

Sep 4, 2013

America's Challenge Teams Prepare for Cross-Country Adventure

Eighteenth Race Set for October 5 Launch

Experienced and formidable. That describes the field for the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta's 18th America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons.

The ten members of the five teams have a combined 110 years of experience flying in the America's Challenge, along with dozens of competitive years in the other great distance race, the Coupe Aéronautique Gordon Bennett. Three of the five teams include former America's Challenge winners.

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 U.S. East Coast.

This year's competitors are:

- **Mark Sullivan and Cheri White, USA:** Last year Sullivan, from Albuquerque, and White, from Austin, TX, flew to Beauville, North Carolina to win their second America's Challenge (their first was in 2008). Their winning 2012 flight of 2,623 km (1,626 miles) ended just short of the East Coast and was the fourth longest in the history of the race. The team has finished as high as third in the Coupe Gordon Bennett (2009). Mark Sullivan, a multiple-award-winning competitor in both hot air and gas balloons and the American delegate to the world ballooning federation, is the founder of the America's Challenge. He is the only pilot in the race to have flown in all of the previous America's Challenge races; Cheri White will be participating in her ninth America's Challenge.
- **Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke, USA:** Cuneo and Fricke, from Albuquerque, have won the race twice (2001 and 2010) and have finished second four times; their third-place effort in last year's America's Challenge was their longest-ever gas flight (2,345 km/1,465 miles). Each is flying their 15th America's Challenge. Fricke and Cuneo finished third in the 2008 Gordon Bennett, the last time the race was held in Albuquerque. Their many other ballooning adventures include flying ten squawking geese suspended beneath a balloon as part of an experiment in imprinting migration patterns on geese, and participation in a 2002 smoke balloon flight over the Nazca lines, a series of ancient [geoglyphs](#) in Peru.
- **Phil Bryant and Andy Cayton, USA:** Co-pilot Andy Cayton, from the Savannah, Georgia area, is a two-time America's Challenge winner (2006 and 2007); his 2006 win, which involved a transit of the Gulf of Mexico, was one of the most daring America's

Challenge flights ever. In 2012, Cayton with co-pilot Bill Manuel finished third in the Coupe Gordon Bennett. This will be Cayton's seventh America's Challenge start. Houston's Phil Bryant, a former president of the Balloon Federation of America, will be flying in his sixth America's Challenge.

- **J. Michael Wallace and Kevin Brielmann, USA:** Gas ballooning is loaded with tradition, and that tradition is embodied by Mike Wallace and Kevin Brielmann. Their *Spirit of Springfield* is the last traditional netted gas balloon still being flown in the United States (think *Around the World in 80 Days*); their balloon is a piece of living history. Wallace and Brielmann are longtime distinguished international competitors who finished second in the Coupe Gordon Bennett in 1995 and 1996; they've competed in 11 previous America's Challenge races.
- **John Kugler and Bert Padelt, USA:** These two veteran competitors are flying together in the America's Challenge for the first time, but both have competed in many previous America's Challenge races (Kugler in 10, Padelt in 14). John Kugler is especially known in the gas ballooning world as a pioneer in the experimental use of ammonia as a lifting gas. He was also a member of the flight support team for the late Steve Fossett's around-the-world flights and taught Fossett how to fly balloons. Bert Padelt is one of the world's premier balloon designers and builders, most recently developing and promoting American-built hydrogen gas balloons (two of these systems are flying in this year's race). Since helium is (at least for now) no longer an option for gas balloon flights, hydrogen balloons are seen as the future of the sport in the U.S.

For the first time in many years, all of the competitors in the America's Challenge are from the U.S. As was the case last year, all of the balloons will be using hydrogen as the lifting gas.

The America's Challenge is the U.S. qualifier for the Coupe Aéronautique Gordon Bennett. The top three American finishers are generally invited by the Gas Division of the Balloon Federation of America to represent the United States in the Gordon Bennett; the 2014 event will be held in Vichy, in south central France.

The Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta Web site, www.balloonfiesta.com, and the Balloon Fiesta app for Android and iPhones, will feature live computerized tracking of all the balloons and race updates throughout the competition.

Oct 3, 2013

Teams Arriving for America's Challenge

Most of the competitors in the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta's 18th America's Challenge cross-country race for gas balloons are in Albuquerque this evening, preparing their equipment and supplies for their journey. Destination? Unknown.

The object of the race is to fly the greatest distance from Balloon Fiesta Park. Flights of more than 1,000 miles (more than 1,600 km) are not uncommon, and the race record is just shy of 2,000 miles (3,200+ km).

The five America's Challenge teams, along with their ground support crews and race officials, will gather for the first race briefing at 3 PM MDT (2100Z) on Friday. This comprehensive briefing includes a review of rules and procedures, safety information and – significantly -- weather. Race officials closely monitor weather systems both locally and across the country in the interest of the balloonists' safety. The balloons are scheduled to take off at approximately 6:30 PM MDT (0030Z) on Saturday, October 5. Weather conditions and wind direction especially at altitude, both at the launch point and downrange, will determine the exact timing of the launch.

The other major event of the opening briefing is determination of the launch order, which is always decided by random draw. Well . . . sort of. The pilots have the option of passing their turn when it comes their time to launch, and last year almost all the competitors did just that. The last team in line – Mark Sullivan and Cheri White – became the first to launch. They went on to win the race.

We'll provide ongoing updates through the Balloon Fiesta website, www.rfps.net, or the Balloon Fiesta mobile app. Once the race starts, you can also track your favorite team's progress in real time via online live tracking.

Oct 4, 2013

America's Challenge Launch Order Set

Five teams, ten pilots, one goal . . . to fly safely the longest distance from Balloon Fiesta Park and emerge triumphant in the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta's 18th America's Challenge for gas balloons. Launch is scheduled for approximately 6 PM on Saturday, October 5 from Albuquerque's

Balloon Fiesta Park. The launch is half of a spectacular Balloon Fiesta double-header which also includes the Twilight Twinkle Glow for hot air balloons.

All five teams answered today's role call at the inaugural pilot briefing, held at 1500 MDT (2100Z). At the briefing, Event Director Johnny Petrehn and the America's Challenge support team summarized launch procedures, airspace information, safety information, and weather. High pressure will be building into Albuquerque behind the strong upper-level weather system that is currently pulling out of the area. Trajectory forecasts for a Saturday launch suggest the balloons would move south and then to the west into Arizona, which would be a very unusual direction for the balloons to travel. A Sunday launch would move the balloons to the northeast, which is the more usual track. Race officials are scheduled to review the weather data with the pilots again on Saturday at 11:30 AM and make a final determination on the launch time.

The launch order for the race is determined by random draw. The launch order is.

Team 1: Peter Cuneo / Barbara Fricke

Team 2: J. Michael Wallace / Kevin Brielmann

Team 3: John Kugler / Bert Padelt

Team 4: Mark Sullivan / Cheri White

Team 5: Phil Bryant / Andy Cayton

Gas balloons use a lighter than air gas ó in this case, hydrogen ó for lift. Unlike hot air balloon flights, which generally last only an hour or two, gas balloons can stay up for two or three days and travel long distances. Last year, two of the five teams landed very close to the East Coast.

The Balloon Fiesta website, www.rfps.net, and the America's Challenge mobile tracking app, <http://www.balloonfiestalcom/GasTracking/2013/mobile.html>, will provide real-time tracking of the balloons' positions and news and updates on the race.

Oct 5, 2013

America's Challenge Launch Postponed for 24 Hours

America's Challenge Event Director John Petrehn has just announced a one-day postponement in the launch of the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons.

The launch is now scheduled for approximately 6 PM on Sunday, October 6, with inflation beginning about three hours before the launch.

