

Aug 13, 2010

## 15th America's Challenge Set for October 5th

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### **A strong field of American and international competitors are heading to Albuquerque.**

A strong field of American and international competitors are heading to Albuquerque this week to compete in one of the world's premiere distance ballooning events, the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta America's Challenge race for gas balloons.

This year, the scheduled launch for the race will move from its traditional slot on the first weekend to Tuesday evening, October 5. The launch is scheduled for 6:30 PM from Balloon Fiesta Park. The change of schedule will give members of the American team who are also competing in the world's other major gas balloon distance race, the Coupe Gordon Bennett, time to return to Albuquerque after the conclusion of that event.

The object of the America's Challenge is to fly the greatest distance from Albuquerque while competing within the event rules. The balloonists often stay aloft more than two days and must use the winds aloft and weather systems to their best advantage to gain the greatest distance. Flights of more than 1,000 miles are not unusual, and the winners sometimes travel as far as Canada and the East Coast.

Nine teams, including 2008 winners Mark Sullivan and Cheri White, are scheduled to complete in this year's America's Challenge:

Richard Abruzzo and Gary Johnson, United States

Troy Bradley and Shane Robinson, United States

Philip Bryant and Elbert Mann, United States

Danielle Francoeur, Canada, and Linda Ellis, United States

Barbara Fricke and Peter Cuneo, United States

Allan Nimmo and Cripsin Williams, United Kingdom

Bert Padelt and Louis Vitanza, United States

J. Michael Wallace and Kevin Briemann, United States

Cheryl White and Mark Sullivan, United States

Sullivan and White are the defending champions, since the 2009 competition had to be cancelled due to high winds that prevented the balloons from launching safely. Former winners Abruzzo/Johnson, Bradley, and Fricke/Cuneo are also in the field.

The America's Challenge is the U.S. qualifier for the Coupe Gordon Bennett, the international gas balloon distance race first run in 1906. The top three American pilots will earn the right to represent the United States in the 2011 Gordon Bennett, which will be held in France.

The Albuquerque Balloon Fiesta Web site, [www.balloonfiesta.com](http://www.balloonfiesta.com), features regular race updates and live computerized tracking of all the balloons during the competition.

[Print](#)

[Return](#)

## America's Challenge Race Launch Moves to Midweek

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### **Eight outstanding gas balloon teams – including three that will hasten back to Albuquerque after flying a distance race in Europe – are scheduled to compete in the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta's America's Challenge race for gas balloons.**

The America's Challenge is one of the world's two premier gas balloon races. The other event, the Coupe Aéronatique Gordon Bennett, is scheduled to launch near Bristol, England on September 25, just a week

before Balloon Fiesta begins. The America's Challenge is traditionally held the first Saturday of Balloon Fiesta, but this would not allow members of the three American Gordon Bennett teams enough time to complete that race and get back to Albuquerque. Therefore, the launch date for the America's Challenge was moved from its traditional Saturday evening slot to Tuesday, October 5. Weather permitting, the launch is scheduled for 6:30 Tuesday evening.

The object of the America's Challenge is to fly the greatest distance from Albuquerque while competing within the event rules. The balloonists often stay aloft more than two days and must use the winds aloft and weather systems to their best advantage to gain the greatest distance. Flights of more than 1,000 miles are not unusual, and the winners sometimes travel as far as Canada and the East Coast.

The logistics and preparation for a gas balloon race for the teams involved are extensive. Attempting to fly two races in two weeks will take extensive planning and a lot of stamina – but three American pilots are going to, as they say in Britain, “give it a go”:

- Defending America's Challenge champions Cheri White and Mark Sullivan, who won in 2008, also finished third in the 2009 Gordon Bennett, flying from Geneva, Switzerland to the coast of Portugal. In 2008 they broke the America's Challenge duration record they had held since 2002 – but another team flew 11 minutes longer to claim the new record. Mark Sullivan is the founder of the America's Challenge race.
- Richard Abruzzo will fly the America's Challenge with co-pilot Gary Johnson, the former Governor of New Mexico. Abruzzo has won the America's Challenge five times, twice with Johnson as his co-pilot. This will be former Governor Johnson's fifth America's Challenge flight. Abruzzo is flying the Gordon Bennett with another long-time co-pilot, Carol Rymer Davis.
- J. Michael Wallace and Kevin Briemann, distinguished international competitors for 20 years and the third American Gordon Bennett team, are the only team still flying a traditional “netted” gas balloon (think “Around the World in 80 Days”), where the gas cell is enclosed in and supported by a net. They will be flying in their 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> America's Challenge races.

The rest of the distinguished America's Challenge international field is equally formidable:

- Albuquerque's Troy Bradley is also a former America's Challenge winner (1998) and is the current duration record holder for the race, at 68 hours, 46 minutes. Bradley, who holds multiple world ballooning records, will be flying this year with Shane Robinson. He is the current president of the Balloon Federation of America.
- The race's only all-female team is led by Canada's only female gas balloon pilot, Danielle Francoeur. She has competed in several gas balloon events in Albuquerque and, as co pilot to fellow Canadian Leo Burman, finished second in the 1999 Gordon Bennett. Her co-pilot in this year's America's Challenge will be Californian Linda Ellis.
- The all-Albuquerque team of Barbara Fricke and Peter Cuneo is always competitive, winning the America's Challenge in 2001 and finishing second three times.
- Longtime America's Challenge competitor Bert Padelt and his co-pilot Louis Vitanza will fly a newly developed American-built hydrogen balloon. Padelt, a balloon builder from Pennsylvania, has been working with Peter Cuneo on developing an affordable hydrogen system for the American market. Padelt and Cuneo successfully tested the new hydrogen system last spring with a 21-hour flight from Balloon Fiesta Park to Canadian, TX.
- Former Balloon Federation of America President Phil Bryant is flying in his third America's Challenge with co-pilot Elbert Mann.
- 2008 British Gordon Bennett competitor Allan Nimmo and co-pilot Crispin Williams were scheduled to compete but withdrew from the race in mid-September.

