

Sep 18, 2011

Top Pilots From Five Nations Prepare For 16th America's Challenge

Eight balloon teams featuring some of the world's greatest gas balloonists are preparing to compete in the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta's 2011 America's Challenge race for gas balloons, set for launch, weather permitting, on Saturday October 1.

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 wind 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 America's Challenge is the U.S. qualifier for the world's other major gas balloon distance race, the Coupe Aéronautique Gordon Bennett. The top three American finishers will earn the right to represent the United States in the 2012 Gordon Bennett, which will be held in Switzerland.

This year, the outstanding international field features one of the world's great adventurers, one of only five three-time winners of the Gordon Bennett, the first team from Spain to compete in the race, and three teams who have previously won the America's Challenge:

- Defending champions and two-time winners Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke won last year's America's Challenge with a 1,350-mile flight ending with a daring landing on a dock on the Detroit River in Windsor, Ontario. Fricke flew as the lead or primary pilot in that race and is the race's second female winner (the first, Janet Folkes of the UK, won in 2005). This year the team switches roles; Cuneo will be the primary pilot. Fricke and Cuneo have finished second in the America's Challenge three times and in 2008 finished third in the Gordon Bennett.
- The race's only all-female team, Danielle Francoeur of Canada and Linda Ellis from California, finished second in last year's America's Challenge after giving Fricke and Cuneo a spirited run for their money. Danielle Francoeur is Canada's only female gas balloon pilot. 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 – at the time, the highest finish ever for a female pilot in the decades-old race.
- 2008 America's Challenge champions Cheri White and Mark Sullivan were last year's third place team and finished third in the 2009 Gordon Bennett. For many years Sullivan and White held the flight duration record for the America's Challenge. Mark Sullivan is the founder of the race and this year will be the team's lead pilot.
- Former Balloon Federation of America President and veteran hot-air balloonist Phil Bryant is flying in his fourth America's Challenge this year. A late and prominent addition to the field is Bryant's co-pilot Wilhelm Eimers of Germany, who replaces Greg Winker on the team. Eimers is one of only five pilots to win the Coupe Gordon Bennett three times. In his six previous America's Challenge appearances, Eimers has finished second once and third twice. Eimers also holds the world duration record of more than 92 hours for this size and type of balloon, set during the 1995 Gordon Bennett.
- British pilot David Hempleman-Adams has one of the most distinguished records in international ballooning: he made the first flight across Canada's Northwest Passage in 1999, the first flight to the North Pole in 2000, and the first successful trans-Atlantic flight in an open wicker basket in 2003 (a feat he recently repeated). He holds the absolute world altitude record for Roziere (combination hot-air and helium) balloons of 41,200 ft, and also holds several hot-air airship records. Hempleman-Adams and his Australian co-pilot Jonathan Mason (then competing for Britain) became the first British team to win the Coupe Gordon Bennett in 2008, the last time the race was held in Albuquerque. They finished third in the 2005 America's Challenge.

- One of the America's Challenge's fiercest competitors, Andy Cayton of Georgia, returns to the America's Challenge this year, this time with co-pilot Bill Manuel from Florida. Cayton notched back-to-back America's Challenge wins in 2006 (with co-pilot Kevin Knapp) and in 2007 (with co-pilot Stuart Enloe).
- Longtime America's Challenge competitor Louis Vitanza and his co-pilot Bert Padelt will fly a recently-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. Vitanza and Padelt were the runners-up in the 2002 America's Challenge.
- This year's America's Challenge newcomers are pilot Anulfo Gonzales and co-pilot Angel Aguirre from Spain. Both are relatively new to gas ballooning but are experienced hot-air balloonists; Gonzalez has made flights over the North and South Poles. They are the first team from Spain to fly in the America's Challenge and are very excited to be coming to Albuquerque. The Albuquerque Balloon Fiesta website, www.balloonfiesta.com, will feature live computerized tracking of all the balloons and race updates throughout the competition. For more information and photos please click [here](#).