The concern is not conditions in Albuquerque itself, but the trajectory the gas balloons will take as they move across the country. Race officials and weather forecasters project a day's delay will permit the balloons to take a more easterly path across the country, allowing for longer flights and a more exciting race.

Conditions in Albuquerque have been rapidly improving following the passage of the weather front that has affected the area in the past two days. Balloon Fiesta visitors enjoyed a gorgeous mass ascension this morning and conditions are expected to be ideal for this evening's Twilight Twinkle Glow.

The next pilot briefing for the America's Challenge will be held during the late morning tomorrow (Sunday, October 6), where a final determination on the launch time will be determined. At this point conditions look great for a spectacular double-header – the launch of the America's Challenge race followed by one of the Balloon Fiesta's signature events, the annual Balloon Glow.

Oct 6, 2013

Gas Balloon Race Launch Go for Sunday Evening

The five America's Challenge Gas Balloon Race teams are reading their equipment and preparing to go to Balloon Fiesta Park for inflation and a journey that may take the balloons into the Midwest and Canada.

Inflation is set to begin at approximately 3 PM (2100Z) this afternoon, with launch scheduled around sunset (6:15 PM is the target). It should be a spectacular event, since the 300 hot air balloons participating in the balloon glow should be inflating and glowing at about the time the gas balloons take off.

Trajectory forecasts provided to the pilots at the noon briefing suggest the balloons will head through eastern and northeastern New Mexico and up into Kansas, Nebraska, and Minnesota. However, the winds are fairly light, meaning a slow journey. Much will depend on how well the pilots can conserve gas and ballast (expendable weight) and stay aloft; teams that can stay aloft three nights have an advantage.

The America's Challenge is one of two distance races worldwide for gas balloons. The object: land further away from Balloon Fiesta Park than anyone else. Flights of more than 1,000 miles (1,600 km) are common, and the pilots, in their small gondolas, stay aloft for up to three days.

On viewing the tracks, one pilot noted they might land in the 18 inches to two feet of snow that fell in the northern US late last week. That would probably be an America's Challenge first!

The launch order is determined by random draw. The five teams and the order in which they are scheduled to launch is:

Team 1: Peter Cuneo/Barbara Fricke

Team 2: Mike Wallace/Kevin Brielmann

Team 3: John Kugler/Bert Padelt

Team 4: Mark Sullivan/Cheri White

Team 5: Phil Bryant/Andy Cayton

The Balloon Fiesta Website, www.balloonfiesta.com, includes live updates of the race and live tracking of the balloons' positions. The free Balloon Fiesta app includes a link on the home page to the gas balloon tracking map.

Oct 6, 2013

America's Challenge Off to Dazzling Start

Five balloons are headed slowly northeastward out of Albuquerque, after a picture-perfect beginning to the 18th America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons.

The balloons began inflating in very calm and stable conditions at about 3 PM (2100Z) Sunday afternoon. As the balloons filled with hydrogen, crews attached the sandbags that provide the expendable weight that is so crucial during the flight. Radios and flight instruments were meticulously checked to make sure they would operate in flight. Then, crews helped the pilots load maps, clothing, food, and (yes) a porta-potty. The pilots literally make a list and check it twice to make sure they don't forget anything, since they can't land at the nearest 7-11 for supplies! What they take with them has to last for the up to three days of the flight.

Just after 6 PM, the first balloon, piloted by two-time winners Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke, was "walked" to the platform. To the strains of the National Anthem, and the cheers of the crowd, they majestically headed aloft. They were followed by the teams of John Kugler and Bert Padelt, Mark Sullivan and Cheri White (the defending champions), and Phil Bryant and Andy Cayton. Last to launch, at 6:38 PM, were Mike Wallace and Kevin Brielman, flying the race's only netted balloon, the "Spirit of Springfield."