This year marks the 15<sup>th</sup> America's Challenge race. The event was founded in 1995 in order to make gas ballooning a lasting part of the Balloon Fiesta. The race was not held in 1999 so the Gordon Bennett could be accommodated in Albuquerque (the two events have been run simultaneously from Balloon Fiesta Park

twice since, in 2005 and 2008). Last year's race was cancelled after the balloons were inflated and flight-ready because of high winds that prevented a safe launch.

The America's Challenge is the U.S. qualifier for the Coupe Gordon Bennett. The top three American pilots will earn the right to represent the United States in the 2011 Gordon Bennett, which will be held in France. The Albuquerque Balloon Fiesta Web site, [www.balloonfiesta.com](http://www.balloonfiesta.com), will feature live computerized tracking of all the balloons and race updates throughout the competition.

For further information, please contact Kathie Leyendecker at 228-9874.

[Print](#)

[Return](#)

Sep 24, 2010

## The Armchair America's Challenge

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**Follow the process of the America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons via live tracking on the Balloon Fiesta website! Here's how it works.**

Most of us will never have the opportunity to see America from the (relatively) slow-moving platform of a gas balloon. But we can follow the excitement of America's very own gas balloon distance race right from the nearest computer screen or Smartphone. The launch of the America's Challenge Gas Balloon Race is always an exciting and interesting event. Balloon Fiesta guests can watch the preparation and inflation of the gas balloons – a very different process from a hot-air balloon inflation – on the afternoon before the scheduled sunset launch [this year scheduled for Tuesday, October 5]. But once the balloons disappear into the night sky, they usually don't return to the launch site. (One notable exception: David Hempleman-Adams and Jonathan Mason, during their winning Gordon Bennett race flight in 2008, flew almost directly over Balloon Fiesta Park at noon the day after the launch).

However, each balloon carries a small yellow box that gives the rest of us a way to follow its flight. The box, referred to as a tracker, contains a satellite transmitter that sends the balloon's location to the Command Center at Balloon Fiesta Park. There, computer software plots the data onto a map that displays the balloons' positions and track. The tracker also reports the speed and direction the balloon is traveling. However, it does not report the altitude at which the balloon is flying, since reporting the balloon's altitude could provide information which could give away the pilots' race strategy.

Gas balloon race watchers can log onto the Balloon Fiesta's website, [www.balloonfiesta.com](http://www.balloonfiesta.com), and click on the link on the home page to view the tracker data. The Balloon Fiesta website also includes information about the race and the competitors and regular updates on the progress of the race. Under the rules, competitors have up to four hours to report their landing, and the website posts teams as having landed once an official report is received by the Command Center.

Unofficial results are posted on the site after the last balloon has landed, and official results are posted once race officials have debriefed the pilots and evaluated their data to assure the race was flown in accordance with the rules.

[Print](#)

[Return](#)

Sep 29, 2010

## America's Challenge Teams Monitoring Adriatic Search for Missing Balloonists

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**The America's Challenge team is closely following developments in the Adriatic with the search for longtime competitors Richard Abruzzo and Carol Rymer Davis.**

The America's Challenge race team is following with concern the ongoing search in the Adriatic Sea off the Italian coast for our longtime friends Richard Abruzzo and Carol Rymer Davis. The team was reported missing early today while competing in the Coupe Gordon Bennett distance race which launched Saturday from Bristol in the United Kingdom.

Richard Abruzzo has competed in 13 America's Challenge races and won five times, including the 2003 race with Carol Rymer Davis as his co-pilot. The team has competed in three America's Challenge races and in several other international events. Both have earned numerous ballooning world records and both are recipients of the Montgolfier Diplome, the highest award in international ballooning. Both are also long-time participants in the Balloon Fiesta's hot air events.

We remain hopeful that the team will be found soon. Richard and Carol and their families are in our thoughts and prayers.

[Print](#)

[Return](#)

Oct 2, 2010

## America's Challenge Launch On Schedule

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**Plans are moving forward for a Tuesday, October 5 launch of the America's Challenge race for gas balloons at the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta.**

America's Challenge Race Director Thomas Hora and the race support team met Friday afternoon October 1 to discuss plans for the race, which is planned to continue as scheduled the evening of Tuesday, October 5. Two teams that were originally scheduled to compete have withdrawn from the race. The British team of Allan Nimmo and Crispin Williams withdrew earlier in September, and Mike Wallace and Kevin Brielmann of the USA have also withdrawn from the race after sustaining a hard landing during a recent flight in Europe. It is likely this year's America's Challenge field will include six teams: Troy Bradley/Shane Robinson, Phil Bryant/Elbert Mann, Danielle Francour/Linda Ellis, Barbara Fricke/Peter Cuneo, Bert Padelt/Louis Vitanza, and Cheri White/Mark Sullivan.

The team extends its hope that their friends Richard Abruzzo (who is scheduled to compete in the America's Challenge with former New Mexico Governor Gary Johnson) and Carol Rymer Davis are found soon.

[Print](#)

[Return](#)

Oct 2, 2010

## Balloon Fiesta Follows Search for Missing Balloonists

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**As the search continues for missing balloonists Richard Abruzzo and Carol Rymer Davis, balloonists and officials at the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta have not given up hope that their friends will be found.**

America's Challenge and Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta officials continue to closely monitor developments in the search for missing balloonists Richard Abruzzo and Carol Rymer Davis. While recently reported transponder data is discouraging, the search for the balloon and pilots is still in progress and we continue to hope that Carol and Richard will be found soon.

