



Jet car suit rolls to halt

Owner, museum settle claim over piece's treatment



The Spirit of America, designed and driven to speed records by Craig Breedlove, was at the Museum of Science and Industry for five decades. (J.B. SPECTOR/MUSEUM OF SCIENCE AND INDUSTRY 2007)



Craig Breedlove, in Chicago on Monday for settlement talks, said he was “brokenhearted” over the jet car's condition when he got it back. (PHIL VELASQUEZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE)

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By Robert Channick Chicago Tribune

Craig Breedlove reached an agreement this week with the Museum of Science and Industry over a lawsuit alleging his record-setting Spirit of America jet car was damaged during its 50 years on display.

Terms of Monday's settlement were not disclosed, according to a statement released by Breedlove and the museum. Breedlove had been seeking \$395,000 to cover estimated repair costs.

“For more than 50 years, millions of museum visitors were able to get an up-close

view of the racecar,” the joint statement said. “The confidential agreement fully resolves a lawsuit brought against the museum regarding the condition of the car.”

When Breedlove lent his Spirit of America jet car to the Museum of Science and Industry in 1965, it was freshly repaired from a harrowing crash during a land speed record run at the Bonneville Salt Flats in Utah.

Fifty years later, the museum took the car off display and returned it — in far worse shape than after the record-setting crash, Breedlove said in an interview with the Tribune.

“Unquestionably, the damage from the museum was much, much more severe than the crash,” Breedlove said. “It was in beautiful shape when we loaned it to them.”

Breedlove and his attorney were in Chicago on Monday for settlement discussions before a federal magistrate judge in their lawsuit against the museum, seeking money to repair the historic jet car. Filed in June and amended in October, the lawsuit alleged negligence and breach of fiduciary duty by the museum.

Breedlove, now 79, designed, built and piloted the world's fastest car while still in his early 20s. In 1963 he became the first to cross the 400 mph threshold, and he set a record the following year, topping 526 mph before crashing into a saltwater pool far beyond the course. It was the last time he drove the car.

At the urging of his sponsors, the Spirit was cosmetically repaired and lent to the Museum of Science and Industry for exhibition — minus the jet engine, which was subsequently destroyed in a flood. Breedlove and the museum entered into an “oral agreement” that the car would be returned to him in the event it was pulled from display.

“At the time, I was a young guy, I didn't have experience, I didn't have an attorney,” Breedlove said. “It was something the sponsors wanted and the museum wanted it. It

seemed like the right thing to do and they had this marvelous reputation. I just had no idea that something like this could happen.”

When the car was taken off display and shipped to his Rio Vista, Calif., home in October 2015, damage included exterior panels that no longer fit, stretched intake duct mountings for the jet engine and graffiti where schoolchildren had carved their initials in the aluminum finish, Breedlove said.

In addition, Breedlove said the vehicle's frame had been cut and “unprofessionally” rewelded, and the driver's seat was missing. The car was taken to a professional restoration shop, which estimated repair costs at \$395,000.

“It was a real art piece and an icon in automotive history for the United States,” Breedlove said. “I was just totally stunned at the condition. I couldn't believe the amount of damage that was done to it. I'm just brokenhearted over the thing.”

While Breedlove expected normal wear and tear over 50 years of kids' field trips and hands-on admirers, he said the decision to cut the car was by far the most damaging — to the vehicle and his faith in the museum.

He said he wasn't looking for damages — only the cost of repair. He believes the car can be restored to its glory, and despite his “disappointing” experience with the MSI, he may donate it to another museum for display.

While the Spirit of America is permanently retired from racing, Breedlove, who turns 80 in a couple of months, hasn't lost his need for speed. He is hoping to help recapture the title of world's fastest car, currently held by England, with a new car — and his son at the wheel.

“We're hoping to put a car together for the United States to take them on,” Breedlove said. “The good news is I won't have to drive it anymore.”

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