Sep 27, 2011

America's Challenge Shopping List

As the eight America's Challenge gas balloon teams head to Albuquerque to prepare for the scheduled start of the race on Saturday, October 1, they're making a list and checking it twice (just like Santa!) to be sure they don't forget to bring along any "must haves" for the journey.

You see, when you're planning to spend nearly three days aloft in a balloon, trying to fly further than your competitors, you'd better have everything you need packed on board. After all, it's a little hard (and against the rules) to stop at the store enroute!

For starters, balloonists must make sure they have all of the equipment required to fly the balloon: sandbags, trail ropes, instruments, handling lines, tools, radios, cellphone, night position lights, flashlights, and more. Pilots also carry aeronautical charts and road maps – after all, it's embarrassing to get lost! – but the GPS (and backup GPS) should help in that department. The balloons carry onboard oxygen in case it becomes necessary for the pilots to fly at high altitude for a long period of time.

Then, there are the items the pilots need to survive comfortably, or not so comfortably, during a cross-country trek that may exceed 2,000 miles: food, water, portable stove, clothing, sleeping bags, porta-potty, lanterns, glow-sticks, paper towels, weatherproof matches. And the pilot's mother would hardly be forgiving if the balloon took off without a generous supply of sunscreen and toilet paper.

Pilots also carry survival gear in case the balloon lands in a remote area inaccessible to the crew. The warm clothing (some pilots carry survival suits), space blankets, flares, first aid kit, and emergency locator beacon might make a big difference in the backcountry.

One last challenge: the basket, home to two people for more than two days, is about 6' X 4'; or even smaller. So everything has to be compact, lightweight, and carefully stowed. Pilots weigh their equipment and themselves -- some even go on the "gas balloon diet" beforehand -- because weight is such an important factor on a gas balloon flight.

Weather permitting, the launch window for the America's Challenge race opens at 6:30 P.M. Saturday evening, October 1. The first general briefing for pilots, crews, and officials will be held at 3:00 PM (2100Z)

on Friday, September 30. The briefing will include a preliminary weather assessment and the random draw that determines the teams' launch order.

Sep 30, 2011

Pilots Await First America's Challenge Briefing

As the America's Challenge race draws nearer, most of the competing teams have arrived in Albuquerque and begun preparations for a scheduled Saturday launch. Several teams have already filled sandbags and are organizing supplies and equipment.

On Friday afternoon September 30th, race officials will hold their first mandatory briefing, which will include launch and procedural information regarding the race and a complete weather analysis and briefing. The launch order will be determined by random draw at the conclusion of this briefing.

The launch is scheduled for 6:30 PM (0030Z) on Saturday evening, October 1, which is the opening of the launch window. The launch window closes Wednesday night.

As preparations continue we will provide updates through this site, as well as live tracking of the balloons' positions as the race progresses!

Sep 30, 2011

America's Challenge Launch On Schedule for Saturday Evening, October 1

Excitement is building as the scheduled Saturday launch for the 16th America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons draws nearer. Conditions look good for a launch on schedule Saturday evening, October 1, at 6:30 pm MDT (0030Z). A final determination will be made at a noon briefing tomorrow.

At 3:00 PM this afternoon (2100Z) members of the eight teams met with the America's Challenge officials for roll call and the opening general briefing. The participants received information on safety, communications, air traffic, customs procedures, and the support operations of the Command Center and Flight Service. Balloon Fiesta meteorologist Randy LeFevre provided a very comprehensive weather briefing covering both the launch forecast in Albuquerque and anticipated conditions during the race. Light southerly winds are expected tomorrow night in Albuquerque at launch time. Winds aloft are also relatively light and are expected to persist through the next several days, with the weather pattern suggesting the balloons will move slowly to the north and east into eastern Colorado, Kansas, and Nebraska.

At the conclusion of the briefing, the launch order of the teams was determined by random draw.