Richard Abruzzo and Carol Rymer Davis are highly-respected longtime participants in both the Balloon Fiesta and America's Challenge. The Abruzzo and Davis families' involvement in Balloon Fiesta dates back to the early 1970's. Richard and Carol have competed as a team in the America's Challenge five times and won the race in 2003. They won the ReMax cup in 1999 and the prestigious Coupe Aeronautique Gordon Bennett in 2004 – Carol Rymer Davis is the first and still the only woman to have won the Gordon Bennett.. In addition to his win with Carol, Richard has won the America's Challenge four times – his five victories are far and away the most achieved by any competitor in the race.

Richard Abruzzo is the son of Ben Abruzzo, the legendary balloonist who completed the first manned transatlantic balloon crossing in 1978 and the first manned transpacific crossing in 1981. In 1992, Richard competed with Troy Bradley in the Chrysler Transatlantic Challenge race, setting a world record for duration and making the first balloon crossing from the USA to Africa. He is a former national gas balloon champion and has set numerous world records in gas balloons. His many honors include the FAI De La Vaulx Medal, the BFA Shields-Trauger Award, and the Montgolfier Diploma; he is a three-time winner of the National Aeronautic Association (NAA) Harmon Trophy. Richard has also won the Balloon Fiesta Pole Grab competition three times – most recently last year. He serves on the Balloon Fiesta board of directors and is the current chair of the Board of Trustees of the Anderson-Abruzzo Albuquerque International Balloon Museum. The Abruzzo family operates the Sandia Peak Tram, the Sandia Peak and Santa Fe ski areas, and a real estate company.

Dr. Carol Rymer Davis at one time held all three records – altitude, distance, and duration – for class AX-5 hot-air balloons. She held the absolute altitude record for women for many years, and her altitude AX-5 record – set in 1979 -- was beaten only three years ago. Carol is a two-time Montgolfier Diploma recipient, has won the Harmon Trophy, and in 2005 received the NAA Stinson Award and the Federation Aeronautique International's Sabhia Gokcen medal. Both awards are given for the most outstanding performance of the year by a woman in any form of aviation. She is a former Balloon Federation of America Board Member, Treasurer, and Vice President and was the Balloon Fiesta's chief safety official in 1991. Carol, a radiologist in Denver and a former resident of Albuquerque, served in the Army Reserves as a doctor, and is a competitive ski racer and triathlete.

Richard's and Carol's families express their appreciation for the prayers and outpouring of support from around the world and extend their thanks to all who have respected their privacy at this difficult time. They also thank the many agencies from countries throughout the area who continue to search for Richard and Carol.

[Print](#)  
[Return](#)

Oct 4, 2010

## Search Ends for Missing Balloonists

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As gas balloon pilots begin preparations for the America's Challenge, Italian authorities have announced the end of the search for missing competitors Richard Abruzzo and Carol Rymer Davis. With heavy hearts, Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta and America's Challenge Gas Balloon Race officials are monitoring reports from Italy regarding the official end to the search for our friends Richard Abruzzo and Carol Rymer Davis. Richard and Carol disappeared while competing in the Coupe Aéronautique Gordon Bennett in Europe. We join Carol's and Richard's families in expressing our deep appreciation to the Italian, Croatian, Albanian, U.S. and other forces that so diligently searched the area where the balloon was last heard from.

The America's Challenge Gas Balloon Race is a distance event similar to the Coupe Gordon Bennett. The winner is the team that travels the farthest distance from the start point at Albuquerque's Balloon Fiesta Park. The race is still scheduled to launch, weather permitting, in the early evening of Tuesday, October 5. America's Challenge officials will conduct a weather analysis later today and then will hold their first briefing with the six competing teams. We will provide an update on plans for the launch after the completion of this briefing.

While the Balloon Fiesta and America's Challenge continue, Richard and Carol and their families are in all of our hearts and are with us in spirit.

[Print](#)  
[Return](#)

Oct 4, 2010

## From the Family of Dr. Carol Rymer Davis

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### Release from the Family of Dr. Carol Rymer Davis

**Bristol, UK; October 4, 2010**

On Saturday night, September 25<sup>th</sup>, Carol Rymer Davis and Richard Abruzzo lifted off from a field in Bristol with high expectations and the support of friends and family around the world for a successful flight. Both of them were doing the things that they loved the most, flying and competing. Now, little more than one week later, the prayers, love and support of millions continue to lift them up.

With the official end of the search in the Adriatic, the family of Dr. Carol Rymer Davis want to express their gratitude and appreciation for the efforts expended on behalf of Carol and Richard. First amongst those are the officials, volunteers and participants of the Gordon Bennett 2010 International Balloon Race. Second, the response and professionalism of the search and rescue personnel from Albania, Croatia, the United States and particularly the Italian Maritime Rescue Sub Centre will never be able to be properly recognized.

There is no more noble cause than to put one's self at risk for another, which these professionals have done time and time again for Carol & Richard.

Finally, the outpouring of love, hope and support from friends, members of the ballooning community and complete strangers has provided and will continue to provide strength to our entire family. We will never be able to properly respond to so many well wishers, but want them to know how much we appreciate their concern. We also are truly thankful for the restraint shown by many to respect our privacy.

We continue to ask for everyone's thoughts and prayers for not only Carol and Richard, but also for all the members of their families.

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[Print](#)

[Return](#)

Oct 4, 2010

## **America's Challenge Launch Delayed Until Wednesday Evening**

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**The launch of the 15<sup>th</sup> Annual America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons will be delayed at least for one day because of concerns about weather for the launch and the early stages of the flight.**

A persistent "cut-off" low pressure system to the west of Albuquerque has been pumping moisture into the Albuquerque area, causing late-afternoon thunderstorms. This weather system has not been affecting morning hot-air balloon flights, but could affect gas balloons as they move out across the country.

Teams have been advised to be ready to prepare for inflation as early as Wednesday evening October 6 for a potential late-night launch. The next briefing will be held Wednesday afternoon, at which time a further determination will be made. The end of the "launch window" – the latest the race could launch – is Saturday evening, October 9.

