

NYC TO LA ASAP

The Cannonball Run is an illegal, 3,000-mile race across America. What happened when a Welshman with a need for speed tried to break the record?

WORDS BY ALEX HANNAFORD

PORTRAIT BY GUERIN BLASK



Tommy Davies with his 2008 Audi S5 in Manhattan the day before his Cannonball attempt

24/7
PARK
KWIK

936

CONVOI EXCEPTIONNEL

V8

sparc

Pacific time zone (GMT-8hrs)

Mountain time zone (GMT-7hrs)

Central time zone (GMT-6hrs)

Eastern time zone (GMT-5hrs)



Highest section of the freeway at 3,250m. Just 999 miles to go



Progress was slow in Vegas due to heavy Friday-evening traffic

TOP SPEED 165mph

Green River

3:32pm

10:55am

Denver

Brush

Vail Pass

COLORADO

Omaha

7:29am

Road closed for work on a bridge. Detour taken after 20-minute delay

3:27am

North Utica

11:42pm

Mantua

START 6:58pm September 14

New York NEW JERSEY

KEY

- Petrol stop
- Roadworks
- 100 miles



The second of only six refuelling stops — thanks to the car's extra fuel tank

FINISH 10.20pm September 15



The morning after arriving at the finishing point: Portofino Hotel, Redondo Beach

6.30PM

Midtown Manhattan. Two Welshmen dressed in matching black polo shirts walk into a 7-Eleven on 3rd Avenue, a few blocks from the Empire State Building. One picks up several bottles of water and an armful of crisp packets, while the other grabs two sorry-looking ham rolls. Sustenance for the journey ahead.

6.40pm. They drive their 2008 Audi S5, emblazoned with yellow and black stripes and the words *Convoi Exceptionnel*, out of a basement car park and pull over by the Red Ball Garage on the side of East 31st Street. It's time for final checks. In the boot they examine the rubber hose connected to a shiny supplemental fuel tank, and inside the car the driver types "Portofino Hotel, Redondo Beach, California" into the GPS, selecting the northern route — across Pennsylvania and Ohio, through Nebraska, then down past Denver, across Utah to Las Vegas and finally Los Angeles. He then attaches their dashcam to the windscreen.

6.53pm. T-minus five minutes. I receive a link via text message to an app where I can follow their journey in real time. The passenger moves the map across the screen in front of him with his finger, assessing the traffic in the Lincoln Tunnel. Then the driver points at me to witness a final time check. "6.58pm," he says and pulls away, disappearing through a green light.

For the next day or so Tommy Davies, the son of a sheep farmer, and his co-driver, Steve (not his real name, because he works in intelligence in the UK), will race across the United States, their police scanner alerting them to speed traps, stopping only to refuel and switch drivers. When they arrive at the Portofino Hotel they'll have completed one of the great feats of American motoring subculture — the Cannonball Run, an unsanctioned and illegal almost 3,000-mile race from east to west coasts, immortalised in a 1981 film of the same name starring Burt Reynolds.

That night, at home in upstate New York, I take one last look at the app before bed. Tommy and Steve are flying across Pennsylvania at 157mph.

Tommy Davies, 32, is no stranger to the Cannonball Run — or to cross-country endeavours in the UK. In 2018, then aged 26, he claimed on national radio that he'd driven an Audi S5 from John O'Groats to Land's End in just over nine-and-a-half hours — which would have been the fastest time ever recorded. A few months later the police impounded his beloved car and arrested him. He spent eight hours in a cell before being released "pending investigation" — which is when Tommy decided to fly to America and do his first Cannonball Run. "A lot of people asked if I thought it was a good idea to race across the States considering what was happening back home, but I'd regret not doing it more than I'd regret doing it," Tommy tells me.

