bonneville



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Back to the Salt

It is just purest coincidence, really, that we should be getting together in London on this particular autumn evening to ponder the black art of land speed racing. None of us knew when we picked the date out of a hat that Richard Noble of supersonic Thrust SSC fame was going public even as we spoke with his next blockbuster assault on the ultimate in earth-bound velocity. The only thing on our collective minds tonight is maybe a small celebration of

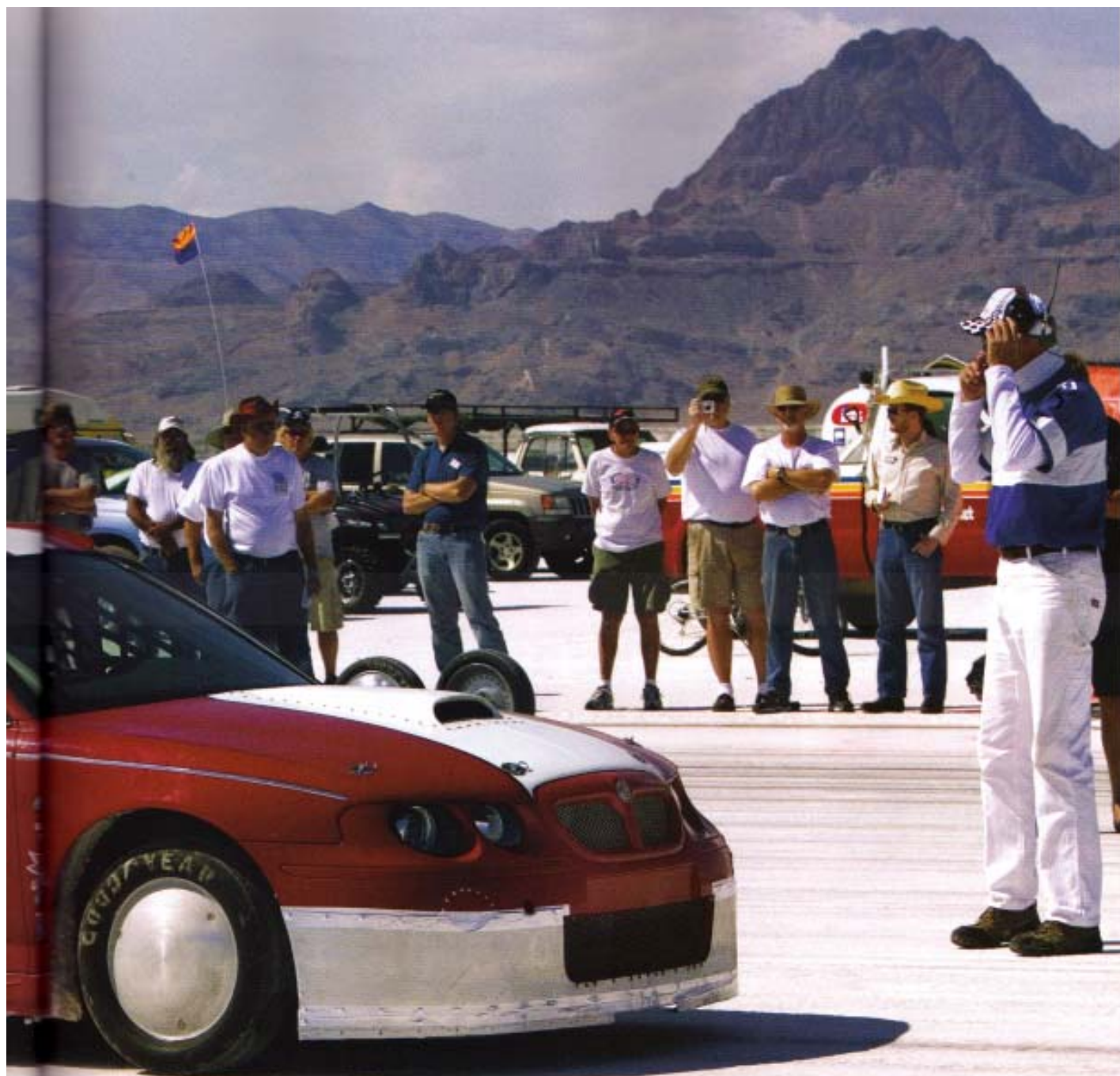
Jon and Daniel's safe return home from Bonneville, and a post-mortem of their second season on The Salt.