As they launched, Mark and Cheri paid tribute to balloonists who have passed on this year, and especially to longtime Balloon Fiesta photographer Cindy Petrehn. They wore purple, and deployed purple streamers from the basket as they took off. Phil and Andy delighted the crowd by showering them with silver confetti.

Wind speeds in the first hours of the race are expected to be slow, so the balloons should not travel very far during the first night. They're headed slowly northeast, cutting around the north end of the Sandia Mountains. This move will allow teams to fly at a lower altitude to clear the mountains, thus saving ballast.

Live tracking is now up and operating at www.balloonfiesta.com, where you can also see these regular updates. Just go to the Gas balloons tab at the top of the page and click on 2013 Gas Tracking. From that page you can also upload a convenient mobile app for iPhone and Android phones. You can also access tracking from the Balloon Fiesta free app.

Oct 7, 2013

Creeping Through the Night

The weather gurus told the America's Challenge teams that their first night aloft would be s-l-o-w . . . an exercise in patience as they seemed to go nowhere. They weren't kidding.

As the America's Challenge race for gas balloons moves towards 11 hours aloft, the balloons have been ever so slowly crawling northeast. The leaders are headed roughly towards Las Vegas, NM. Last year's defending champions Mark Sullivan and Cheri White (Team 4), are setting the (snail's) pace, but "leader" might be a bit misleading, since all of the balloons are about 40 miles of each other.

The next phase of the race will unfold in the next couple of hours, as the sun rises and the warming and expansion of the hydrogen causes the balloons to ascend, giving the pilots a "free ride" to the altitude of their choice. It's at that point the strategies will really begin to unfold. You can catch it all on the Balloon Fiesta website, www.balloonfiesta.com, and on the free Balloon Fiesta app for your favorite Apple or Android mobile device.

Oct 7, 2013

A Long S-L-O-W America's Challenge Afternoon . . .

Things are percolating along for the five teams in the 18th America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons as they progress relatively slowly across northeastern New Mexico and southeastern Colorado. At this writing, it's been a couple of hours since the phone has rung in the Command Center, an indication that things are going well aloft.

The America's Challenge is a distance race. The object is simple – land as far away from Balloon Fiesta Park in Albuquerque as possible. The balloon that goes the greatest distance wins.

Balloons cannot be “steered”: they ride the wind. Wind speed and direction varies with altitude, so the pilots maneuver by ascending and descending into winds that take them in the direction and at the speed they wish to go. Each team has its own strategy to use the winds to achieve distance and to maximize time aloft, which gives them a better chance to travel further.

To reach this lofty goal, the pilots have to conserve the limited resources they have on board the balloon. This means they have to minimize the loss of gas (in this case, hydrogen) as much as possible, using the natural day to night heating and cooling cycles. Even so, the balloon loses hydrogen over time, which causes it to lose lift. Pilots counteract this loss of lift this by dropping ballast – expendable weight, carried in the form of sand or water. Hydrogen and ballast are “fuel”, and the best teams at conserving both usually have the best chance to win.

At this writing, Mark Sullivan and Cheri White (Team 4) continue to hold the early lead. They've traveled about 250 miles (409 km) and are headed towards the Arkansas River and Lamar, Colorado. Team 5, Phil Bryant and Andy Cayton, are only a few miles behind. There are some hints of competing strategies beginning to develop, and those will become more apparent as the race progresses. Command Center controller Ben Anello likens it to the early stages of a marathon, where the competitors are jockeying for position but aren't making their big moves yet.

The next major decision point in the race is likely to be about three hours from now as the sun begins to set and the balloons lose solar heat, which causes the gas in the balloon to contract and lose lift. The teams will then have to decide whether they can stay aloft through the night or whether it would be best to land before sunset, with light to see the ground below.

