

America's Challenge 2015 News Update Archives

20th America's Challenge Competitors Include World Ballooning Legends

October 1, 2015

The U.S. and international competitors in the 20th running of the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta's America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons are a truly remarkable bunch.

One team recreated a 100-year-old historic flight from France across the English Channel, following in the footsteps of a remarkable French woman dubbed *La Fiancée du Danger* (and one of the team members also set three world records while flying across the Atlantic). Two are the undisputed "iron men" of distance gas ballooning, with more than 30 races each to their credit. Several competitors hold multiple world records. The field includes seven former winners with nearly half the victories in the America's Challenge among them.

The America's Challenge is scheduled to launch (weather permitting) at approximately 6:30 PM on Saturday, October 3 from Balloon Fiesta Park. The object of the race is to fly the greatest distance from Albuquerque while competing within the event rules. The balloonists often stay aloft for two to three days and must use the winds 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.

The America's Challenge is one of the world's two great gas balloon distance competitions; the other is the Coupe Aéronautique Gordon Bennett, which this year launched from Pau in France. Members of four of the top six teams in this year's Gordon Bennett are competing in the 2015 America's Challenge.

The America's Challenge field this year features an intriguing and exciting combination of experienced competitors and newcomers:

- **Anulfo González and Angel Aguirre, Spain:** In 2011, Anulfo González and Angel Aguirre were relatively new to gas ballooning and came to Albuquerque to fly their first gas balloon distance race. This year, they arrive as defending champions. González and Aguirre won the 2014 America's Challenge with a 53-hour, 1,189 mile (1,915 km) flight to Campbellsville, KY. The team has also racked up two fourth-place finishes in the Coupe Gordon Bennett. The ebullient duo will be making their third America's

Challenge start. They're an interesting team – Anulfo is from Madrid; Angel from the Barcelona area – and their high spirits and sense of fun brightens every race in which they compete.

- **Wilhelm Eimers and Bernd Landsmann, Germany:** They're ballooning legends, and competing together in a distance gas balloon race for the first time in nearly 20 years. Eimers and Landsmann are three-time Coupe Gordon Bennett winners and hold the world duration record – 92+ hours -- for competition-size gas balloons. Eimers is one of the most remarkable balloonists in history: his more than 9,000 hours aloft include 25 Gordon Bennett races (four wins and he almost always finishes in the top three), eight America's Challenges, 17 crossings of the Alps, and transits of just about every major body of water in Europe. But – in his eight attempts – he's never won the America's Challenge (though he's been close: two seconds, two thirds).
- **Benoit Pelard and Laurent Lajoie, France:** This is their first America's Challenge, and they've never finished high up in the Gordon Bennett standings – but oh, the adventures they've had! The team from Lorraine (where Joan of Arc was born) named their balloon *Marie Marvingt*, after the most remarkable woman you've never heard of.* In 1906, on a routine balloon flight, she got caught in a storm and blown across the English Channel. Pelard and Lajoie, with fellow balloonist Benoit Peterlé, recreated the flight (sans storm) in 2010, flying from Nancy in France to Sissinghurst in England. In 2000, Lajoie and Christoph Houver set three world duration records (at 146+ hours) while crossing the Atlantic in a Roziere balloon, a system which uses a hybrid of helium and hot air for lift. Although he's never flown in the America's Challenge, Benoit Pelard has flown hot air balloons in the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta a number of times.
- **Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke, USA:** Cuneo and Fricke, from Albuquerque, are the only three-time-winning team (2001, 2010, 2013). Only one pilot has more wins to his credit, the late Richard Abruzzo, who won five times with four different co-pilots. They also finished third in the 2008 Gordon Bennett, the last time the race was held in Albuquerque. Cuneo and Fricke are also known as balloon builders (two hot air balloons and a gas balloon basket) and for participating in a number of unusual flights, including an attempt to prove ancient balloon builders may have helped create the Nazca lines in Peru. For many years, they've written and edited the U.S. gas ballooning newsletter and have served in leadership positions in many ballooning organizations (Barbara is currently a member of the Balloon Fiesta Board of Directors). They are each flying in their 16th America's Challenge; in previous races they've crossed Lake Superior, Lake Huron, and Lake Michigan.
- **Mark Sullivan and Cheri White, USA:** Sullivan, from Albuquerque, and White, from Austin, TX, are two-time America's Challenge winners (2008, 2012) and finished third in the 2009 Gordon Bennett. Mark Sullivan is the other iron man of distance gas balloon competition: he just completed his 19th Gordon Bennett flight, the third-most in the nearly 50-year history of the race, and his 38 combined America's Challenge and Gordon Bennett flights bests Eimers' combined 33 races. A multiple-award-winning competitor

in both hot air and gas balloons and the American delegate to the world ballooning federation, Sullivan is the founder of the America's Challenge and a board member and past president of AIBF. He is the only pilot in the field to have participated in all of the previous 19 America's Challenge races. Cheri White will be flying in her eleventh America's Challenge.