Team 1: Phil Bryant, USA / Wilhelm Eimers, Germany

Team2: Danielle Francoeur, Canada /Linda Ellis, USA

Team 3: Mark Sullivan/ Cheri White, USA

Team 4: Peter Cuneo/ Barbara Fricke, USA

Team 5: Andy Cayton/ Bill Manuel, USA

Team 6: David Hempleman-Adams, UK /Jonathan Mason, Australia

Team 7: Anulfo Gonzalez / Angel Aguirre, Spain

Team 8: Louis Vitanza/ Bert Padelt, USA

The object of the race is to travel the greatest distance from Balloon Fiesta Park. Once the balloons launch, you can follow their progress via live tracking on the Balloon Fiesta web site, www.balloonfiesta.com.

Oct 1, 2011

America's Challenge GO for Launch Saturday Evening, October 1

Barring some last-minute change in the weather, the America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons will launch tonight on schedule at 6:30 pm.

At the noon weather briefing, Balloon Fiesta and America's Challenge meteorologist Randy LeFevre said the weather pattern during the next couple of days continues to be dominated by high pressure that is expected to swing the balloons north and slightly east, with a likely trajectory towards Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas. The pattern in the Albuquerque area will change early in the week, but by then the balloons will have moved out of the area.

The challenge in this race is likely to be who can use the relatively light winds during the next couple of days aloft to gain the greatest distance. Although the projected tracks run generally north, there is enough variation to make for a very interesting race.

The teams, in launch order, are:

Team 1: Phil Bryant, USA / Wilhelm Eimers, Germany

Team 2: Danielle Francoeur, Canada / Linda Ellis, USA

Team 3: Mark Sullivan/ Cheri White, USA

Team 4: Peter Cuneo/ Barbara Fricke, USA

Team 5: Andy Cayton/ Bill Manuel, USA

Team 6: David Hempleman-Adams, UK /Jonathan Mason, Australia

Team 7: Anulfo Gonzalez / Angel Aguirre, Spain

Team 8: Louis Vitanza/ Bert Padelt, USA

Once the balloons launch, you can follow your favorite teams' progress via live tracking on the Balloon Fiesta web site, www.balloonfiesta.com

Oct 1, 2011

America's Challenge Launch Now Set for Approximately 7 PM

The launch of the America's Challenge Gas Balloon race is now scheduled for around 7 PM, possibly 7:30 PM MDT. This will allow some time for convective weather in the direction the balloons will travel to subside and provide better conditions for inflation.

Depending on how weather conditions develop, it is possible the launch could be postponed further into the evening. It is not unusual for America's Challenge launches to see these kinds of postponements; last year's race launched at midnight.

Once the race begins, you can track the competitors' progress live at www.balloonfiesta.com.

Oct 1, 2011

America's Challenge is Underway!

On a beautiful, warm Saturday evening in Albuquerque, with glowing hot air balloons and fireworks in the background, the eight competitors in the America's Challenge headed skywards with the objective of winning the race by flying the longest distance.

The launch was delayed approximately two hours by winds on the launch site and convective weather downwind. But the winds lessened at sunset, permitting the Balloon Fiesta's Twilight Twinkle Glow to proceed. As the gas balloons inflated, dozens of hot air balloons provided a rainbow of color and sound with their "all-burns" and "twinkle burns".

Following the spectacular AfterGlow Fireworks Show, the first balloon piloted by Phil Bryant of Texas and Germany's Willi Eimers lifted off before a large and enthusiastic crowd in quickening winds. The launch began at about 8:35 PM (0235Z) and it took about 35 minutes to launch all eight balloons.

In the very early stages of the race, the competitors are headed northeastward up the Rio Grande Valley north of Albuquerque. The winds are forecast to slowly take the balloons north and northeastwards into Colorado, Kansas, and Nebraska.

The live tracking feature on the Balloon Fiesta website, www.balloonfiesta.com, is live and functioning, and there's a cool new mobile phone ap available for iPhone, iPod, and Droid-capable phones – search for "balloonfiesta." We'll also provide updates and landing reports as the race progresses.

Oct 2, 2011

America's Challenge Balloons Making Slow Progress

As the America's Challenge gas balloon race moves into its first morning, the competitors are slowly moving north and east across New Mexico.

