

1998 AMERICA'S CHALLENGE

IT WAS A SLOW START AND A FAST FINISH FOR THE 16 GAS BALLOONS LAUNCHING OUT OF ALBUQUERQUE. THREE DAYS OF WEATHER DELAYS FOLLOWED BY A NIGHT WITH NO WIND BUILT THE SUSPENSE, FOR PILOTS AND SPECTATORS ALIKE.

BY CLIFFORD Y. AUSTIN



Cindy Petrehn photo

In perfect conditions, under clear skies, America's Challenge gas balloons prepare to launch from Balloon Fiesta Park in Albuquerque October 8. The first night's flight would be illuminated by a full moon.

The biggest challenge of the America's Challenge was finding a good time to launch. After the frustration of the cancelled Coupe Gordon Bennett in France just three weeks before, the gas pilots from the U.S. and around the world who had gathered in Albuquerque were ready to fly on Saturday, October 3.

Nineteen balloons had registered for the race, from the United States, Canada, England and Australia.

Three teams representing global contenders entered the event: Per Lindstrand and alternate pilot Dave Jackson from the *ICO Challenger*, Mark Sullivan and Crispin Williams representing *Spirit of Peace*, and Dave Liniger and John Wallington from *Team Re/Max*.

Five of the U.S. entrants, as well as seven of the foreign pilots, had recently returned from France, having spent thousands of dollars to attend a non-event. (See story, page 17.)

Weather takes center stage

At the first pilot briefing Friday evening, meteorologist Lou Billones predicted good conditions for the following afternoon's scheduled launch.

Lou said the first night's flight, as well as part of the first day, would not see the competitors gaining very much speed.

After that, however, things would change, and the pilots could expect to achieve some real distance to the east and northeast. Officials distributed paperwork necessary for Canadian crossings.

By Saturday noon, however, the weather pattern across the United States had changed dramatically. Low pressure had developed across the entire mid-section of the country, with areas of thunderstorms and even tornados predicted. The balloons might be able to fly for 24 hours or so before encountering the bad weather, or they might find it sooner.

Championship Director Steve Shope put the pilots on a four-hour hold, but told them nevertheless to begin preparing their balloons for a possible 5:00 p.m. launch.

Several pilots, some of whom had hired private weather forecasters to supplement the weather provided before launch, voiced concern over the conditions.

Mike Wallace said the balloons should launch, even if the flight might be short. "You don't know what's down the road," he said. "If we wait, we might not be able to fly at all." Others, however, urged Shope to act with caution.

At the 4:00 p.m. briefing, Lou's forecast had not improved, and Shope called a hold until an 11:00 a.m. briefing the following day, Sunday. The sigh of relief from pilots and crew was palpable.

Sunday's weather had, if anything, deteriorated. Hind-sight proved the wisdom of Saturday's weather hold, as strong storms decorated the radar picture throughout the flight area. A strong upper air trough passed through Albuquerque



Cindy Petrehn photo

Sunday afternoon, and the flight was again put on hold.

Monday morning's briefing looked more promising, with a possible launch window after midnight. The storms still posed a threat, but Tuesday afternoon's weather was shaping up to look ideal. With Wednesday as the last possible day to launch under the rules, Shope took the gamble and put the pilots on one last hold.

By this time, three teams had left Albuquerque, two of them for weather concerns, and one to return to work commitments back home. The rest of the teams had settled into a rhythm of briefing, working and holding, and enjoying the other activities of Fiesta. Most had taken advantage of the extra time to fine-tune their equipment and supplies.

All made a point to get as much extra rest as they could. And by the time Tuesday's noon briefing rolled around, the pilots and crews were rested and recovered from the tension that dominated the event earlier in the week.

Sure enough, Billones forecast nearly ideal conditions—calm surface winds, and calm winds aloft for the first night. By Sunday afternoon, he said, the balloons should pick up some speed and cover good ground to the north and northeast, at least at low altitudes.

But higher altitudes, he said, would take the balloons southeast into Mexico. Congresswoman Heather Wilson of New Mexico wrote a letter of introduction for the pilots and crews to carry with them should the need arise. Organizers also obtained clearance and arrangements for flights into White Sands Missile Range and Holloman Air Force Base, where the Air Force was conducting bombing drills.

At 6:55 p.m., the first balloon launched into a beautiful Albuquerque sunset, and 15 others followed in orderly succession. By the time the last aerostat left the ground at 8:04 p.m., a full moon spread balloon shadows all over the desert floor, and those who had left earlier began to hear coyote concerts as they entered the mountains east of Santa Fe.

Lou's forecast proved accurate. While some of the teams early in the launch sequence made as much as 125 miles overnight, most stalled out within a 25-mile radius of Santa Fe. A few tracked back toward Albuquerque, and spectators at Wednesday morning's Fiesta launch reported seeing two gas balloons from Fiesta Park. No one elected to take the high flight to Mexico.