The briefing began with a roll call of the teams. When the team of Richard Abruzzo and his scheduled co-pilot Gary Johnson did not answer the roll call, the teams and officials stood to acknowledge Abruzzo and Dr. Carol Rymer Davis, who vanished without a trace over the Adriatic Sea while competing in the Coupe Gordon Bennett.

With the consent of the all the pilots, Phil MacNutt will replace Elbert Mann as co-pilot to Phil Bryant in the race. Bert Mann had to withdraw due to a family medical emergency.

As is tradition, the launch order for the race was determined by random draw:

Phil Bryant/Phil MacNutt

Barbara Fricke/Peter Cuneo

Bert Padelt/Louis Vitanza

Cheri White/Mark Sullivan

Troy Bradley/Shane Robinson

Danielle Francoeur/Linda Ellis

The pilots have been discussing various ideas to demonstrate their support for Richard Abruzzo and Carol Rymer Davis and their families during the launch of the America's Challenge. An announcement should be forthcoming in the next 24 hours.

[Print](#)

[Return](#)

Oct 5, 2010

## America's Challenge Pilots Invite Public to Join Them in Honoring Missing Balloonists

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**Pilots at the America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons will send skyward their support for two missing balloonists during the launch, now scheduled for Wednesday, October 6.**

The America's Challenge race was scheduled to begin today (Tuesday, October 5) but was postponed for at least 24 hours due to weather concerns.

During a private meeting on Monday, the teams participating in the race discussed ways they could demonstrate their support for longtime America's Challenge competitors Richard Abruzzo and Carol Rymer Davis, who vanished in stormy weather over the Adriatic Sea on September 29. An extensive search has failed to turn up any trace of the balloon or the pilots, who were participating in the 54th Coupe Gordon Bennett in Europe. Both the America's Challenge and the Gordon Bennett are distance competitions where the team flying the greatest distance wins. Abruzzo and former New Mexico Governor Gary Johnson were scheduled to compete in this year's America's Challenge.

The America's Challenge teams have afforded Richard Abruzzo and Carol Rymer Davis the symbolic first launch position in the competition. By tradition, the national anthem of each competitor's country is played when the first balloon from that country lifts off in the race. At the conclusion of the National Anthem, the competitors, officials, and crews will release white balloons to "send aloft" their good wishes for Richard and Carol. Balloonists and spectators attending the launch are invited to bring and release their own white balloons.

Each of the balloons will also carry two small chile ristras aloft when they ascend into the Albuquerque skies. This tradition was established during the record-setting transatlantic flight of the Double Eagle II, when Richard's father Ben Abruzzo, Maxie Anderson, and Larry Newman carried a ristra for good luck. Pink ribbons will be attached to one of the ristras to recognize Carol, a radiologist and former Albuquerque resident who now lives in Denver and has actively supported the fight against breast cancer.

The race is currently scheduled for launch sometime during the evening of Wednesday, October 6, but this is subject to change depending on weather conditions. The pilots will meet Wednesday afternoon at 2:00 PM to look at the weather and determine whether the conditions will permit a safe launch. Following this briefing, officials will either announce an estimated time for a Wednesday evening launch or will postpone the event in hope of better weather. The end of the "launch window" -- the latest date the race could begin - is Saturday, October 9.

[Print](#)

[Return](#)

Oct 5, 2010

## America's Challenge Race Now Scheduled for Thursday

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**With unstable afternoon and evening weather in the forecast Wednesday, America's Challenge race officials have decided to further postpone the launch of the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta's distance race for gas balloons.**

The launch of the 15<sup>th</sup> America's Challenge is now anticipated to occur – weather permitting – on Thursday evening, October 7, when it is hoped that late-day weather conditions both in Albuquerque and downrange will improve.

All events surrounding the launch, including those planned to recognize and support missing balloonists Richard Abruzzo and Carol Rymer Davis and their families, are also postponed. When the balloons launch, the six America's Challenge teams each will carry two small chile ristras aloft to honor Richard and Carol – Carol's including a pink ribbon. The teams, crews, and officials will also send white balloons skyward carrying good wishes and prayers for Richard and Carol. Balloon Fiesta participants and the public are invited to bring their own white balloons to send aloft.

Morning weather conditions in Albuquerque have been glorious, with spectacular hot-air balloon launches and competitions every day. However, a low-pressure system to the west and a high pressure system to the east continue to draw moisture into New Mexico, causing late-afternoon thunderstorms that could create a problem for both the launch and to the north in the direction the balloons are expected to travel.

The next briefing for pilots is scheduled for Thursday afternoon. The "launch window" – the latest the race could launch – is Saturday evening, October 9.

If the America's Challenge launches Thursday, it would share space at Balloon Fiesta Park with the very popular Special Shapes Glowdeo. Plans are being made to accommodate both events on the field, providing a spectacular double event for Balloon Fiesta visitors.

[Print](#)

[Return](#)

Oct 6, 2010

## **America's Challenge Launch Set for 5:30 AM Friday**

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**At a late afternoon Wednesday briefing, America's Challenge race officials announced that the launch of the race is now scheduled for 5:30 AM on Friday morning, October 8. Inflation is expected to begin at approximately 1 AM Friday morning.**

After detailed analysis of the weather data, race officials determined this launch time provides the best opportunity for good weather both at the launch and downrange in the direction the balloons are expected to travel. Weather forecasts project the balloons will move to the northeast towards the Midwestern United States.

Each participating gas balloon team will carry aloft two chile ristras in support of missing balloonists Richard Abruzzo and Carol Rymer Davis. Participants, crews, and officials will also release white balloons at the beginning of the launch to send aloft support and prayers for the pilots and their families. Pilots and spectators are invited to attend and to bring their own white helium-filled balloons to send their thoughts and prayers aloft.

Race officials will hold a briefing for the pilots tomorrow afternoon to update weather information and finalize plans for the launch.