The early leaders this morning are Team 3, Mark Sullivan and Cheri White, moving towards Springer, NM. Most of the competitors have transited or are above the Sangre de Cristo mountains of Northern New Mexico and are headed generally northeast. The exception is the British / Australian team of David Hempleman-Adams and Jonathan Mason (Team 6), which appears to be pursuing a different strategy and has been headed nearly due north.

The strategies will really start to play out this morning as the sun rises, allowing the balloons to take advantage of solar heating and gain altitude without expending ballast. Normally, this would cause the balloons to tend to pick up speed, but indications are the

winds aloft are also fairly light. It will be interesting to see which teams can find the best winds to gain distance and an advantage in the race.

The live tracking feature on the BalloonFiesta website, www.balloonfiesta.com, is live and functioning, and there's a cool new mobile phone app available for iPhone, iPod, and Droid-capable phones – search for “balloonfiesta.” We'll also provide updates and landing reports as the race progresses.

Oct 2, 2011

Leading America's Challenge Balloons Inch Toward NM Border

Well, the weather forecasters said the America's Challenge race would be slow going for gas balloonists trying to go the distance, and they weren't kidding . The pace has been excruciatingly tepid for the eight America's Challenge teams. When you're trying to win a distance race, limping along at four miles per hour or less can be frustrating.

However, anything can happen. In the 2008 Gordon Bennett, the UK's David Hempleman-Adams and Australia's Jonathan Mason (this year's Team 6) were spotted hanging directly over Balloon Fiesta Park about 18 hours into the race. They went on to win.

This year, Hempleman-Adams and Mason are blazing their own trail, headed north through the San Luis Valley across the Colorado border. All the other teams have been taking a northeast track, with the leaders headed towards the area where New Mexico, Colorado, and the Oklahoma panhandle meet. As they have much of the day, Team 3 (Albuquerque's Mark Sullivan and Austin's Cheri White) are leading the race, closely pursued by Team 7, Anulfo Gonzalez and Angel Aguirre of Spain.

Most of the balloons have now cleared the Sangre de Cristo Mountains; however, Team 2 (Francoeur/Ellis) and Team 8 (Vitanza/Padelt) are still in the process of transiting the mountains southeast of Taos.

The next major activity is expected around sunset, as the pilots decide whether to land or fly through the night. Often when crossing mountainous terrain, pilots have to use a great deal of ballast (sand or water carried as expendable weight) to gain and maintain altitude, which shortens the potential duration of the flight. The balloons best able to conserve ballast are often in the best position to win the race.

You may follow the progress of the balloons live at www.balloonfiesta.com. The tracking site also includes a link to information on the Balloon Fiesta's new mobile phone race tracking app for iPhone, iPod, and Droid-capable devices.

Oct 2, 2011

First America's Challenge Landing Reported

The America's Challenge Command Center has received word that Team 8, Louis Vitanza and Bert Padelt, have landed safely 56 miles northeast of Santa Fe.

The Command Center officially reports landings only after receiving confirmation from the pilots or their crew that the balloon has landed. Under the event rules, pilots have up to four hours after landing to report in to the Command Center.

Meanwhile, the leaders continue to slowly move towards the northeast corner of New Mexico. You can watch them creep along via live tracking at www.balloonfiesta.com.

Oct 2, 2011

Afterburners Kick In for America's Challenge Teams

The long slow crawl across New Mexico is ending for the leading America's Challenge teams. After plodding along with single-digit wind speeds for much of the day, the lead group is moving along at a smokin' 15-20 miles per hour!

The Spanish team of Anulfo Gonzalez and Angel Aguirre (Team 7) and the Americans Mark Sullivan and Cheri White (Team 3) have been running neck and neck for much of the day and have now crossed into southeastern Colorado. But three other teams – Bryant / Eimers (Team 1), Cayton / Manuel (Team 5) and Cuneo / Fricke (Team 4) are within 40 miles. Team 6 (Hempleman-Adams / Mason) has also exited New Mexico but is much further west, in the Alamosa, CO area.

The next activity is expected around sunset, as we learn which teams will fly through the night and which will have to land. You can view it all at www.balloonfiesta.com!