Still, when the conversation turns philosophical, and it inevitably does if chasing speed records is involved, Jon borders onto the clairvoyant. 'I can understand now, after we've gone through all this,' he says, 'why people keep going back again and again; it's addictive, it can become almost

obsessive, and when you're out there, you're wrapped up in it so completely that sometimes being out there eventually becomes what's normal and real, and being back here is the unreal.'

I can understand far better now as well, the Bonneville Salt Flats, where Martyn Goddard and I first met Daniel Nash and Jonathan Suckling this September, is one of the most out there places on the planet. The bulk of any given year, Bonneville is simply a large shallow lake of briny liquid on a remote high plateau in the mountains of western Utah. For a few short weeks in late summer, however, the blazing high-desert sun bakes away enough water to turn it into a huge, perfectly level salt tablet suitable for driving wheeled vehicles at extremely high speeds. Provided, of course, you don't mind doing it under a heat lamp across what is effectively the salt-encrusted floor of a frying pan.

The two drivers and their MGs were already in the queue for the starting



Land speed racing holds a special place in the history of the MG name. Now, two amateur privateers carry on the MG tradition where the works left off

Report by Dale Drinnon. Photos by Martyn Goddard.

line on the five-mile *Long Course* when we found them, but that's not unusual. There are no assigned starting times; you run when you think you're ready, and everyone from the fast and famous to the freshest-faced rookie waits together in the same tailback, under the same sun, with the same tension, often for hours at a stretch.

As the cars get closer to the front, last minute preparations taper off but last minute repairs get more frantic, until it's time to go or stand aside. This trip, it's Daniel and the ZTT as the first MG off; there are nods all around and he squirms among the tangle of roll cage tubing to be tamped in and strapped down. The engine fires with an open-piped V8 blast so brutal that even the seasoned for a moment recoil in response; Daniel watches the dials and fidgets in anticipation of the starter's thumbs up.

Then the push vehicle nudges the racer gently off the line and when the launch speed is right, the driver finds a gear and begins to accelerate away,

building momentum with the seamless inevitability of a steam locomotive. In seconds he is gone from sight; there is no fanfare, no prize money at stake, very little media coverage, and virtually no audience save for the fellow competitors against whom, in truth, he isn't really competing. There is only driver and car, disappearing into the shimmering heat devils that constantly dance on the blinding white horizon...

But of course the hard, dirty part is always getting there in the first place, and especially for this particular endeavour. Every great MG speed team of the past – Gardner, Moss, Hill, all the EX streamliners – they all ran with factory support. These last production-based MG-Rovers, the most advanced and complicated land speed cars in the marque's long history, originally came to the Salt with the staffing and funding of a modern automobile company with a point to prove. Now, though, they're being campaigned solely on the effort and resources of two independents, >



Above: EXF requires a healthy push to launch smoothly. Lightning bolt graphic first appeared on MG record-breakers before the war.

learning their craft as they go. 'It still seems a little bizarre to me that a couple of historic racers should wind up in such hi-tech machinery,' Daniel says. 'Both of us have always been fascinated with the idea of Bonneville, and we talked for ages about buying a car together, sharing the expenses and having a go. I think we just had something in mind more like a straightforward big-engine hot rod.'