[Print](#)  
[Return](#)

Oct 7, 2010

## **Friday Midnight Launch Now Planned for America's Challenge**

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**Uncertain weather conditions in the direction balloons competing in the America's Challenge gas balloon race will travel have caused yet another delay in the launch of the race. The launch is now projected to take place around midnight on Friday evening, October 8 or very early on Saturday morning, October 9. Inflation should begin after the Special Shapes Glowdeo at about 9:30 or 10 PM.**

The reason for this latest delay is concern over a developing low pressure system in Colorado and Nebraska that could create bad weather for the competitors as they move northeastward out of New Mexico. The delay should allow the system time to move out before the balloons reach the area.

When the race begins, each participating gas balloon team will carry aloft two chile ristras in support of missing balloonists Richard Abruzzo and Carol Rymer Davis. Participants, crews, and officials will also release white balloons at the beginning of the launch to send aloft support and prayers for the pilots and their families. Pilots and spectators are invited to bring their own white helium-filled balloons to send their thoughts and prayers aloft.

Once the race begins, you can follow the balloons' journey across the country via live tracking at [www.balloonfiesta.com](http://www.balloonfiesta.com). The Command Center will provide regular updates and landing reports as the race progresses.

In launch order, the competing teams are:

Phil Bryant, Houston, TX/Phil McNutt, Austin, TX  
Barbara Fricke/Peter Cuneo, Albuquerque, NM  
Bert Padelt, Barto, PA/Louis Vitanza, Hillsborough, NJ  
Cheri White, Austin, TX/Mark Sullivan, Albuquerque, NM  
Troy Bradley, Albuquerque, NM/Shane Robinson, Joplin, MO  
Danielle Francoeur, Montreal, Quebec, Canada/Linda Ellis, San Jose, CA

[Print](#)  
[Return](#)

Oct 8, 2010

## **America's Challenge Launch A Go For Midnight Tonight**

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After three days of waiting for good weather, the America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons is finally scheduled for launch later this evening or early Saturday morning. The setup and inflation process will begin in the next couple of hours, with launch scheduled for approximately midnight on Friday evening, October 8 MDT (0600Z 10/9). Inflation should begin after the Special Shapes Glowdeo at about 9:30 or 10 PM. The teams are focused and ready to fly, and spectators are welcome to watch.

The weather system that had caused some concern for the competitors has passed through, and the current projections are that the balloons will remain south of the weather system north of New Mexico that caused some concern yesterday. Trajectory plots suggest the balloons will move west to east more or less directly across the country towards the Carolina coast.

Each participating gas balloon team will carry aloft two chile ristras in support of missing balloonists Richard Abruzzo and Carol Rymer Davis. Participants, crews, and officials will also release white balloons at the beginning of the launch to send aloft support and prayers for the pilots and their families. Pilots and spectators are invited to bring their own white helium-filled balloons to send their thoughts and prayers aloft.

Once the race begins, you can follow the balloons' journey across the country via live tracking at [www.balloonfiesta.com](http://www.balloonfiesta.com). The Command Center will provide regular updates and landing reports as the race progresses.

In launch order, the competing teams are:

Phil Bryant, Houston, TX/Phil McNutt, Austin, TX

Barbara Fricke/Peter Cuneo, Albuquerque, NM

Bert Padelt, Barto, PA/Louis Vitanza, Hillsborough, NJ

Cheri White, Austin, TX/Mark Sullivan, Albuquerque, NM

Troy Bradley, Albuquerque, NM/Shane Robinson, Joplin, MO

Danielle Francoeur, Montreal, Quebec, Canada/Linda Ellis, San Jose, CA

[Print](#)

[Return](#)

Oct 9, 2010

## **They're Aloft! America's Challenge Competitors Head East**

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**In a beautiful and moving midnight ballet of light and motion, the six America's Challenge balloons finally headed skyward on a beautiful, calm early Saturday morning in Albuquerque.**

The launch began with an emotional ceremony honoring friends and fellow competitors Richard Abruzzo and Carol Rymer Davis, who disappeared nine days ago during a similar race, the Coupe Gordon Bennett, and have not been found. Richard had been scheduled to compete in the America's Challenge with former New Mexico Governor Gary Johnson.

The America's Challenge competitors afforded Richard and Carol the ceremonial first position in the competition order. As per tradition, the US National Anthem was played and at the end of the anthem, competitors, officials, and spectators released white balloons carrying aloft good wishes and prayers for Richard and Carol. On the launch platform, Richard's brothers Benny and Louis and Carol's husband John, daughter Heather, and grandson Ryan released the first two balloons. In the background glowed two splashes of color – Richard Abruzzo's hot air balloon "Peak Express" and Carol Rymer Davis' hot air balloon "Raggedy Ann."

A few minutes later, the first of the competitors, the team of Phil Bryant and Phil MacNutt, were walked to the launch platform and lifted off, followed in rapid sequence by the other five balloons. All were aloft by 12:45 AM MDT (0645Z). As they gained altitude they began to head southeast towards Tijeras Canyon at the southern end of the Sandia Mountains.

The object of the race is to fly the greatest distance from Albuquerque. Trajectory forecasts suggest the balloons are likely to head fairly directly east across the country – but who knows what secret strategies our wily teams have up their sleeves.

Well – you can find out as you follow the balloons' journey across the country via live tracking at <http://www.balloonfiesta.com/GasTracking/2010/>. The Command Center will provide regular updates and landing reports as the race progresses, and you can access the updates through the link above the map on the tracking page.