Oct 2, 2011

New Leader, Landings Reported in America's Challenge

With darkness deepening along the America's Challenge Gas Balloon Race tracks, the Command Center has received reports two additional competitors have landed. Meanwhile, at the front of the pack, there's a new leader.

At about 5:15 PM, Team 7, Anulfo Gonzalez and Angel Aguirre of Spain, reported landing about 55 miles east of Trinidad, Colorado. They were briefly the race leaders and relinquished the lead on landing. At about 6:40, Team 2, the all-female Canadian/American team of Danielle Francoeur and Linda Ellis, landed near Cimarron, NM.

Meanwhile, Andy Cayton and Bill Manuel, Team 5, have taken the lead after hanging back for much of the day. Teams 3 (Sullivan / White) and 4 (Cuneo / Fricke) are southeast of Pueblo, CO, and at this writing, (about 7 PM MDT or 0100Z) are neck and neck. Also still flying: Team 1 (Bryant / Eimers) and Team 6 (Hempleman-Adams / Mason).

We'll continue to update you as the race progresses, and of course you can watch the action live at www.balloonfiesta.com.

Oct 2, 2011

Beer and Chips Anyone? America's Challenge Teams Fly Thru the Nigh

It's a quiet night in the America's Challenge Command Center, and judging by some of the conversations being had with the five teams still aloft, it's quiet aloft too.

Often when the teams call into the Command Center with updates or requests, the controllers will at the end of the conversation ask, "Any other requests?" One pilot responded with one word: "Food." Another was more specific, asking for "beer and chips." Well, if they have time to think of food, things must be going pretty smoothly. And it's a healthy trend, since the race participants say they often don't have much appetite for eating while aloft.

As to the race itself, at this writing (about 9:30 PM MDT or 0330Z), the leaders continue to be Team 5, Andy Cayton and Bill Manuel, who are near Lamar, Colorado. Last year's winners, Barbara Fricke and Peter Cuneo (Team 4) are slowly gaining, with Team 1 (Phil Bryant/Willi Eimers) and Team 3 (Mark Sullivan/Cheri White) not far behind. The fifth balloon still aloft, Team 6 (David Hempleman-Adams / Jonathan Mason) is near Walsenburg, CO about to cross Interstate 25, and after traveling north on a totally different track for most of the race is heading towards the party in eastern Colorado.

As noted, earlier, three teams – Team 2, Team 7, and Team 8 – have reported safe landings.

The balloons flown by America's Challenge competitors are different from the colorful hot air balloons that are the heart of the Albuquerque Balloon Fiesta. The America's Challenge balloons use a lighter-than-air gas such as hydrogen or helium to provide lift. The balloons are filled at the beginning of the flight and cannot be re-filled, so the gas they start with is all they get. Throughout the flight, as the balloons lose gas, pilots drop ballast - sand or water - to lessen the balloon's weight and keep it aloft.

The teams still aloft are likely to fly through the night. They will then evaluate whether they have sufficient ballast to continue flying through the next day. We'll keep you posted with live tracking of the balloons' positions and updates at www.balloonfiesta.com and our new mobile ap.

Oct 3, 2011

America's Challenge: Game of "Musical Leaders"

As the second sunrise of the 16th America's Challenge race for gas balloons dawns in the Great Plains, it seems just about every team at one time or another has been in the lead. And the big question now – which teams will have to land at sunrise, and which have the resources left to carry on?

The current leaders in this game of "musical leaders" are Team 1, the American / German team of Phil Bryant and Willi Eimers. They have just crossed into Nebraska near

Wilsonville. Team 5, Andy Cayton and Bill Manuel, has held the lead for much of the night and continues in hot pursuit.

The other three balloons still aloft are further west and about to cross from Colorado into northwestern Kansas. They are Team 3, Mark Sullivan/Cheri White; Team 4, Peter Cuneo/Barbara Fricke; and Team 6, David Hempleman-Adams/Jonathan Mason.

We will soon learn which teams have been just trying to stay aloft until daylight, when they can see the terrain below them to find a landing site, and which have the ballast (sandbags/water/etc.) left to allow them to continue flying safely through the day.