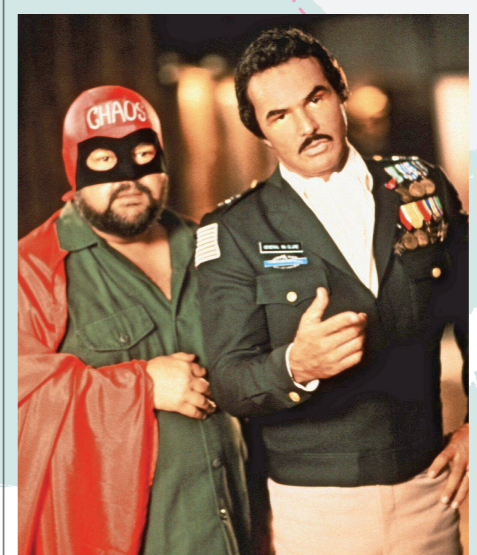
The Cannonball Run is named after Erwin "Cannon Ball" Baker, an American racing driver who in 1933 set a cross-country record driving from New York City to Los Angeles in a Graham Blue Streak Eight. It took Baker 53.5 hours — a record that stood for almost 40 years. That's when Brock Yates, a motoring journalist, dreamt up the Cannonball Run in Baker's honour, making the journey himself in 1971 in a Dodge van he called Moon Trash II. Several runs followed. In 1974 the race became a protest against the 55mph national speed limit imposed on America's roads by the Nixon administration in an effort to save petrol following the Opec oil crisis.

More recently, the Cannonball Run has tended to feature solo record attempts by a driver and co-driver, who verify their crossings via dashcam footage and GPS tracking, as well as witnesses: teams of spotters who ride ahead in relays making sure the coast is clear.

In 2006 a motoring journalist called Alex Roy set a new trans-American record of 31 hours and four minutes. In 2013 Ed Bolian, often referred to as the godfather of the modern-day Run, did it in 28 hours and 50 minutes. And at the end of 2019 Arne Toman set a new record of 27 hours and 25 minutes. It's been done in Audis, Mercedes-Benzes, Ferraris and BMWs, most of them modified to coast at speeds well in excess of 100mph for long periods. There are diesel records, electric vehicle records and motorbike records. During the pandemic, with drivers taking advantage of empty roads and few police, Toman's record was broken several times. But the American wasn't prepared to let his feat slip away. In May 2020 he bought an Audi S6, disguised it as a police interceptor by replacing the emblem on the bonnet with a fake Ford-style badge, reshaped the grill and blasted across the US, achieving a top speed of 175mph. Toman's new record — which still stands — was 25 hours, 39 minutes. He is currently the undisputed Cannonball champ.

Ironically, the race in which Tommy Davies took part in 2019 — the Cannonball-style C2C Express — was a cross-country invitational to raise money for the Cannonball Memorial Run charity, which supports the families of police officers killed in the line of duty. At least one of the teams was made up of police officers. "Forty-odd cars entered," Tommy says. "And we were doing it to raise money for fallen police officers, which still doesn't register with us. It's mad."

That race was solely for cars built before 1984, so Tommy shipped a "snot-green" 1974 Jaguar XJ6



Dom DeLuise, left, and Burt Reynolds in *The Cannonball Run*, 1981. Above: Erwin "Cannon Ball" Baker, after whom the Run is named, at the wheel in 1923

ERWIN "CANNON BALL" BAKER SET A RECORD DRIVING FROM NEW YORK TO LOS ANGELES IN 1933. HIS 53.5-HOUR TIME STOOD FOR ALMOST 40 YEARS

PREVIOUS PAGES: GUERIN BLASK FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE. THESE PAGES: GETTY IMAGES; ALAMY; COURTESY OF TOMMY DAVIES

across the Atlantic. He installed some big rally-style lamps and called his team Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Tires. He and his co-driver came fifth, completing the race in 38 hours and 11 minutes — the fastest right-hand-drive car ever to cross the States.

When Tommy returned to the UK he was charged with dangerous driving and perverting the course of justice. He was later acquitted after he told the court that he'd exaggerated the John O'Groats-to-Land's End record. He argued that the case against him was circumstantial and that if he'd been speeding, at least one of the numerous speed cameras en route would have been triggered. None had. He was a free man.

As the world shut down because of Covid, Tommy watched from across the pond as teams attempted to break the Cannonball record. One — a handyman from Maine called Fred Ashmore — claimed to have done so in a rented Ford Mustang GT. Two years, a lengthy GQ magazine feature and several YouTube interviews later, however, and Ashmore's story began to unravel. Among the community of Cannonball drivers, the evidence Ashmore presented for his sub-26-hour drive was deemed insufficient — not that it mattered much anyway because Tommy's friend Arne Toman swiftly won his own record back. Still, the controversy stirred something in Tommy: a desire to better his own time across America.