You can follow the progress of the competitors via live tracking and these updates at www.balloonfiesta.com, or download the official Balloon Fiesta app and view the race live tracking on your favorite Android or Apple mobile device

Oct 7, 2013

First America's Challenge Landing Reported

It's a long, cold night in east central Colorado for the four America's Challenge teams remaining aloft as they journey northeastward toward Nebraska in what is fast becoming a very competitive race; only 40 miles separate the four teams still flying. A fifth team is now out of the race. John Kugler and Bert Padelt (Team 3) have safely landed near Springfield, CO.

This is just one of many developments in the rapidly-changing dynamics of this race, where the goal is to travel the greatest distance from Albuquerque's Balloon Fiesta Park. After maintaining a pace for most of the race's first 24 hours that could best be described as "stately," some teams have been absolutely screaming north. Team 2 (Mike Wallace and Kevin Brielmann) and Team 1 (Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke) have been clocking speeds in the 30-40 MPH range and both are beginning to slowly overhaul Mark Sullivan and Cheri White (Team 4), who have led for most of the day and at this writing are not moving quite as briskly. Team 5 (Phil Bryant and Andy Cayton) are also continuing to fly a strong race and are further east than the rest of the competitors.

The differences in speed most likely mean the balloons are choosing to fly at different altitudes in accordance with their individual (and secret!) race strategies. Very subtle differences in speed and track can make a big difference in the ultimate outcome of the race, and these highly skilled teams take advantage of these differences. Very often, the early race leaders don't prevail in the end. Slow and steady truly can win this race.

The next big decision point for the teams is likely to be around sunrise, as they assess the weather and their balloon system to determine if they will need to land with daylight or can continue through the day. Who will stay aloft and who will have to call it quits? You can find out by monitoring live tracking on the Balloon Fiesta website, www.balloonfiesta.com, or through the Balloon Fiesta's mobile apps for Apple and Android devices.

Oct 8, 2013

We Have A Race!

While America slept, the complexion of the America's Challenge race has changed dramatically – from a seeming one-team race to a neck and neck battle between two teams with Albuquerque connections.

Team 1 (Albuquerque's Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke) and Team 4 (Mark Sullivan from Albuquerque and Cheri White, the pride of Austin, TX) have been trading the lead over the last couple of hours and are currently in north-central Nebraska on a northeast heading. Peter and Barbara, you'll remember, were dead last and going nowhere yesterday. These two teams are both highly experienced, both two-time winners, and both tenacious competitors. It ought to be quite a contest.

Meanwhile, lurking back in wait, is Team 5 (Phil Bryant and Andy Cayton), no slouches themselves. They've been travelling relatively slowly, but Andy is a two-time winner and has come from behind before to capture the top trophy.

The Command Center is currently not receiving tracking data from Team 2, Mike Wallace and Kevin Brielmann. However, they are also still in the air – and the competition.

It should be quite a morning, as the sun comes up and we determine which teams will race through another day and which will have to land now that they have daylight to see. We'll keep you updated throughout the day, and you can follow the action through live tracking on www.balloonfiesta.com or on the Balloon Fiesta app for your favorite mobile device.

Oct 8, 2013

Three America's Challenge Teams Remain Aloft

"It's anybody's race" is almost a cliché – but with the 18th America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons, with the top two teams flying neck and neck and a third lurking ready to pounce, it really is anybody's race to win.

Three teams are still flying in the race, which began about 39 hours ago when the balloons lifted off from Balloon Fiesta Park. Team 2, J. Michael Wallace and Kevin Brielmann, have reported to the Command Center they made a safe landing this morning near Whitman, Nebraska. In looking at their landing position superimposed over Google Earth, it looks like they landed on a nice road. That would make their chase crew happy!

Meanwhile, a heck of a race has developed among the remaining three competitors. Team 4, Mark Sullivan and Cheri White, have now travelled 700 miles (1,130 km) and have pulled out about a 30-mile lead over Team 1, Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke. Mark and Cheri crossed the Missouri River into South Dakota around 9 AM (0300Z) this morning, and at this writing Peter and Barbara are about to cross the river.