In launch order, the competing teams are:

Phil Bryant, Houston, TX/Phil McNutt, Austin, TX  
Barbara Fricke/Peter Cuneo, Albuquerque, NM  
Bert Padelt, Barto, PA/Louis Vitanza, Hillsborough, NJ  
Cheri White, Austin, TX/Mark Sullivan, Albuquerque, NM  
Troy Bradley, Albuquerque, NM/Shane Robinson, Joplin, MO  
Danielle Francoeur, Montreal, Quebec, Canada/Linda Ellis, San Jose, CA

[Print](#)

[Return](#)

Oct 9, 2010

## **America's Challenge Leaders Near NM Border**

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**As the 15<sup>th</sup> America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons moves into its first morning, the early leaders are headed towards Tucumcari and the New Mexico/Texas border.**

Team 2, Phil Bryant and Phil MacNutt (both Texans!) will cross into their home state as the race enters its sixth hour aloft, having traveled about 150 mi (approx. 230 km) from the starting point. A second group of balloons including Team 4 (Bert Padelt/Louis Vitanza), Team 3 (Barbara Fricke/Peter Cuneo), Team 5 (Cheri White/Mark Sullivan), and Team 7 (Danielle Francoeur/Linda Ellis) headed slightly more southeast in the overnight hours.

Team 6 (Troy Bradley/Shane Robinson) is blazing a somewhat different trail, moving towards Roswell, NM, somewhat south of the other balloons. Part of the fun of the America's Challenge is trying to guess at the pilots' strategies – and already, a couple are beginning to emerge.

We'll keep you posted as the race continues. And of course you can follow the balloons' journey across the country via live tracking at <http://www.balloonfiesta.com/GasTracking/2010/>.

[Print](#)

[Return](#)

Oct 9, 2010

## America's Challenge Competitors Cruise Into Oklahoma

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**1720 MDT (2320Z)**

**It's been an uneventful day in the America's Challenge Command Center as the gas command center staff monitors the progress of the six competitors across the United States.**

The two lead balloons have now crossed the Texas panhandle and are moving into Oklahoma. Phil Bryant and Phil MacNutt (Team 2) remain in the lead, with Bert Padelt and Louis Vitanza (Team 4) less than 20 miles behind and appear to be slowly catching up. Five of the six balloons are within about 70 miles of each other and are largely following the same track. The Command Center got one call from a pilot who saw another of the competitors cross over their track less than five miles away. In the immortal words of Paul Newman in "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid" the pilot asked, "Who are these guys?"

Team 6 (Troy Bradley/Shane Robinson) are continuing to fly a track south of the other competitors, and it will be interesting to see if this "tortoise and hare" strategy plays out.

One interesting tidbit: while the majority of the gas balloon pilots around the world are men, three of the six primary pilots in this race are women. Canadian Danielle Francoeur and U.S. pilots Barbara Fricke and Cheri White are all highly respected competitors; Fricke and White are both former America's Challenge winners and all three have also competed on teams that have finished in the top three in the Coupe Gordon Bennett. Add in Danielle's flying partner in this race, Linda Ellis, and fully a third of the pilots in this year's race are female.

We'll keep you posted as the race continues. And of course you can follow the balloons' journey across the country via live tracking at <http://www.balloonfiesta.com/GasTracking/2010/> or via the Balloon Fiesta's new I-Phone app.

[Print](#)  
[Return](#)

Oct 9, 2010

## First America's Challenge Landing Reported

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### 2100 MDT (0300Z)

**The America's Challenge Command Center has received its first landing report. Team 6 (Troy Bradley/Shane Robinson) made a safe landing around 7:25 PM MDT (0125Z) to the northwest of Plainview, TX.**

Meanwhile, up at the front of the pack, things have changed quite a bit since the last report, and one heck of a race has developed. At the time this report was drafted Team 4 (Bert Padelt/Louis Vitanza) and Team 3 (Barbara Fricke/Peter Cuneo) were literally neck and neck, flying northwest of Enid, OK. Team 2 (Phil Bryant/Phil MacNutt) have slipped back to third, but all of the five balloons remaining in the competition are still well-positioned to win.

The Command Center team remains on watch as the balloons fly eastward through the night. The next major flurry of activity should occur around sunrise in the central United States as the pilots decide whether to land or to continue flying through the day tomorrow.

And of course, day or night, you can follow the progress of the race via the America's Challenge tracking page, <http://www.balloonfiesta.com/GasTracking/2010/> or via the Balloon Fiesta's new I-Phone app.

[Print](#)  
[Return](#)

Oct 10, 2010

## Race Strategies Develop as Sun Rises

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### 0545 MDT (1145Z)

**As the sun rises in the Midwest, five America's Challenge gas balloons are flying into their second day aloft, vying to fly the greatest distance and win America's prestigious race for gas balloons. The current leaders, Albuquerque's Barbara Fricke and Peter Cuneo (Team 3), have now traveled more than 700 miles (1150 km) and are south-southeast of Kansas City, MO. All night, they've been flying neck and neck with Bert Padelt and Louis Vitanza (Team 4) and at this writing the gap is less than 10 miles. Team 7 (Francoeur/Ellis) and Team 5 (White/Sullivan) are not far behind. It's truly anybody's race.**

Stay tuned for updates throughout the day, and of course you can follow the progress of the race via the America's Challenge tracking page, <http://www.balloonfiesta.com/GasTracking/2010/> or via the Balloon Fiesta's new I-Phone app.

[Print](#)

[Return](#)

Oct 10, 2010

## Second Balloon Lands in America's Challenge

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**0920 MDT (1520Z)**

**The America's Challenge Command Center has received word that the "Texas Phils" – Phil Bryant and Phil MacNutt, or "Phil<sup>2</sup>", as someone in the Command Center joked – have made a safe landing near Arkansas City, KS.**

Current leaders Barbara Fricke and Peter Cuneo (Team 3), passed the 800-mile mark about 9:00 AM MDT (1500Z), but the other competitors are hot on their tail. Bert Padelt and Louis Vitanza (Team 4) have now adopted a slightly more southerly track, but remain within 25 miles of the lead. Cheri White and Mark Sullivan (Team 5) have been steadily catching up, and Danielle Francoeur and Linda Ellis (Team 7) are only about 75 miles from the lead. We expected a highly competitive race and have not been disappointed!

Stay tuned for updates throughout the day via the America's Challenge tracking page, <http://www.balloonfiesta.com/GasTracking/2010/> or via the Balloon Fiesta's new I-Phone app.