This summer, with his Audi S5 finally released from the impound in Britain, Tommy quietly put the car on a container ship in Liverpool, bound for New York City.

A couple of hours before they set off, I find Tommy and Steve in a café drinking Cokes and shovelling French fries into their mouths with a nervous energy, discussing the logistics of their run. The extra fuel tank in the boot means they'll be able to do about 500 miles before stopping. As for cops they may pass on the way, they hope the yellow and black livery will help.

"We've gone for a sort of Interpol, diplomatic look," Tommy tells me. "No one quite knows what it is. And we've got a squad number. While we've been in Manhattan, NYPD officers have just sort of looked over and nodded." It's also got fake Italian licence plates so they don't have to pay for tolls. And it comes complete with a PA system and siren, while in the front grill he's installed a lighting system that flashes amber, red, and white "for fun".

"Coming out of New York was pretty awesome," Tommy will tell me later. "We had our lights and sirens on so we could get through pedestrians."

Born in north Wales, Tommy grew up on his family's sheep farm in the village of Glyndyfrdwy. As a teenager he was into parkour — sometimes called free running — and even got sponsorship, turning semi-professional. He studied rural enterprise and land management at Harper Adams University near Newport, after which he returned to the farm and set up a log cabin rental company. Today, his sister works for the business too. Tommy got married in June and the couple have a three-year-old daughter. "I don't drink, I don't smoke, I don't go out partying every night. I've taken my car to the other side of the world. These are once-in-a-lifetime adventures," he says.

Tommy is too young to remember the first *Cannonball Run* film — he was born a decade after it came out — but he does recall watching *Long Way Round* with Ewan McGregor and Charley Boorman when he was about 12 and becoming fascinated by the



Arne Toman and Doug Tabbutt, his co-driver, broke the Cannonball record for the second time in May 2020. Their sub-26-hour time is still the fastest ever

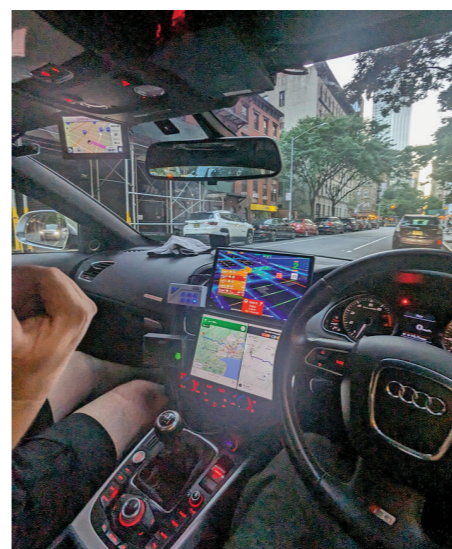
concept of overlanding — travelling long distances by motorbike or car. The first time he heard of the Cannonball Run was when he watched the 1989 movie *Cannonball Fever*, another in the franchise, starring John Candy and Eugene Levy. "They say it's the shittiest one, but for me it's nostalgic," Tommy says, "and I thought: I must do that."

He says some people ask him what's the point — you don't see any of America because you're just flying past everything so fast. "But there's an upside to it," he insists. "You see how everything sort of changes. You come out of the city, and then into Pennsylvania and it's really green and big, and then everything just slowly starts to fade to desert — but it happens so much quicker than if you were doing it over two weeks. You can really notice it."

Critics complain that these unsanctioned races on public roads put lives at risk. But Ed Bolian tells me that in more than 50 years there has never been a fatality or a serious injury, and zero incidents involving other cars. "There was a team in 1975 in a limousine that ran off the road and one of the unbuckled female passengers broke her arm," he says. "There was a car a few years ago that hit a deer — and nobody was hurt except the deer. And then there was a crash in 1979 when a Lotus spun off the road into a guardrail in the rain. No injuries."