Meanwhile, like the tortoise sneaking up on the hare, Team 5, Phil Bryant and Andy Cayton, are rapidly moving up from the south to join the party. They're making more than 40 mph (70

kmh), which is a pretty torrid pace in a balloon and is faster than their competition is moving at the moment.

It looks like the leaders will continue to track through the northeast through southeastern South Dakota and into Minnesota roughly towards the Minneapolis-St. Paul metroplex. We'll keep you updated throughout the day, and you can follow the action through live tracking on www.balloonfiesta.com or on the Balloon Fiesta app for your favorite Android or Apple mobile device.

Oct 8, 2013

Command Center Watches Balloons Speed North

Be careful what you wish for – you might just get it! After making slow progress for the first day of the race, the three America's Challenge balloons still flying are screaming along at near-freeway speeds.

The standings haven't changed in several hours as the teams begin to move into Minnesota. Team 4, Mark Sullivan and Cheri White are nearing the 900-mile (1,450 km) mark and have widened their lead over Team 1, Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke, to about 60 miles. Meanwhile, Team 5 (Phil Bryant and Andy Cayton) have gobbled up ground on the leaders, at times moving at speeds exceeding 65 mph (about 100 km/hr). Geez, that's the freeway speed limit in Albuquerque. Mark and Cheri have been clocking about 50 mph, and Peter and Barbara motoring along at a respectable 35 mph. The differing speeds and directions they're choosing to travel – Teams 4 and 5 have a more northerly track than Team 1 – probably reflect differences in strategy.

Watching over all this are a small group of volunteers who staff the race's Command Center. We often talk about the Command Center hearing about this or providing information about that, but you may be wondering, who are these guys? Well, these guys (and gals – two are female) are on duty 24-7 to support and assist the pilots and their ground crews throughout the flight. They provide flight position tracking (the live tracking data you see on the website and apps, as well as other data), advice to chase crews who are trying to rendezvous with pilots, and assistance with filing paperwork and keeping air traffic control centers and others who control airspace abreast of balloons that may be moving into their area. The Command Center staff helps coordinate with Canadian authorities if the balloons enter Canada, which could potentially happen in this race.

If necessary, the Command Center staff also alerts and helps coordinate search and rescue support for balloon teams. America's Challenge competitors sometimes land in remote and

difficult-to-access areas, and law enforcement agencies are generally very cooperative in providing assistance to the teams and helping chase crews reach the balloon.

Interestingly enough, the Command Center staff also acts as a resource to help pilots' psyches through those long, lonely trips across the country. Pilots occasionally call just to check in and chat or to let the Command Center know their plans so the controllers can plan ahead in providing assistance. All this information is held in strict confidence by the Command Center staff. In keeping with this same practice, just about the only thing the Command Center doesn't do is provide "competition advice" to pilots.

A couple of notes on Command Center procedures. Some have noticed the data we provide on our tracking pages does not include altitude. Since flight altitudes are crucial to the teams' race strategies, this information is kept confidential. Also, when teams land, they have up to four hours to report their landing to the Command Center. The Command Center does not post a team as "landed" until the team calls in. It may sometimes seem obvious that a team is down because their speed and track show as "0", but false readings sometimes can show "0" even while a team is still in the air. It would be most impolite for the Command Center to declare a still-flying team as "landed"!

With all three teams still in the running, the excitement is building, and we'll keep you updated through live tracking on www.balloonfiesta.com or on the Balloon Fiesta app for your favorite Android or Apple mobile device.

Oct 8, 2013

Decision Time!

The next few hours will be critical ones in the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta's 18th America's Challenge race for gas balloons.

We're at this writing about an hour and a half from sunset in Minnesota, where the three teams still aloft are headed north and northeast towards the Canadian border. The pilots will soon have to make the crucial decision about whether they will try to land before it gets dark, or whether they will continue flying into the night.