[Print](#)

[Return](#)

Oct 10, 2010

## America's Challenge Balloons Near 1,000 Mile Mark

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**1715 MDT (2315Z)**

**The hot air balloon events are over and Balloon Fiesta Park is quiet. But four gas balloons – competitors in the America's Challenge distance race – are still aloft, heading northeastward through Illinois and Iowa.**

Leaders Barbara Fricke and Peter Cuneo (Team 3), are nearing the 1,000-mile mark as they pass just south of Davenport, Iowa, but their competition continues to breathe down their necks. Danielle Francoeur and Linda Ellis (Team 7), and Cheri White and Mark Sullivan (Team 5) are just two miles apart in the standings and just 36 miles behind Fricke and Cuneo.

Unlike hot air balloons, which use heated air for lift, gas balloons use a lighter-than-air gas like hydrogen or helium to stay aloft. Balloons in the America's Challenge often fly upwards of 60 hours, and the pilots carry with them everything they need to navigate and survive as they fly thousands of feet above the ground. While this is a distance race, endurance is also important: the longer a balloon can stay aloft, the better the team's chance of victory. The America's Challenge duration record is in excess of 69 hours – nearly three full days!

The next couple of hours are critical as night falls in the Midwest. The pilots will need to make the decision to either continue into the night or land. Balloons are

reported as having landed once the pilots have contacted the Command Center to confirm they are down. Under the event rules, competitors have up to four hours to report a landing.

The quest to see which team can fly the greatest distance continues – and you can follow it in real time through the America’s Challenge tracking page, <http://www.balloonfiesta.com/GasTracking/2010/> or via the Balloon Fiesta’s new I-Phone app.

[Print](#)

[Return](#)

Oct 10, 2010

## Historic “Pink Podium” in America’s Challenge?

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### 2000 MDT (0200Z)

**Just two balloons remain aloft in the 15<sup>th</sup> America’s Challenge distance race for gas balloons – and it looks like regardless of who wins, history will be made.**

The Command Center has received reports that Bert Padelt and Louis Vitanza (Team 4) landed safely earlier this evening northwest of St. Louis, MO. Cheri White and Mark Sullivan (Team 5) reported a safe landing SSW of Iowa City, IA. That leaves just two competitors still flying. Albuquerque’s Barbara Fricke and Peter Cuneo (Team 3) are at this writing west of Chicago and have flown 1,027 miles (1,653 km) since leaving Balloon Fiesta Park early Saturday morning. Canadian ballooning champion Danielle Francoeur and rookie co-pilot Linda Ellis from San Jose, CA (Team 7), have been sailing along about 40 miles behind for much of the race.

This means that almost certainly the America’s Challenge will be won by a female primary pilot for only the second time in the event’s history (Janet Folkes, with Bill Arras as co-pilot, won in 2005) -- though several women have won as co-pilots. In fact, all three of the top positions in the race currently are held by female primary pilots (Barbara Fricke, Danielle Francoeur, Cheri White). If this result holds, we’ll have what the Command Center’s only female controller, Ruth Lind, calls a “pink podium.” While we haven’t had time to do the research, it’s almost certain that this is a first in the annals of competitive distance gas ballooning.

It is nighttime now in Illinois, and since balloonists try to avoid landing in the dark it is likely the remaining competitors will fly at least until daylight. You can follow their progress in real time through the America’s Challenge tracking page, <http://www.balloonfiesta.com/GasTracking/2010/> or via the Balloon Fiesta’s new I-Phone app.

[Print](#)

[Return](#)

Oct 11, 2010

## America’s Challenge Competitors Transit Lake Michigan

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**0630 MDT (1230Z) 10/11/10**

**The Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta is not quite over. As daylight comes to the Eastern United States, two competitors in the Balloon Fiesta's America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons have been in the air for about 54 hours and are headed towards the East Coast.**

Albuquerque's Barbara Fricke and Peter Cuneo (Team 3) continue to lead the race. They made the 80-mile transit across Lake Michigan overnight and are northeast of Battle Creek, MI, having flown 1,258 miles (2,025 km). Canadian pilot Danielle Francoeur and Linda Ellis from San Jose, CA (Team 7) began the crossing of Lake Michigan earlier this morning and are about 100 miles behind. As the race progresses this morning, you can follow their progress in real time through the America's Challenge tracking page, <http://www.balloonfiesta.com/GasTracking/2010/> or via the Balloon Fiesta's new I-Phone app.

[Print](#)

[Return](#)

Oct 11, 2010

## **One America's Challenge Balloon Still Aloft**

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**10:15 MDT (1615Z) 10/11/10**

**The America's Challenge Command Center has received word that Danielle Francoeur and Linda Ellis (Team 7) have landed safely in Monterey Township southwest of Holland, MI after a spectacular 1,223 mi. (1,968 km) flight. They made a stand-up landing and a couple of local residents helped them walk the balloon to a road.**

That leaves just Albuquerque's Barbara Fricke and Peter Cuneo (Team 3) still aloft. They are over Detroit, MI, having traveled 1,349 mi. (2,171 km).

As the race progresses this morning, you can follow their progress in real time through the America's Challenge tracking page,

<http://www.balloonfiesta.com/GasTracking/2010/> or via the Balloon Fiesta's new I-Phone app.

[Print](#)

[Return](#)

Oct 11, 2010

## **Final America's Challenge Balloon Lands: Fricke/Cuneo Unofficial Winners**

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**11:30 MDT (1730Z) 10/11/10**

**The final balloon aloft in the America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons has landed safely on the U.S./Canadian border. Albuquerque's Barbara Fricke and Peter Cuneo are the unofficial winners of the race, having flown 1,350 miles (2,173 km) in approximately 57 hours and 30 minutes.**

**The team landed on the east shore of the Detroit River in Windsor, Ontario Canada. Gas balloon landings in urban areas are very unusual, as the balloons usually land in rural and even remote areas.**

This is the team's second America's Challenge win. With Cuneo flying as the primary pilot, they won the race in 2001. They have finished second three times, in 2003, 2005, and 2007.

