HEADING- 50th Anniversary of SCORE International

(lead photo - 7-1 113) - Photo Courtesy Danny Thompson Archives

TITLE------ AN ORGANIZATION YOU CAN SCORE WITH

SUB HEAD ------Mickey Thompson Created SCORE To Be The Premiere Off-Road Racing Organization

BYLINE-------By Dan Sanchez

SCORE International officially began in 1973, but before fully sprouting, its roots began earlier when Mickey Thompson and drag racing legend Danny Ongias of the Flyin’ Hawaiian decided to take on the 1969 Mexican 1000 race. That same year, Thompson also raced at the newly formed Mint 400, started by Norm Johnson in 1968, competing alongside many of the same prominent racers at the time.

Thompson knew that off-road racing, in general, was still in its infancy, and because he was already involved in several forms of automotive racing, participating in events like the Mint 400 and the Mexican 1000 would give him a deeper understanding of the sport. After the race, Thompson was even more excited about off-road racing but also had some ideas of his own. “He was so excited after racing the Mexican 1000 in 1969 that it was all he talked about,” recalled Mickey Thompson’s son, Danny. “His interest grew from there.”

Thompson would go on to build vehicles specifically for Baja racing, develop shocks and other components, and continue competing. Since its inception into a formal racing-sanctioning body, the Mexican 1000 was put on by the National Off-Road Racing Association (NORRA). NORRA started the official version of the race in 1967 and ran it until 1972, when the Mexican government took it over and formed the Baja Sports Committee. The BSC was run by one of the leading government official’s sons, and after the 1973 race, it was apparent to the racers and local business owners that the BSC was not the answer. “The 1972 race didn’t live up to the previous events,” recalls former SCORE owner Sal Fish.

(photo Sal Fish INTV-) (ASHLEY Make sure you can see his hands in this image ) Photo by Dan Sanchez

Fish had already visited Baja to cover the race as the publisher of Car Craft in 1968 and then raced the Mexican 1000 in 1969 in the Revel Model Car and EMPI-sponsored Baja Bug. He loved the idea of the race, the people, and the atmosphere that Baja desert racing started. He frequently visited Baja and attended the race for several years afterward, ultimately making friends with influential people there. “The BSC had lots of problems with a lack of volunteers. The course was not up to the standards that NORRA had in previous years,” said Fish. “Many of the racers thought it was very disorganized and threatened not to ever return.”

Because the Mexican 1000 had brought prominence and business to the area, local hotel owners and city officials did not want to see an end to it. Several of them, including Pepe Limon and Nico Saad, who knew both Thompson and Fish, approached then-Mexican Governor, Milton Castañeda, and organized a meeting in hopes Thompson and Fish would be able to assist in the next race’s organization and logistics. By now, Sal Fish had become publisher at Hot Rod Magazine and had the power of the press. At the same time, Mickey Thompson had also become a well-known celebrity, businessman, and racer that could bring back other prominent participants to make the next race successful.

After the meeting with Thompson, Fish, and the Governor, the next race could move forward under the agreement that Thompson and Fish would help organize and be consultants. “Mickey had other things in mind, however,” said Fish. “I didn’t know this at the time, but he had already had things in motion for his own off-road racing organization. He wanted me to help him with this and become the president of the company. He knew that even with our help, the BSC would not be able to do it the way he envisioned.”

BRINGING BAJA TO THE MASSES

Thompson had thought of an organization he called SCORE and had been working on an off-road event of his own. “My dad came flying into the offices one day and started shouting about this organization called SCORE and how we were going to race in Mexico,” said Mickey Thompson’s son Danny. While he isn’t sure how his dad came up with the name, Danny Thompson had thought it stood for Southern California Off-Road Enthusiasts. That’s what the press called it when in October of 1973, the first annual Mickey Thompson-Delco RV Spectacular was held at the Riverside International Raceway in California. The race was said to be one of the most expensive off-road events at that time.

(photo Danny 4) CAPTION----- Danny Thompson recalls when his father Mickey came in excited about creating SCORE – Photo by Dan Sanchez

Thompson’s idea was to put on a race where people could see the excitement of racing in Baja but on a closed course instead of thousands of miles of desert. The event had one of the wealthiest purses at the time, a total of $200K. The track was built within grandstands for the public, and the event had racers such as Walker Evans, Rod Hall, Rick Mears, Parnelli Jones, and many others.