In making these decisions, the pilots consider many factors: how much ballast (expendable weight, like sand) they have on board to counteract the loss of hydrogen gas to this point in the flight (ballast is required to safely land the balloon), the weather conditions, wind speeds, and where the wind is likely to take them overnight: are they travelling into inaccessible terrain? After weighing everything, they'll decide whether to fly on or to land.

Another factor that plays into these decisions is the pilots' physical and mental condition. The America's Challenge is a grueling test of both. At this point the three teams still flying have been aloft for 46 hours, through bone-freezing nights and (early in the flight) searing daytime heat. They've been cooped up in a gondola smaller than the size of a small closet with one other person for nearly two days. (One hopes they like each other!) They take turns sleeping, but sleep is hard to get in a small gondola thousands of feet above the ground. Landing is one of the most demanding phases of the flight, requiring the pilots to make split-second decisions and – after days of almost no physical activity – perform the dexterous chores required to bring the balloon safely down. This race is – to a much greater degree than most of us realize – an intense psychological test.

Mark Sullivan of Albuquerque and Cheri White, from Austin Texas (Team 4), have held the lead most of the way through the race and continue to lead by about 60 miles. They're in northwestern Minnesota. Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke, from Albuquerque (Team 1), have been shadowing them since the middle of the night last night. Phil Bryant and Andy Cayton (Team 5), after lagging far behind, have been steadily reeling in the leaders all day and are within about 25 miles of second place.

The next few hours will be at least interesting, and perhaps dramatic. We'll keep you posted as the race continues through live tracking on www.balloonfiesta.com or on the Balloon Fiesta app for your favorite Android or Apple mobile device.

Oct 8, 2013

America's Challenge Leaders Land; Two Still Flying

Mark Sullivan and Cheri White (Team 4), the leaders in the America's Challenge through most of the race, have just reported a safe landing east of Alexandria, Minnesota.

The new race leaders – within moments – are likely to be Phil Bryant and Andy Cayton (Team 5) who were third when the day dawned this morning. The spread between them and the other team still flying – Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke (Team 1) is just four miles!

Will both teams still flying continue through the night? Will they cross into Canada? It should be a very interesting evening. Stay tuned and watch live tracking on www.balloonfiesta.com or on the Balloon Fiesta app for your favorite Android or Apple mobile device.

Oct 8, 2013

And Then There Was One

The Command Center has just received word that Team 5, Phil Bryant and Andy Cayton, have landed safely near Long Prairie, Minnesota. Their only problem? Mosquitoes at the landing site!

This leaves just one balloon still flying. Albuquerque's Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke (Team 1) have now assumed the race lead. They are headed northeast and are near St. Cloud, MN.

You can watch their progress via live tracking at www.balloonfiesta.com and via the official Balloon Fiesta app.

Oct 8, 2013

Onward Through the Night

One balloon remains aloft in the 18th America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons.

Team 1, Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke, continue to fly through the night through Minnesota and towards Lake Superior and Canada. At this writing they have travelled more than 1,050 miles (about 1700 km) and have been flying more than 50 hours. All of the other competitors landed earlier today and yesterday. Live tracking at www.balloonfiesta.com and via the official Balloon Fiesta app never sleeps and you can monitor their progress throughout the night.

Oct 9, 2013

A Long Lonely Trek Over Water

For most of the night, apparent America's Challenge winners Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke have been transiting Lake Superior. They've now been in the air more than 58 hours and have flown about 1,360 miles (2,185 km).

This is not the first time Cuneo and Fricke have flown over a big body of water in a gas balloon race, or even in the America's Challenge. They crossed Lake Michigan enroute to their 2010

race win, and in 2006 spent nearly a day over the North Sea in a passage from Belgium to the British coast to Scandinavia.

That said, it has been a lonely, cold night for the team. They will be flying into daylight as they approach the northeastern coast of Lake Superior, and will most likely land as soon as they can find an appropriate place to do so.

Cuneo and Fricke have flown about 400 miles further than the second place team of Phil Bryant and Andy Cayton, and are the unofficial winners. Bryant and Cayton bested third place team Mark Sullivan and Cheri White by just seven miles.

