

Gordon Bennett Media Materials:
Meet the Gordon Bennett Competitors

Contact: media@balloonfiesta.com

Updated October 2nd, 2023



Note: This corrects information for team SUI-1 and reflects a pilot change for Team USA-1.

Austria AUT-1: Gerald Stürzlinger, Helmut Meinhofer

Austria AUT-1



Gerald Stürzlinger



Nicaero Nautilo
D-ORZL



Wolfgang Spät

Gerald Stürzlinger is one of the race's most experienced and colorful pilots – only Willi Eimers has competed in more Gordon Bennett races. The last time the Gordon Bennett was held in Albuquerque, Stürzlinger and co-pilot Helmut Meinhofer were the runners-up; he has finished in the top ten 16 times. Stürzlinger is also a world-class hot air balloon competitor. Wolfgang Spät is a professional balloonist with more than 1,300 pilot hours. This will be Spät and Sturzlinger's fifth Gordon Bennett flying together; they finished fifth in 2016.

Austria AUT-2: Christian Wagner, Stefanie Liller

Austria AUT-2



Christian Wagner



OE-ZZM



Stefanie Liller

This will be Christian Wagner's seventh Gordon Bennett; last year he and Stefanie Liller finished a very respectable 7th. Wagner also competed in the 2019 America's Challenge, logging a flight from Albuquerque of 1,447 km (nearly 900 miles). Wagner comes from a ballooning, flying, and skydiving family and is a gas and hot air ballooning instructor who has completed more than 90 gas balloon flights. Steffi Liller is an expedition and adventure lecturer and guide specializing in the polar regions, and also a skydiving champion and a hot air balloonist.

France FRA-1: Benoît Pelard and Benoît Péterlé

France FRA-1



Benoît Pelard



Marie Marvingt
F-PALL



Benoît Péterlé

Leaders of the robust French and European ballooning communities, Benoît Pelard and Benoît Péterlé are veterans of 10 previous Gordon Bennett races and have competed together in the America's Challenge since 2017. They've scored several top ten finishes in the Gordon Bennett and were third in the 2019 America's Challenge. Pelard and Péterlé are returning to competition in the Gordon Bennett after a several years' absence, during which they served as race officials.

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France FRA-2: Eric Decellières, Benoit Havret

France FRA-2



Eric Decellières



Le Petit Prince
F-PPSE



Benoît Havret

In a few short years, this team has become a force to be reckoned with in international gas ballooning. They finished second in the 2021 Gordon Bennett, and Eric Decellières, flying with the great Gordon Bennett champion Vincent Lëys, came in second in the 2019 America's Challenge. Decellières and Benoit Havret have two top five Gordon Bennett races and four top tens to their credit, and are known as tough, gutsy competitors. Decellières is a businessman and entrepreneur, and Havret works in real estate.

France FRA-3: Hervé Moine, Christophe Blanchard

France FRA-3



Hervé Moine



Mobil 1
F-HMDF



Christophe Blanchard

A professional balloonist and member of a ballooning and aviation family, Hervé Moine is competing in his ninth Gordon Bennett. He's finished in the top five three times, including 3rd in 2021. He and Christophe Blanchard flew together in the race for the first time last year. Blanchard is a physician specializing in trauma care and aeronautical medicine. Although relatively new to gas ballooning, he is an experienced airplane and hot air balloon pilot, club president, and event organizer.

Germany GER-1: Wilhelm Eimers, Benjamin Eimers

Germany GER-1



Wilhelm Eimers



Leonid
D-OTLI



Benjamin Eimers

Wilhelm Eimers has flown in more Gordon Bennetts than any balloonist in history (this will be his 30th) and has won five times. He has more than 9,000 flight hours and holds multiple records, including the Gordon Bennett duration record of more than 92 hours aloft. Eimers' *Gasballonstartplatz Gladbeck* is arguably the world's leading training center for gas ballooning. Benjamin Eimers is this year's recipient of the Diplome Montgolfier, ballooning's highest award. He holds several German ballooning records and is a professional balloonist. The Eimers are the defending Gordon Bennett champions.

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Germany GER-2: Benedict Munz, Matthias Schlegel

Benedict Munz and Matthias Schlegel are competing in their fourth Gordon Bennett and have a couple of mid-pack finishes to their credit. Both pilots are also experienced hot air balloonists who fly in events in Germany and elsewhere in Europe. Munz has nearly 1,000 hours in balloons and has twice placed in the top three in the German national hot air balloon championships. Schlegel has nearly 1,500 hours in gas and hot air balloons and, in addition to piloting, has provided weather and strategic support for several Gordon Bennett teams.



Germany GER-3: Max Michels, Andreas Michels



Father and son Andreas and Max Michels are new to flying in Gordon Bennett, but are experienced second and third generation balloonists. Max is a certified balloon maintenance engineer and flight instructor, and for the last five years has provided Command Center support for the Eimers and other German Gordon Bennett teams. Andreas has been involved in ballooning for more than 50 years and is a certified flight instructor with more than 2,100 hours in gas balloons and 1,900 hours in hot air balloons.

Lithuania LTU-1: Robertas Komža, Romanas Mikelevičius



Robertas Komža is a professional balloonist, designated examiner, and airship pilot and owner of a Lithuanian ride operations and balloon maintenance and repair facility. He is flying in his fourth Gordon Bennett. Both of Robertas' sons are also balloonists and his younger son, Danielius, won the Lithuanian national hot air ballooning championship last year. Komža's Gordon Bennett co-pilot, Romanas Mikelevičius, has more than 4,000 hours experience in hot air and gas balloons and flew with Komža in last year's race.