That changed, almost accidentally, when MG-Rover folded and the motorsport assets came up for grabs in 2006. Of special interest was a land speed ZT estate designated the X-15, made on sub-contract by the legendary So-Cal Speed Shop in 2003. When it went unsold for six months, Daniel and Jon went along, you guessed it, 'just to have a look'. To make a long story short, EXF, the MGF built for Bonneville by the works in 1997, was parked beside it, and they went home with both.

The cars do make a handsome set, despite the fact they have not the slightest thing in common besides the Octagon. EXF is what Jon calls a boffin's car; starting from a plain MGF shell, Rover aerodynamicists trimmed the 0.37 drag coefficient to a mere 0.24, a quantum leap in aero terms. Then engineers installed a 1433cc K-series with a Garrett turbo and water-cooled Aston Martin intercooler, while the PR guys were making noises about how nearly standard everything was. EXF made 328bhp and went 217.4mph with American racer Terry Kilbourne, and if there's any genuinely standard bits of great consequence left, they're well hidden.

The ZT-T, on the other hand, while hardly being ordinary main dealer fare either, is a hot-rodder's car. A conventional front engine/rear drive platform, it's far closer to the old American '*crum in all the motor she'll hold and let's go!*' school of making speed. Power is from an electronically-controlled 6-litre Ford pushrod V8 prepped by Roush Racing to a staggering 765 horses (without forced induction, mind), and the driveline would be at home in any first-class traditional racing or rod shop in the USA: Jerico five-speed box, Winters quick-change diff, Wilwood brakes, Morrison and Aldan suspension bits – and an extremely non-traditional Pi Research computerized data logging system.

Like EXF, X-15 also broke the magic double-ton. Driven by Pat Kinne, another Bonneville veteran, it did 225.609, a true testament to the theory that enough horsepower can achieve anything, as basically the only aerodynamic help the big chunky wagon got was add-on spoilers and the

windows rolled up (inspiring, no doubt, the press release claim that it was 'a virtually stock ZT-T').

Which was not to say that either car was capable of repeating those speeds as-purchased. Following its Bonneville performance, MG-Rover modified EXF for an airport runway attempt on the world record for solo blind drivers by Brit ex-policeman Ken Moss (successfully, at 131mph). The audio guidance system installed for the run was subsequently removed, the steering and suspension mods were not, and after some publicity appearances, EXF was shoved into storage and forgotten.

The ZT-T had gone straight to the motor show circuit on return from the States, and then similarly into back-room limbo; both cars by 2006 were suffering from neglect and, more sadly, from downright abuse. Parts had gone missing. Lots of them. When Daniel finally got around to checking X-15's parachute, even that had been nicked and the bag re-packed with foam to cover the theft. The car had evidently also at some time been hoisted astride the tines of a fork lift, not very kind to things like custom-fabricated exhausts.

There was no choice, given the team's experience level, but to enlist some expert help. And when word got around the tiny and incredibly interconnected world of land speed racing, an amazing number began stepping up to the crease to do their part. Alan Reid, a member of the Rover team that built EXF and who now works in Formula One, became available to take on its rebuild. 'Kiwi Steve' Davies, leader of So-Cal's labours on the ZT and currently owner of his own shop, agreed to bring the wagon back to spec, plus crew with the novices when they went to the salt. Sir Stirling Moss served as a consultant; so did Peter Stevens, former MG-Rover director of design and the creative force behind X-15.

Andy Green, holder of the outright World Land Speed Record with Thrust, did everything from speaking at the RAC fundraising dinner to giving driving lessons and tech advice, and was a Godsend. 'When you've got the world's fastest man telling you to move the spoiler,' as Daniel puts it, 'you think maybe you should move the spoiler.' John Wood, MD at MIRA, came forward with intel on a forgotten but invaluable stash of X-15 spares, then helped with wind tunnel time as well. Lloyd's Motor Club, where both drivers are members and Jonathan edits the club magazine, helped with critical sponsorship to pay for it all.

By summer 2007, the boys were ready to go, with X-15 at least. EXF



Above: Battery and dry sump; oil needs pre-heating before start-up.