Official results will most likely be posted on Saturday, October 12, following debriefing of all the pilots in the race and imposition of any deductions for violation of the race rules.

Oct 9, 2013

Final America's Challenge Team Lands Safely

The last balloon aloft in the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta's 18th America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons has made a safe landing about four miles north of White River in Ontario, Canada.

Team 1, Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke are the unofficial race winners. Their flight of 1,427 miles (2,297km) is their second-longest gas flight and nearly beat their personal best distance of 1,454 miles. They were aloft for 60 hours, 19 minutes.

Their flight included an overnight transit of Lake Superior – the long way! They made the decision to fly across Lake Superior because ground winds in Minnesota were too high for them to safely attempt a night landing. Their landing this morning in a swampy clearing off a road was still fast but, in Barbara's words, much better than they had thought it might be.

The come-from-behind victory – they were last for most of the competition's first 24 hours – is Cuneo and Fricke's third America's Challenge win. They are the first team to achieve three victories in the competition since Richard Abruzzo won his third America's Challenge in 2002, enroute to an eventual five wins.

Pending final certification of the race results, Team 5, Phil Bryant and Andy Cayton finished second, with a flight of 967 miles (1,556 km). They just—by seven miles – edged out Team 4, Mark Sullivan and Cheri White, who led for much of the race.

All of the race results are unofficial pending debriefing of the pilots and imposition of any deductions resulting from violations of the race rules. Official race results should be released sometime on Saturday, October 12.

1. Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke, 1,424 miles (2,297 km), duration 60:19 hours, landed near White River, Ontario, Canada
2. Phil Bryant and Andy Cayton, 967 miles (1556 km), duration 48:02 hours, landed near Long Prairie, MN
3. Mark Sullivan and Cheri White, 960 miles (1545 km), duration 45:51 hours, landed near Pelican Rapids, MN
4. J. Michael Wallace and Kevin Briemann, 543 miles (874 km), duration 35:53 hours, landed near Whitman, NE
5. John Kugler and Bert Padelt, 257 miles, (414 km), duration 24:24 hours, landed near Springfield, CO

The America's Challenge tracking site, www.balloonfiesta.com, remains live, as does the Balloon Fiesta mobile app for Apple and Android devices.

Oct 12, 2013

It's Official! Albuquerque Team Wins Their Third America's Challenge

Official results have now been released for the 18th America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons, confirming that Team 1, Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke, are the winners.

The husband-wife team made a nighttime passage over Lake Superior to a landing near White River, Ontario, Canada, traveling 1,429 miles (2299.79 km.) and staying aloft for 60 hours, 19 minutes.

Cuneo and Fricke have flown farther and longer before, but this flight will be especially remembered for an overnight, lengthy transit of Lake Superior. The win is their third in the America's Challenge, a feat bested only by the late Richard Abruzzo.

The battle for the other spots on the podium was much closer, with just seven miles separating Team 5, Phil Bryant and Andy Cayton, and Team 4, Mark Sullivan and Cheri White.

Place	Pilot	Co-Pilot	Country	Miles	Kilometers	Duration	Nearest City/ Town
1	Peter Cuneo	Barbara Fricke	USA	1,425.87	2,299.79	60:25	White River, Ontario, Canada
2	Phil Bryant	Andy Cayton	USA	966.07	1558.17	47:54	Long Prairie, MN
3	Mark Sullivan	Cheri White	USA	959.01	1546.79	45:48	Pelican Rapids, MN
4	J. Michael Wallace	Kevin Brielmann	USA	543.08	875.93	35:52	Hyannis, NE
5	John Kugler	Bert Padelt	USA	257.87	415.92	23:39	Pritchett, CO

The America's Challenge tracking site, www.balloonfiesta.com, remains live, as does the Balloon Fiesta mobile app for Apple and Android devices.