Watch it happen at www.balloonfiesta.com or via our new mobile ap.

Oct 3, 2011

America's Challenge Leaders Land

The America's Challenge overnight leaders -- Phil Bryant of the US and Wilhelm Eimers of Germany (Team 1) -- have just reported to the Command Center they have made a safe landing near Cambridge, Nebraska, east of McCook. This leaves four balloons still aloft in the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta's distance race for gas-filled (helium and hydrogen) balloons.

Bryant and Eimers still are in the lead, but it may not for long as balloons still flying pass them to fly a greater distance. The closest pursuers at this point are Andy Cayton and Bill Manuel (Team 5) who are just crossing into Nebraska. Also still aloft are Team 4 (Peter Cuneo/Barbara Fricke), Team 6 (David Hempleman-Adams/Jonathan Mason) and Team 3 (Mark Sullivan/Cheri White).

The sun is up in the central United States now, so with the heat of the day providing extra lift to the balloons the strategies will really start to play out as the pilots try to work the very light winds to their best advantage. We'll keep you posted at www.balloonfiesta.com.

Oct 3, 2011

America's Challenge Race Passes 500-Mile Mark

Three teams are still aloft in the America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons. The field was reduced by one when Team 3, Mark Sullivan and Cheri White, landed safely earlier this morning just south of Interstate 70 near the Colorado-Kansas border.

Team 5, Andy Cayton and Bill Manuel, have now re-taken the lead they held earlier in the race and are now past the 500-mile mark. They are headed northeast toward Grand Island, NE. Team 2 (Peter Cuneo/Barbara Fricke) are in northeastern Colorado, and Team 6, the UK/Australian entry of David Hempleman-Adams and Jon Mason, are in western Kansas.

The next big decision point is likely to be sunset, when the remaining competitors decide whether to continue through a third night or whether to land. We'll keep you posted at www.balloonfiesta.com.

Oct 3, 2011

And Then There Were Two! America's Challenge Update

The gauntlet has been thrown in the 16th America's Challenge Gas Balloon Race at the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta. Current leaders Andy Cayton and Bill Manuel (Team 5) have made a safe landing near Kearney, Nebraska, having traveled about 555 miles (893 km).

So the question now is – can either of the two teams still flying overtake Cayton and Manuel for the win? At this writing, the UK/Australian Team of David Hempleman-Adams and Jonathan Mason (Team 6) and the Americans Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke (Team 4) are both about 155 miles behind and moving slowly northwards. To overtake Cayton and Manuel, the pursuers would most likely have to fly well into or through the night.

Do the teams have enough ballast left to stay aloft through another night? We'll find out in the next few hours, and you can come along for the ride by following live tracking of the race at www.balloonfiesta.com.

Oct 3, 2011

America's Challenge: Like Thieves in the Night – Will First Place Be Stolen?

A really exciting finale to the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta's America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons is in the offing, as the two balloons still flying chew up territory on the leaders.

Team 4, America's Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke (last year's winners), and Team 6, the United Kingdom's David Hempleman-Adams and Australia's Jonathan Mason, at this writing are almost literally in shouting distance of each other, a mile and a half apart. They've traveled about 500 miles (804 km) and in the last hour have overtaken the already-landed Team 1, Phil Bryant and Willi Eimers, for second and third-longest distance traveled. They're about 60 miles (97 km) from snatching the lead from Team 5, Andy Cayton and Bill Manuel, who landed earlier today.

It's anticipated that Team 4 and Team 6 will fly through the night, and their next real decision point will be at sunrise, when it becomes light enough to land should they desire to do so. Who will win this highly competitive contest? Stay tuned at www.balloonfiesta.com.

Oct 4, 2011

Magnificent Duel Continues in America's Challenge

For almost a day now, the great British adventurer David Hempleman-Adams and Australian co-pilot Jon Mason (Team 6) have been dueling it out with last year's America's Challenge gas balloon race winners Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke of Albuquerque (Team 4). The two balloons passed Andy Cayton and Bill Manuel (Team 5), who landed yesterday, overnight to take the lead.