By Wednesday morning, six of the 16 balloons had landed, due to equipment problems or other difficulties. The rest flew on to the northeast, catching winds of up to 25 MPH depending on their altitude.

Tom Davies and Tarp Head were in one of the five balloons that flew over Vadito, New Mexico, home of the legendary Ed Yost. Ed, by the way, built four of the 16 gas balloons flying the America's Challenge.

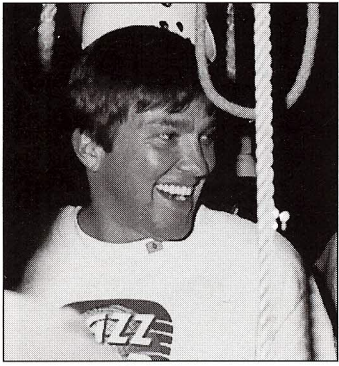
Others crossed the Sangre de Cristo Mountains further south over Las Vegas, New Mexico. Thermal activity for the day was mild, and, once past the mountains, the pilots could mostly relax and enjoy the scenery.

Wednesday afternoon and evening, another three teams landed, leaving seven to race through the second night aloft. Now it was down to the serious competitors.

No matter how serious they were, every pilot remaining in the sky that second night was humbled by the overwhelming beauty that unfolded around their envelopes over Kansas, Colorado and Nebraska.

With virtually no man-made light below, the Milky Way threw a panorama of bright white starlight around nets and load rings. By the time the moon had completed its orange ascent, the pilots could read charts and instruments easily in its light.

Speeds increased overnight as well, with a low-level jet developing across the plains. At sunrise Thursday, no one landed. All 14 pilots grew even more serious about their strategy, as the lower level winds picked up to 40 MPH to the north or northwest. Increased altitude brought some reduction in speed, but a track more to the northeast.



Cindy Petrehn photo



Cindy Petrehn photo



Jan Stevenson photo



Peter W. Richardson photo

Opposite page: The advent of sunset sees the first balloon leave the field. The total launch window for 16 balloons lasted one hour and nine minutes

Above: Pilots and co-pilots prepare for their long flights. Left to right: Jim Herschend and Rich Hager lifting off; Tami Stevenson Bradley and the Bradleys' crew chief, Bob Day, holding the valve during inflation; Tarp Head lifting off with Tom Davies, and at right, a stowaway on Dave Liniger and John Wallington's Re/Max balloon.



Peter W. Richardson photo

At approximately 1:00 p.m., Jim Herschend's crew radioed that they had another balloon in sight not more than 5 miles behind. Jim and his co-pilot, Ruth Ludwig, strained to find the other envelope, but to no avail. A haze layer near their altitude of 2,000 feet AGL made spotting difficult.

Finally, nearly two hours later, they found it—Troy Bradley and his wife, Tami Stevenson-Bradley, who were flying some 1,000 feet above Herschend's red *Jazz Bird*. Herschend reasoned that, at their higher altitude, the slower speeds would keep the Bradleys well behind.

As sunset approached, so did decision time for the pilots. All weather indications pointed to very high surface winds throughout the night. Indeed, those attempting a sunset landing faced speeds of 30-40 MPH on the ground.

Some forecasters said the wind would drop at sunrise. But what if it didn't? Ballast expended through nightfall as the balloons' gas contracted would leave several pilots with

the minimum sand necessary to land at dawn.

And where would they be? Those who had stayed high would be further east. The others, those who flew low during the second day, looked at possible landings in the deep woods of Canada, beyond civilization and approaching the permafrost.

Four teams decided to land. David Levin said, "I had 18 bags left, plenty of ballast to go through a four-day flight. But I did *not* want to be where I knew I would be if I kept going that night."

Herschend and Ludwig landed in De Smet, South Dakota. As they packed their equipment, they looked up to see Troy and Tami fly right over their heads at a high rate of speed. Jim and Ruth said a prayer for their friends' safety as the Albuquerque pilots flew off into the night.

Mark Sullivan and Crispin Williams also flew on. They had remained high earlier, and were able to land the next morning in Side Lake, Minnesota.

Troy and Tami, however, were not so lucky. Reaching

speeds in excess of 60 MPH on the deck, they raced on into Canada. In the last 12 hours of their flight, they gained more than half their total distance.

Lou Billones, who had returned to Omaha Thursday morning, worked with the pilots via cell phone and radio, trying to find them a better flight pattern and place to land.

"We talked to Lou at 1:30 a.m.," said Tami, "and had our last contact with the crew at 2:00. Then we lost all contact in the wilderness."

Troy and Tami's crew, Bob Day and Gary and Sydney Evans, kept driving north.

"We were right under them until Fargo, North Dakota," said Day. "But when we stopped to get something to eat, they were going 60 MPH. There was no way we were going to keep up."

When they stopped, the crew called Winnipeg Center by telephone to let them know of the Bradley's speed, direction and location.