Perhaps one reason for this is that Cannonballers use spotters ahead of them to check for accidents or any other obstacles that might slow them down — including police speed traps. Some Cannonballers have as many as 30 spotters; Tommy and Steve have five, one of whom is Toman, the current record holder. He'll meet them at a petrol station somewhere in Illinois and take off ahead while they're refuelling. "The Cannonball is the last American thing you can do," Toman tells me. "Stick it to the man. It captures the American spirit that's kind of been lost — this sense of adventure in doing something you're not supposed to be doing."

He says his own Cannonballing days are over, although he doubts his record will be stolen from him anytime soon. "The record will probably be broken again when they isolate a lane on the highways just for electric vehicles. Or when they raise the speed limit. Who knows? With the green movement, it may mean



From top: Tommy's Audi, ready to set off through the busy streets of New York; inside, the car has been fitted with GPS tracking, a dashcam and a police radar detector

fewer cars on the road in future, and if people are driving less, maybe that's when it'll be broken."

Bolian tells me that nobody has done a record-setting run with zero stops because the amount of fuel you would require for a car of the performance needed to set the record would be too heavy. Who knows if a future car would be capable of it, though.

I track Tommy and Steve on the app across New Jersey and into Pennsylvania, and clock them going 119mph, 131mph, 140, 142, 146. At one point I see they've pulled over and I'm fairly sure they hadn't scheduled a refuelling stop. I message them on WhatsApp. "What happened? Police?" Steve replies: "No. Quick auxiliary fuel tank check. Ten seconds." Then they're back in the race.

Somewhere in the Midwest, one of their spotters is pulled over by two sheriff's deputies who had been parked in the central reservation with their lights off. "I buried the brakes trying to scrub as much speed off as possible," the spotter later tells me. "Tommy was half a mile behind me. They pulled me over and we watched

"I DON'T DRINK, I DON'T SMOKE, I DON'T GO OUT PARTYING EVERY NIGHT. THESE ARE ONCE-IN-A-LIFETIME ADVENTURES"

Tommy zoom past; they clocked him doing 111mph. The police said they could tell by my gadgets and my buddy speeding down the road what we were up to. So I name-dropped a sergeant I knew in the next district. Turns out they hadn't registered my speed anyway and they let me go. My sergeant friend texted me later that night to say he was disappointed in Tommy: '111 is a rookie number', he wrote."

Just past Des Moines, Iowa, they watch the sun coming up in their rearview mirror. The mountain passes in Colorado are dense with traffic, but as they come down the other side into Utah, Tommy says the sky "got three times as big and the road four times as long and our top speed was 164mph".

Towards the end of the run, Tommy took two shifts driving back to back — a 600-mile stint from central Utah, down through Las Vegas and across California's Mojave Desert to Los Angeles. Tommy and Steve arrive at Redondo Beach after midnight — around 3am New York time. I wake up on Sunday morning to a voice note on my phone. Their time? "30 hours, 22 minutes — outside of Covid we're the fifth-fastest of all time."

"We're feeling pretty good," Tommy tells me, although he sounds exhausted. "It was a very surreal moment when we turned up. I don't drink but I imagine that's what it feels like when you're drunk. We were aiming for sub-30 hours, but we got here in one piece. And we've become the fastest non-Americans to do the Cannonball ever — we beat a guy from Monaco by 20-odd minutes. It was intense driving," he adds. "In that last stretch it seemed like everyone was trying to get to the Portofino Hotel; there was a lot of weaving in and out of lanes to get through. I thought: if the police pull us over now we'll just keep going until we get to the hotel and let them deal with us there."

A few days after Tommy and Dave's Cannonball Run, they're back in the car again heading east — but this time they're not racing. They're sightseeing: Idaho Falls, Yellowstone National Park, over Beartooth Pass — "the most beautiful drive in America". When they were crossing back through Utah, old habits kicked in: Tommy says a cop pulled them over doing 113mph. "He gave me a ticket for reckless driving and that means a mandatory court appearance. I have to take it seriously otherwise I won't be able to come back to America because there'll be a warrant out for my arrest. We got a photo with him at the side of the road anyway."

Regardless, Tommy feels like this is the end of a huge period in his life — one that began with his first car rally back in 2015. "After everything I've been through with this car, this feels like a really big victory lap," he says, "like the end of a really big chapter." There's a pause, and then he adds: "I'm just not sure if it's the end of the book." ■