The teams should have a wonderful view of the South Dakota badlands as the sun comes up this morning. They've now traveled almost 650 miles (about 1050 km) and are about to cross Interstate 90 in South Dakota, headed north towards North Dakota and Canada. At one point last night they were about a mile apart; at this writing they're less than 15 miles apart and pursuers Cuneo and Fricke are gaining on Hempleman-Adams and Mason.

As the sun rises, they'll have to make a decision about landing or continuing into the day. Whatever their plans, the teams are playing it close to the vest. You can watch as their strategies unfold at www.balloonfiesta.com.

Oct 4, 2011

America's Challenge Leaders Approaching Duration Record

The two teams still aloft in the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta's America's Challenge race for gas balloons have now been in the air more than 62 hours. They may not be aware of it -- and it certainly isn't a priority for them -- but they may be in line to set a new race duration record.

The America's Challenge race, of course, is a distance competition -- the balloon that flies furthest in accordance with the event rules wins. Duration -- time aloft -- counts more for bragging rights than anything else. The current America's Challenge duration record is 68 hours 46 minutes, set in 2008 by Troy Bradley and Jonathan Trappe. Both teams still aloft have made flights that have gone beyond 69 hours, so if they have the resources left to stay aloft they should be easily able to break the record.

For nearly a day now, Team 4 (Albuquerque's Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke) and Team 6 (David Hempleman-Adams of the UK and Jonathan Mason of Australia) have been flying in close proximity and swapping positions. Since last night, when they passed the already-landed Team 5 (Cayton/Manuel), the lead has changed several times. They're at this writing, (11:30 AM MDT or 1730Z) about to cross the border from South Dakota to North Dakota.

Those who have been following the race via live tracking at www.balloonfiesta.com or via the new mobile phone app will notice that the remaining teams took very different paths early in the race. Like most of the other competitors, Cuneo and Fricke crossed the Sangre de Cristo Mountains north of Santa Fe, NM early in the race and then headed northward across eastern Colorado and Nebraska. Hempleman-Adams and Mason, however, flew northward from Albuquerque past Santa Fe, Espanola, and Taos and into the San Luis Valley of Colorado near Alamosa, then hooked east to cross the Rockies near Walsenburg, CO before turning north. It is amazing that after these two very different strategies, Teams 4's and 6's tracks converged and they have been flying close together for many hours. For the past several hours, in terms of distance traveled, they have been within about 10 miles of each other.

The question now -- which team has the most "gas left in the tank" -- in terms of remaining helium in the balloon and expendable weight (ballast) they can jettison to lighten the balloon? Towards sunset, we may begin to get some of the answer as the pilots decide whether they can fly through a fourth night or will have to land. Stay tuned!

Oct 4, 2011

America's Challenge Duration Record Falls: Now, Who Will Win?

With the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta's America's Challenge Race for gas balloons entering its 69th hour, both competitors still flying have beaten the race's record for time aloft. The old record of 68 hours and 46 minutes was set in 2008 by Troy Bradley and Jonathan Trappe. The new record will belong to whichever of the teams still flying stays aloft the longest – and that team might or might not turn out to be the winner of the race, which is based on distance traveled.

Team 4, Albuquerque's Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke, and Team 6, the UK's David Hempleman-Adams and Australia's Jon Mason, continue to streak north. At this writing (6:00 PM MDT or 0000Z) the teams were in the Minot, ND area and moving northwards towards the Canadian border. Cuneo and Fricke are at this writing ahead by just nine miles (14.5 km), having traveled nearly 930 miles (nearly 1,500 km).

With sunset approaching, we will soon know whether one or both teams will have to land while they still have daylight. You can follow the teams' progress at www.balloonfiesta.com.

Oct 4, 2011

One Balloon Still Aloft in America's Challenge

The America's Challenge Command Center has received word that Team 4, Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke of Albuquerque, have landed safely 22 miles southeast of Minot, ND.

This leaves just the British/Australian team of David Hempleman-Adams and Jonathan Mason aloft. We will continue to provide updates at www.balloonfiesta.com.