The press reported SCORE as an acronym for Short Course Off-Road Enthusiasts and Southern California Off-Road Enterprises, but apparently, Thompson didn’t seem to mind which was used, as it got him the press he wanted. “It was a massive amount of work to start an organization like SCORE,” recounts Danny Thompson. “But that was the way he was. He would come up with different ways to do things.”

“He invited me to the Riverside race and said he wanted to make me an honorary guest and show the public what happens in the Baja races,” said Fish. “He believed that only jackrabbits and snakes could see the Mexican 1000 race and that this type of off-road racing was the future of the sport. He began pressuring me to be the president of the company, but I was enjoying being the publisher for Hot Rod Magazine at the time and did not want to leave because, for one, the money was good– I had any new car I wanted to drive, and I enjoyed living the hot-rodding car culture that I was a part of.”

(photo ORMHOF Judy Smith Collection Riverside 1978 Photo 50 Buggies Grandstands) and (photo ORMHOF Judy Smith Collection Riverside 1978 Photo 120 Rod Hall Dodge) CAPTION------------ In 1973, the Mickey Thompson-Delco RV Spectacular Riverside was the first SCORE race attracting numerous racers and was Thompson’s vision for SCORE’s future. ------ Photos ORMHOF Judy Smith Collection

After launching the first official SCORE race in Riverside, Thompson had to turn his attention back to Baja. “I think he didn’t want to go back to Baja and handle all of the organization of the race, so he continued to pressure me to become the company president and help him run the organization,” said Fish. “I kept telling him no, but what finally convinced me is the time the publishing industry took me away from my wife, Barbara. I was always traveling and not spending as much time with her and with Mickey suggesting that I was only making money for Peterson Publishing and not myself. I could be a part of something big in which I would be part owner. That’s what finally convinced me, and I joined SCORE as president towards the end of 1973.”

With Fish in the organization, he began working diligently to organize the next Baja race and witnessed the operations of Thompson’s business. One of the first things he came to understand about this new organization called SCORE, is that the name didn’t really have an acronym that the press had given it. “After talking with Mickey at length about the business and how things were going to be run, it was my understanding that the word ‘score’ was just something that Mickey liked,” said Fish. “He liked the implication of the word, meaning this was an organization you can score with!”

A NEW ERA

At the beginning of 1974, Fish was named President of SCORE, which was then changed to SCORE International because of its presence in Mexico. Another opportunity came that year from the fallout with NORRA. “Along with the Mexican 1000, NORRA had also helped put on the Parker off-road race,” said Fish. “I am not sure why NORRA didn’t want to continue producing the Parker race,” said Fish.

Parker, Arizona, had a history of events since 1911 as a way to promote ferry service across the Colorado River. According to the history of the Parker 425 website, the off-road race officially began in 1971 with the Dam 500, created by the Parker Dam Chamber of Commerce and NORRA.

“The people at Parker knew Mickey and approached him about taking over the race, and we eventually did,” said Fish. The race in January 1974 consisted of a 120-mile loop on the Arizona side and a 129-mile loop on the California side, with two laps in Arizona and one in California. The race had 227 entries and could be seen on both sides of the state border. “It was gratifying to see those cars and bikes take off that morning,” said Mickey Thompson. “I knew right then that SCORE was going to be successful and off-road racing had a big future.” [[1]](#footnote-1)

This event further cemented Thompson’s belief that short-course off-road racing was the right thing for SCORE, but Fish didn’t want to abandon the beauty, tradition, and challenges that racing in Mexico brought to the sport.  According to Fish, the timing for these first two events were when people were accustomed to attending large outdoor events like Woodstock. But the U.S. fuel crisis hit in October of 1973 which was another challenge the new organization called SCORE would somehow have to overcome. “These first races were great, but my goal was the Baja races,” said Fish. “I didn’t realize there were so many things going against us like the gas crisis, and Mickey did not want to have a SCORE Baja 1000. He only wanted a 500-mile race and a Riverside short-course race, and that was it. I knew we had a long way to go to be successful.”

TO BE CONTINUED…

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 Norman T. Johnson and Gordon Grimmis, The Off-Road Racer (1976), December 1976, P. 39

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