- **Phil Bryant and Clay Wilson, USA:** Eight-time America's Challenge competitor Phil Bryant, from Houston, is a tenacious foe who's notched some good results. He was second in the 2013 race and has finished as high as sixth in the Gordon Bennett, crossing the Mediterranean to Italy. Bryant is the former president of the Balloon Federation of America. His co-pilot, Clay Wilson, is flying in his first America's Challenge, but like Bryant is an experienced balloonist and fixed-wing pilot.
- **Andy Cayton, USA, and Krzysztof Zapart, Poland:** This fascinating multi-national team --- veteran Cayton and relative newcomer Zapart – may just be a very competitive combination. Andy Cayton is a two-time America's Challenge winner (2006 and 2007), has finished third in the Gordon Bennett, and is coming off a second-place finish as co-pilot to Phil Bryant last year. Krzysztof Zapart, in his America's Challenge debut, finished second last year and is coming off a top five result in this year's Gordon Bennett – his second in the two years he's been competing. Anything can happen when either of these two head skyward: Cayton's first America's Challenge win included a transit across the Gulf of Mexico to Florida, one of the most daring flights in the history of the America's Challenge.

The eighth team scheduled to compete, Astrid Gerhardt and Walter Mueller of Germany, are a late cancellation.

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, which is now recognized by the world ballooning federation as the gas ballooning world championships.

The Albuquerque 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.

America's Challenge Launch Anticipated Saturday Night

Seven teams answered the roll call on Friday afternoon, October 2 for the opening briefing for the 20th America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons. The race is scheduled for launch on Saturday evening, October 3.

At the briefing, meteorologist Dan Pagliaro noted that the weather patterns are changing over New Mexico, but believes a Saturday launch is a possibility. Officials are planning a launch sometime Saturday evening or early Sunday morning. Pilots will receive additional weather information at the 11 AM Saturday briefing, at which time Event Director John Petrehn and his team will provide additional information and make a final decision.

During the briefing, the pilots also received information about safety procedures for the launch and the services provided by the Command Center, whose controllers provide support to the pilots throughout the race.

The launch order is determined by random draw. Two special guests from the Fédération Aéronautique Internationale, sports and marketing director Markus Haggenny and FAI secretary-general Susanne Schoedel, did the honors. They are in Albuquerque for the FAI Hall of Fame induction ceremony, held at the Anderson Abruzzo Albuquerque International Balloon Museum which is the permanent home of the FAI's Ballooning Hall of Fame. This year's inductees are two former America's Challenge winners, David Levin of the US and the late Janet Folkes of Great Britain.

The launch order will be:

1. Benôit Pelard and Laurent Lajoie, France
2. Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke, USA
3. Wilhelm Eimers and Bernd Landesmann, Germany
4. Phil Bryant and Clay Wilson, USA
5. Mark Sullivan and Cheri White, USA
6. Andy Cayton, USA, and Krysztof Zapart, Poland
7. Anulfo González and Angel Aguirre, Spain

Gonzales and Aguirre are the defending champions.

Once the race begins, you can follow your favorite teams' positions via live tracking at the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta website, www.balloonfiesta.com, or via the Balloon Fiesta's free mobile app.

America's Challenge Race Postponed

The launch of the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta's 20th America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons has been postponed for at least 24 hours.

At an 11 AM briefing today (Saturday, October 3), meteorologist Dan Pagliaro told the seven competing teams that unsettled weather over New Mexico could create issues for the balloonists as they inflate and fly out of Albuquerque. The forecast includes intermittent gusty winds as

well as the possibility of thunderstorms along the forecast trajectory, which would carry the balloons to the northeast towards Raton and on up into the U.S. Midwest.

In the interest of safety, the race is being postponed and officials will continue to monitor the weather. The pilots and officials will meet again at noon MDT (1800 UTC) on Sunday, October 4 to look at possible launch opportunities over the next few days.

Postponements are not unusual with the America's Challenge race, since the balloon flights are affected both by launch conditions in Albuquerque and weather conditions downrange as the balloons track across the country.

Hot air events Saturday evening, including the Twilight Twinkle Glow and the AfterGlow fireworks show, are not affected and are expected to proceed on schedule.

Once the race begins, you can follow the balloons' progress via live tracking at www.balloonfiesta.com and via the Balloon Fiesta's mobile app.