Oct 4, 2011

British/Australian Team Notches Greatest Distance in America's Challenge

The last balloon in the 16th America's Challenge Gas Balloon Race at the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta has landed. David Hempleman-Adams of the UK and Jonathan Mason of Australia (Team 6) are the apparent winners. They made a safe but fast – 35 knots! -- landing at about 8:30 PM MDT (0230Z) this evening near the Canadian border, about 64 miles northwest of Minot, North Dakota.

Unofficial results pending completion of scoring shows that the team flew 974 miles (1,568 km) and also has apparently set a new America's Challenge race record for time aloft. They were in the air nearly three days – 71 hours, 32 minutes, besting the old mark of 68 hours, 46 minutes set in 2008.

This would be the first America's Challenge win for Hempleman-Adams and Mason, but not their first win for a gas balloon race in Albuquerque. In 2008, the team won the Coupe Aeronautique Gordon Bennett, an international distance race very similar to the America's Challenge. That race also began at Balloon Fiesta Park in Albuquerque. For much of Monday and Tuesday, Hempleman-Adams and Mason flew neck and neck with the race's defending champions, Albuquerque's Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke (Team 4). This terrific high-altitude duel spanned three states and nearly 24 hours as first one team, then the other took the lead. Cuneo and Fricke landed about two hours before Hempleman-Adams and Mason, and finished only 46 miles (76 km) behind.

Cuneo and Fricke have won the America's Challenge twice, in 2001 and 2010, and have finished second four times.

The other six teams all landed on Sunday and Monday, as follows: Team 5, Andy Cayton and Bill Manuel of the US, 555 miles/893 km; Team 1, Phil Bryant of the US and Wilhelm Eimers of Germany, 495 miles/797 km, Team 3, Mark Sullivan and Cheri White of the US, 355 miles/571 km; Team 7, Anulfo Gonzalez and Angel Aguirre of Spain, 224 miles/360 km; Danielle Francoeur of Canada and Linda Ellis of the US, 138 miles/222 km; Louis Vitanza and Bert Padelt of the US, 105 miles/169 km

The results are unofficial until the scoring team debriefs the pilots, verifies the race data, and assures the race was flown within the rules. Official results should be released on or before Saturday, October 8.

Oct 8, 2011

America's Challenge Results Official: British Team Triumphs

It was a double celebration for participants in the America's Challenge Gas Balloon Race this evening (October 8), as the teams honored the winners of both the 2010 and 2011 competitions.

Because of a very late launch, the 2010 America's Challenge ended a full 24 hours after the end of its parent event, the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta. Since because of the late start many of the participants couldn't return to Albuquerque, the awards ceremony was deferred until this year when winners Barbara Fricke and Peter Cuneo, runners-up Danielle Francoeur and Linda Ellis, and third-place finishers Cheri White and Mark Sullivan received their medals and trophies. The 2010 race was almost certainly the first time in a major international gas ballooning competition that women have occupied all three spots on the podium; all of the pilots (including the guys!) wore pink scarves while receiving their trophies.

The ceremony then turned to 2011, celebrating the victory of Britain's David Hempleman-Adams and co-pilot Jonathan Mason, who now resides in Australia. The team traveled nearly 1,000 miles (1,609 km) to the Canadian border in North Dakota and in the bargain set the new America's Challenge duration record of 71 hours, 31 minutes. They were pushed almost every step of the way by second-place finishers Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke, who finally landed near Velva, ND, having traveled

1,494 km (928.6 miles). The third-place team, Andy Cayton and Bill Manual, landed near Kearney, NE after traveling 555 miles (894 km).

At the beginning of the ceremony, the pilots, crews, and officials paid tribute to Sid Cutter, Richard Abruzzo, and Carol Rymer Davis along with others who have passed on through the years. Sid Cutter, the founder of the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta and also an America's Challenge participant, died last may. Abruzzo and Davis perished while competing in the Coupe Gordon Bennett in September 2010.

This year's America's Challenge had a distinctly international flavor, with pilots residing in six nations participating: Australia, Canada, Germany, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States.