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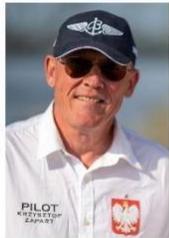


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Poland POL-1: Krzysztof Zapart, Pjtor Halas

Poland POL-1



Krzysztof Zapart



Zonzo
D-OGBL



Piotr Halas

After years of runner-up finishes in the America's Challenge, jovial Polish competitor Krzysztof Zapart broke the jinx in 2019, when he won the race with American co-pilot Andy Cayton. They landed in the Canadian wilderness, serving notice to the gas ballooning community that they'll go for broke to win. Zapart has also flown in eight Gordon Bennett races, with seven top 10 and four top 5 finishes. His copilot, Pjtor Halas, is returning to the Gordon Bennett after a quarter-century absence; he last competed in the race in 1997.

Poland POL-2: Jacek Bogdański, Przemyslaw Mościcki

Poland POL-2



Jacek Bogdański



White Eagle
D-OBAD



Przemyslaw Mościcki

Jacek Bogdański, a member of the Polish national team, is one of only two previous Gordon Bennett winners in the field. He and Mateusz Rękas were victorious in 2018. In Albuquerque, he will fly in his eighth Gordon Bennett. Co-pilot Przemyslaw Mościcki is a Gordon Bennett rookie, but an experienced hot air balloonist. He is one of the many pilots in this race who trained with German Gordon Bennett champion Willi Eimers, including making a recent flight across the English Channel.

Spain ESP-1: Anulfo González, Angel Aguirre

Spain ESP-1



Anulfo González



Kamaroti
EC-MAK



Angel Aguirre

Anulfo González and Angel Aguirre are fun-loving, adventurous pilots with fascinating ballooning resumes. González has flown over both the North and South Poles, and Aguirre has flown in 31 countries on five continents. They won the America's Challenge gas balloon race in 2014, and in their seven previous Gordon Bennetts have two third place finishes, two fourths, and six top 10s. Both are professional balloonists who fill down time during their long hours aloft talking about soccer.

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Switzerland SUI-1: Balthasar Wicki, René Erni

Switzerland SUI-1



Balthasar Wicki



Pure White
HB-QWV



René Erni

Two-time Gordon Bennett competitor Balthasar Wicki made the top 10 in 2021-22. An attorney by profession, Wicki has served as head of the Swiss Ballooning Academy. Co-pilot René Erni has been a balloonist and a member of the Swiss national hot air balloon team since 2005. He is participating in his first Gordon Bennett and is a fiduciary in his professional life. Both Wicki and Erni are also experienced paragliders.

United Kingdom GBR-1: Deborah (Day) Scholes, John Rose

United Kingdom GBR-1



Deborah (Day) Scholes



Mike



John Rose

Deborah Day Scholes has big ballooning dreams, and recently attempted an Atlantic Ocean crossing with her husband Mike Scholes, who mentored her passion for ballooning. This will be her first Gordon Bennett, but her co-pilot, John Rose, is a professional balloonist who has competed in six previous Gordon Bennetts. Rose has several alpine crossings and four transits of the English Channel on his resume, as well as participating as a hot-air balloonist in six Balloon Fiestas.

United States USA-1: Noah Forden, Brenda Cowlshaw

United States USA-1



Noah Forden



Intrepid
N526UP



Brenda Cowlshaw

Noah Forden, the defending America's Challenge champion, represented the US in the 2022 Gordon Bennett, finishing 9th. He is an aerospace engineer and experienced fixed wing and hot air balloon pilot. Long-time balloonist Brenda Cowlshaw, the third-place finisher in the 2019 America's Challenge, replaces Bert Padelt, Forden's flying partner in the 2021 America's Challenge and 2022 Gordon Bennett. Padelt is part of a three-pilot team staged with their crew and equipment in Maine, waiting for the right weather to fulfill Padelt's long-held dream of crossing the Atlantic by balloon.

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United States USA-2: Barbara Fricke, Peter Cuneo

United States USA-2



Barbara Fricke



Foxtrof Charlie
N505HY



Peter Cuneo

The Albuquerque team of Barbara Fricke and Peter Cuneo have a diverse ballooning resume. It includes just about everything except a Gordon Bennett win. They've won the America's Challenge gas balloon race four times and earned third and fourth place finishes in their eight Gordon Bennett starts. They also build their own balloons (four so far), have participated in several balloon flights exploring historical and scientific concepts, and are highly respected as instructors, mentors, and leaders in the ballooning community.

United States USA-3: Mark Sullivan, Cheri White

United States USA-3



Mark Sullivan



Snowbird
N9YN



Cheri White

Mark Sullivan holds the record for the most competition gas balloon flights in history: 25 Gordon Bennett flights and 21 America's Challenge races (including two wins). He has 14 top ten finishes in the Gordon Bennett, including two second, two third, and two fourth places. Mark is the president of the World Ballooning Federation (CIA). Cheri White, a former women's hot air ballooning national champion and Balloon Federation of America president, has flown in the Gordon Bennett 14 times, the most ever by a female pilot.