Winnipeg issued a NOTAM to all airplane pilots in the area to

watch for the yellow balloon, and contacted the America's Challenge Command Center to report the Bradleys' position.

Finally, just at sunrise, Lou's skill again became evident. Surface winds dropped dramatically, as he had predicted they would. The pilots had a stand-up landing in about 7 KTS of wind at the shore of a small lake. Their GPS showed their location as between the towns of Pickle Lake and Cat Lake, Ontario, with a total distance covered of 1,388.8 miles.

After activating their emergency locator transmitter, they began stowing equipment and waiting for someone to find them. Radio contact was impossible in their remote location, as was cellular phone service.

At noontime, they saw a C-130 Hercules airplane circling above, and talked to the Canadian Search and Rescue pilots by radio. About two hours later, Norm Jones in his private helicopter from Kanora, Ontario arrived to bring the couple 100 miles to Pickle Lake. There they rented a hotel

room to shower, eat and wait for the crew.

Shope, meanwhile, had arranged for complimentary airline tickets from Continental Airlines to bring the pilots home. But first they had to drive to Minneapolis, just a short 400 miles from Pickle Lake. The Bradleys' crew reached them late that evening, and they set out driving all night for Minneapolis, arriving at the airport 35 minutes before the plane departed.

Troy and Tami reached Albuquerque at 4:30 p.m., with just time enough to change clothes before the awards banquet.

"It was the flight of a lifetime," said Tami after the banquet. "I'm so glad Steve [Shope] decided to hold the launch until Tuesday. What could have been a difficult, dangerous flight was, instead, challenging and fun.

"Missing the Gordon Bennett was disappointing, but this made up for it."

Getting their balloon back from Canada, however, was somewhat less than fun.

Norm Jones offered to return to the site a week later and try to bring the balloon back. When he and his crew got there, they found the aerostat under water in the lake. It was too soaked and heavy to lift.

"I was devastated," said Tami. "My father and Troy built that balloon together, and when he died, it came entirely to Troy. It isn't just a balloon, it's a memory."

Another week went by, and the Canadians returned to the landing site. This time, the lake was frozen, and the balloon covered with snow.

The pilots attached lines to the valve at the top of the envelope, and slowly lifted it with the helicopter to get most of the snow and frost off the fabric. They then carefully packed everything into the basket for the flight back to civilization.

When they returned to Kanora, they hung the envelope



Jan Stevenson photo

Troy and Tami Bradley's envelope hangs in a Kanora, Ontario hangar to dry out following its week of exposure to rain, snow and ice.

from the rafters of their helicopter hangar to dry, and called the Bradleys.

While relieved that their balloon was out of the woods, so to speak, Troy and Tami were eager to have it back to assess the damage. Shipping would take a week or more, at best.

Tami's mother, Jan Stevenson, decided this was too long to wait. She and her friend, Jim Johnson, drove two straight days to Kanora, retrieved the balloon, and drove straight back to Albuquerque.

"The valve is in pretty rough shape," said Tami, "And there are a few holes, but the fabric looks fine and we'll be able to repair the envelope."

Pilots and crews will remember the 1998 America's Challenge as a gas race full of great frustration, great beauty, great rushes of adrenaline upon landing, and, most of all, great challenge. And the top three winners will proudly represent the United States in the 1999 Coupe Gordon Bennett.



America's Challenge Results

PLACE	PILOTS	COUNTRY	LANDING SITE	ST. MILES	TIME
1.	Troy Bradley Tami Stevenson Bradley	USA	Cat Lake, Canada	1388.8	58.8
2.	Mark Sullivan Crispin Williams	USA England	Side Lake, MN	1108.96	60.1
3.	Richard Abruzzo Jacob Traub	USA	Lake Bronson, MN	1070.87	47.1
4.	David Levin Allan Levin	USA	St. Thomas, MN	1038.06	46.6
5.	Tom Davies Tarp Head	USA	Gwinner, ND	888.00	46.2
6.	James Herschend Ruth Ludwig	USA	DeSmet, SD	801.58	45.8
7.	J. Michael Wallace Kevin Brielmann	USA	St. Francis, ND	618.77	47.00
8.	David Gleed Stan Wereschuck	Canada	Kim, CO	228.77	23.2
9.	Tom Donnelly Colin Wolstenholme	England	Bueyeros, NM	170.57	20.9
10.	Thomas Boyland Richard Hager	USA	Clayton, NM	169.47	20.6
11.	Per Lindstrand David Jackson	England	Chamisal, NM	100.11	15.00
12.	John Kugler Jack Edling	USA	Guadalupita, NM	98.55	15.00
13.	Leo Burman Danielle Francoeur	Canada	Carrizozo, NM	92.37	15.9
14.	Ron Martin Duane Powers	Canada USA	Nambe, NM	61.55	13.5
15.	John Wallington Dave Liniger	Australia USA	Los Alamos, NM	55.28	12.00
16.	Peter Cuneo Barbara Fricke	USA	no data	0.00	n/a