Above: A surprising amount of original ZT interior was left in place.



Above: 5-mile long course is reserved for vehicles capable of 200+mph.



Above: 765bhp version of Ford V8 was to be offered in the MG SV.

"With more aero tweaks and power tuned to 800bhp, Daniel turned a 225.995mph"

would take longer because, as it happened, there was no record for which it stood a practical chance. MG-Rover in '97 had apparently never wanted anything other than 'the fastest production MG ever' on the anniversary of Moss's still-standing EX181 records, and adding an extra 400mm of rear bodywork to increase stability moved EXF forthwith from *Production* status to *Streamliner*. Returning it to the salt without unthinkable butchery would therefore take a touch more time and deliberation, whereas X-15 fitted neatly into an existing class.

'I wasn't terribly realistic, I'm afraid', Jon admits. 'I thought, I suppose, we'd just show up, hop in for a pass or two, and be handed a trophy...' Instead, it was like any other first season: qualify for licensing, learn the car, replace an engine (see previous comments on spares), gradually build speed, pay lots of dues. There was also the matter of learning to drive on a surface of such varying traction that fast road cars – and drivers – often struggle to reach three-quarters of their highest tarmac speed.

Still, the car was quick and had potential to be quicker. Were it not for engine computer problems – the programming used by Roush was so unusual even Roush couldn't access it any more, and it had to be cracked for power tuning by specialist Kris Valdez – the team might have reached the Gas (petrol) C-Production Coupé record of 225.995. As it was, they left the last of Bonneville's three annual events with a best of 223.5 and high hopes for more in 2008.

They very nearly made it at Speed Week, the opening meet of 2008. With more aero tweaks and power now dyno-tuned to a whacking 800bhp, Daniel turned a 226.452, but unfortunately the repeat run necessary to establish a record couldn't be made until the following morning when the cooler, denser air increases drag significantly.

A month later, at September's World of Speed where we met them, both

drivers were consistently running in the mid-225s and a record seemed in the bag. Then, aero pressure started playing havoc on sections of bodywork, actually splitting the rear bumper skin, and on the last and most likely run of the event, the all-pervasive and all-corrosive salt seized the throttle linkage and Jon coasted to a frustrating on-course halt.

That left just one more opportunity to make the record, but in October, the winter rains came early. The year-ending World Finals were cancelled, and the MG Land Speed Racing Team came home.

There's ample cause for optimism over our last round of post-season drinks, though. Both drivers are certain that with further tuning and tidying, there are records awaiting X-15, it's just a matter of time. Daniel has also found a worthy goal for EXF, the last real works MG speed car and the first bio-ethanol Bonneville machine. There's a comparable petrol class record at 195, and considering EXF hit 197 in shakedown runs this year, Daniel hopes to better it with ethanol on the 50th anniversary of MG's final streamliner records, set by the late, great Phil Hill.

But the red car is just so spine-tinglingly close to a big score you can taste it. 'It's right there, it's all within reach now,' Jon says as we adjourn into the street, 'it would be such a waste if the car didn't get to go that last tiny bit and grab it.' As always, of course, it will come down to money in the end, and in the end, that's usually the toughest challenge of all.

The TV news is on when I get home, and as I hang my coat, I can hear the headlines. 'Richard Noble will announce plans tomorrow for a £10million attempt to raise the world land speed record to 1000 miles-per-hour...' Once you've been Out There, it seems, the urge to go back is a mighty urge indeed.

THANKS

Daniel and Jon (right) would like to thank Hugh Outhorp of the Utah Salt Flats Racing Association, Don Lindsey of XPart, Brad Hancock of Flashback Auto, veteran racer Don Dicker, KCU Valdez of Dynamic Race Solutions, MG works driver Anthony Head and Stephan Keating. For more info on land speed racing and the MG team, visit USFRA at www.usfrata.com, and www.landspeedracingmg.com.