No Sunday America's Challenge Launch; Officials Continue to Watch Weather

Update 12:15 PM Sunday, October 4

Unsettled weather across New Mexico continues to plague the prospects for a launch of the 20th America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons. After reviewing weather forecasts this morning, race director John Petrehn and his staff have decided to postpone the launch for at least one more day. The Sunday evening Balloon Glow and other Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta events remain on schedule.

The intermittent nature of the showers and thundershowers across the area have created challenges in timing the America's Challenge launch to assure safe flights across the U.S. This morning, a break in the weather in Albuquerque allowed the hot air balloon pilots to enjoy a great morning of flying in light winds under mostly overcast skies. However, with the America's Challenge, officials must consider weather conditions both for launch in the Albuquerque area and downrange across the country for the two to three days the gas balloons can remain aloft.

The next America's Challenge briefing is scheduled for 5 PM MDT (2300 UTC) on Monday, October 5, which if conditions are favorable could allow for an overnight launch on Monday or later in the week. The "launch window" – the period of time during which the race can commence – closes at midnight Wednesday, October 7 (0600 UTC October 8).

Once the race begins, you can follow the balloons' progress via live tracking at www.balloonfiesta.com and via the Balloon Fiesta's mobile app.

Weather Again Postpones America's Challenge

Update 1 PM MDT (1900 UTC) Monday, October 5

The wet and unstable weather pattern across the American Southwest persists, and so are the postponements to the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta's 20th America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons.

The pilot briefing scheduled for 5 PM MDT (2300 UTC) on Monday, October 5 has been postponed to Tuesday, October 6 at 12 noon MDT (1800 UTC). This means the earliest the race could launch would be Tuesday evening. Under the event rules, the "launch window" – the period of time during which the race can commence – closes at midnight Wednesday, October 7 (0600 UTC October 8).

Weather delays are not uncommon for the America's Challenge, since the race is affected by weather both at the launch site in Albuquerque and along the balloons' track across the country. Balloon pilots are used to weather delays, and the officials continue to monitor the weather for an opening that will allow for a safe and competitive race.

Once the race begins, you can follow the balloons' progress via live tracking at www.balloonfiesta.com and via the Balloon Fiesta's mobile app.

Oct 6, 2015

Another America's Challenge Weather Delay

Update 1 PM MDT (1900 UTC) Tuesday, October 6

Seven international teams poised to compete in the 20th America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons are ready and raring to go, but Mother Nature still has other ideas. The race has been postponed yet again, and the pilots will meet at 12 noon (1800 UTC) on Wednesday, October 7 in the hopes the race can launch Wednesday evening before the launch window closes.

The low pressure system over California that has been drawing moisture into New Mexico is beginning to move eastward into southern New Mexico, which will continue to cause unstable weather in the state. With the threat of evening thunderstorms both in the launch area in Albuquerque and downrange in the direction the balloons would travel, a safe Tuesday launch is

just not possible. As the low moves into New Mexico, easterly winds will prevail and the balloons' projected trajectories will shift to the west, taking them into south central and southwestern Arizona, southern California, and northern Baja California, Mexico – an acceptable but most unusual direction.

Under the rules for the America's Challenge (6.2), the launch window for the race closes at 11:59 PM MDT on Wednesday, October 7 (0559 UTC October 8). If the teams are unable to launch by then, the competition would be cancelled.

The weather has had less of an impact on the morning Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta flights, which take place when the air is more stable. The balloons have flown every morning, with only the Sunday evening balloon glow being cancelled.

We will provide a further update on plans for the race and the America's Challenge teams after the noon Wednesday briefing. Once the race begins, you can follow the balloons' progress via live tracking at www.balloonfiesta.com and via the Balloon Fiesta's mobile app.

20th America's Challenge Cancelled

Update 1 PM MDT (1900 UTC) Wednesday, October 7

The 20th America's Challenge for gas balloons will not be held, due to the wet and unstable weather pattern that has persisted over New Mexico since the beginning of the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta.

Under the race rules, the launch window for the race closes at 11:59 PM MDT today (Wednesday, October 7, 0559 UTC October 8), and rain and thunderstorms are forecast for the launch site this evening in Albuquerque. In the interest of safety, race officials have sadly agreed to cancel the race.

This is the second time in the race's 20-year history that the balloons have been unable to launch. In 2009, the race was cancelled because of high winds that swept the launch site after the balloons inflated, making a safe launch impossible.

The weather in Albuquerque is expected to improve over the next several days. The hot air balloons have enjoyed great morning flights, and the weather looks good for the Special Shape Rodeo beginning this weekend.

The cancellation is of course disappointing for the members of the seven teams, but they are accustomed to weather delays and understand better than anyone the potential challenges of launching into uncertain weather.

Event Director Johnny Petrehn thanked the pilots and event staff and expressed his regret that the race had to be cancelled and his hopes that the pilots will return in 2016 for the next America's Challenge race.