Barbara Fricke is the second woman in the history of the America's Challenge to win the race as the primary pilot (Janet Folkes was the first, in 2005). The top three distances in the race this year were all achieved by female primary pilots: Barbara Fricke, Danielle Francoeur, and Cheri White.

The final results will be posted to the America's Challenge website once the race's scoring officers verify the data and assure that the race was flown in accordance with the rules.

Unofficial America's Challenge results:

AC-3 Barbara Fricke/Peter Cuneo: 1,350 mi/2,173 km, approximately 57:30

AC-7 Danielle Francoeur/Linda Ellis: 1,223 mi/ 1,968 km, 57:15

AC-5 Cheri White/Mark Sullivan: 938 mi/1,505 km, 41:03

AC-4 Bert Padelt/Louis Vitanza: 921 mi/1,482 km, 39:50

AC-2 Phil Bryant/Phil McNutt: 547mi/880 km, 28:59

AC-6 Troy Bradley/Shane Robinson 266 mi/428 km, 18:50

Note: This information was posted to the AIBF home page earlier today, but did not link to the gas tracking page . . . thanks to all who alerted us that it was not on the gas page.

[Print](#)

[Return](#)

Oct 21, 2010

## **America's Challenge Results Official: Fricke Heads All-Female Podium**

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**10:00 MDT (1600Z) 10/20/10**

**It's official: Barbara Fricke and Peter Cuneo are the winners of the 15<sup>th</sup> America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons.**

This is Barbara Fricke's first win as the primary pilot in the America's Challenge, but is the team's second America's Challenge win. With Cuneo flying as the primary pilot, they won the race in 2001. They are only the third team in the race's 15-year history to win two America's Challenges as a team (the others are David and Alan Levin in 1996 and 2000, and Richard Abruzzo and Gary Johnson in 2002 and 2004). Fricke and Cuneo have finished second three times, in 2003, 2005, and 2007.

The team flew 2175.86 km (1352.016 mi.) in 58 hours 16 minutes to a landing on a dock on the Windsor, Ontario, Canada side of the Detroit River. The flight ranks 11<sup>th</sup> for distance and 18<sup>th</sup> for duration of the nearly 180 America's Challenge flights. The all-female team of Danielle Francoeur from Canada and Linda Ellis from California finished second, flying 1,971 km (1,225 mi.) to a landing in southwestern Michigan. Cheri White and Mark Sullivan flew 1,507 km (936 mi.) to a third-place finish.

What was history-making – almost certainly a first in the annals of competitive distance gas ballooning – was that three women captured the three top spots. But it is not the first time a woman has won the America's Challenge. Janet Folkes of Great Britain was the first female primary pilot to win the race (in 2005), and several others have won as co-pilot including Barbara Fricke, Cheri White, Tami Stevenson-Bradley, and Carol Rymer Davis.

The pilots and officials honored fellow competitors Richard Abruzzo and Carol Rymer Davis, lost at sea while competing in the Coupe Aeronautique Gordon Bennett, by releasing white balloons carrying aloft hopes and prayers prior to the launch and carrying two chile ristras aloft (one adorned with a pink ribbon for Carol). After landing, Fricke and Cuneo said, "Richard and Carol were flying ahead of us the whole way."

The final results are as follows:

- |  |                          |             |                                 |
|--|--------------------------|-------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. Barbara Fricke/Peter Cuneo (USA)              | 2175.86 km./1,352.02 mi. | 58.16 hours | Landing in Windsor, Ontario, CA |
| 2. Danielle Francoeur (Canada)/Linda Ellis (USA) | 1971.49 km./1225.03 mi.  | 57:15 hours | Landing near Hopkins, MI        |
| 3. Cheri White/ Mark Sullivan (USA)              | 1507.13 km./936.49 mi.   | 41.07 hours | Landing near Cedar Rapids, IA   |
| 4. Bert Padelt /Louis Vitanza (USA)              | 1490.08 km./925.89 mi.   | 40.13 hours | Landing near Hillview, IL       |
| 5. Phil Bryant/ Phil MacNutt (USA)               | 883.03 km./548.69 mi.    | 30.35 hours | Landing near Oxford, KS         |
| 6. Troy Bradley/Shane Robinson (USA)             | 429.60 km./266.94 mi.    | 18.52 hours | Landing near Plainview, TX      |

[Print](#)

[Return](#)

Dec 6, 2010

## Statement on the Recovery of Richard Abruzzo and Carol Rymer Davis

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**On this difficult day, with the discovery of the USA-2 balloon and pilots Richard Abruzzo and Carol Rymer Davis, the thoughts and prayers of everyone in the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta family are with Nancy, Mary Pat, and Rico Abruzzo, John Davis and daughters Heather and Marne, and with their families and friends.**

We join them in thanking the fishermen who recovered Richard and Carol and their equipment, and the Italian authorities who are continuing the investigation. While this is a sad time for balloonists around the world, we are grateful for the closure that this discovery brings and that Richard's and Carol's families will have the opportunity to bring them home.

[Print](#)

[Return](#)

Dec 6, 2010

## From the Family of Dr. Carol Rymer Davis 12/6/10

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**Carol's family was informed Sunday night of the discovery of the USA2 gondola and the remains of both Carol and Richard.**

This was always something that was hoped for in the back of everyone's mind since it provides an end to this drawn out tragedy for both families. As avid members of the ballooning community, Carol and Richard would be pleased that anything that can be learned by experts from today's discovery will lead to a safer experience for all balloonists. John, Heather and Marne all express their thanks to the fishermen and the authorities in Italy who made the discovery and who are now conducting the necessary investigations.

The Davis family also extends their thanks to all those around the world whose expressions of love and support have helped to sustain them, and to the media for continuing to respect their privacy at a difficult time.

[Print](#)

[Return](#)