

America's Challenge Updates: 2016 Archive

America's Challenge Celebrates 21st Birthday; Field of Six Readies for Launch

Sep 26, 2016

For three days they live suspended thousands of feet above terra firma in a space the size of a small closet, enduring blazing heat and biting cold, ever watchful of what the weather might bring. They have with them only the (meager) supplies they take with them. And they'd better have reserves of strength and stamina, because their hardest task – landing -- comes right at the end of their marathon journey, which could be anywhere from Gorham, ME to Citra, FL. They are tough women and men with unique skills facing ever-changing challenges.

It's just another day at the office for the six teams competing in the 21st Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta's America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons. **This year's competition is scheduled to launch (weather permitting) at approximately 6 PM on Wednesday, October 5 from Balloon Fiesta Park.** The race is delayed from its usual beginning-of-Balloon Fiesta launch date to allow time for the four teams competing in the just-completed world championships in Europe to ship their equipment to the United States.

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, the world championships of distance gas ballooning, which this year launched from Gladbeck in Germany. Four of the six teams in this year's America's Challenge also competed in the Gordon Bennett, finishing as high as fourth. The America's Challenge is the U.S. qualifying event for the Gordon Bennett.

The defending America's Challenge champions, Anulfo González and Angel Aguirre from Spain, are not returning this year, but most of the other top teams from the last America's Challenge are back, including three-time winners Barbara Fricke and Peter Cuneo and two-time champions Mark Sullivan and Cheri White. Both Fricke and White are also competing in the U.S. Women's National Hot Air Balloon Championships being held earlier during Balloon Fiesta. They're joined by two other US teams (Phil Bryant/Mike Emich and John Kugler/Bert Padelt) and two international teams (Benoit Pelard/Laurent Lajoie from France and Krzysztof Zapart/Bazyli Dawidziuk from Poland).

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 Scheduled for Wednesday

Update 10/2/16 2130 MDT (0330 UTC)

The Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons remains on schedule for a Wednesday late afternoon or evening launch. Weather permitting, the balloons should inflate Wednesday afternoon and launch around sunset.

The six competing teams will get together for their opening briefing Tuesday afternoon MDT (mid-evening UTC), at which time they'll be briefed by Event Director John Petrehn, Assistant Director Sam Parks, Command Center chief Ruth Lind, and the launch team. Most importantly, they'll get a detailed weather briefing from the meteorological team about expected weather conditions both for the launch in Albuquerque and downrange in the direction the balloons will travel. If weather concerns emerge, the race can be postponed for up to three days to assure a safe and successful race.

Of course, in most years, the race would already be underway. The America's Challenge traditionally launches the first weekend of Balloon Fiesta. It was delayed this year to allow the four teams who competed in last month's Coupe Aéronautique Gordon Bennett enough time to ship their equipment to Albuquerque.

Meanwhile, the teams – and tens of thousands of spectators – have enjoyed spectacular hot air balloon mass ascensions and balloon glows. Several of the America's Challenge gas balloon pilots also participate in Balloon Fiesta hot-air ballooning events. Most notably, Cheri White is competing – well, better than that: at this writing is leading! -- the U.S. Women's National Hot Air Balloon Championships, being flown concurrently with the Balloon Fiesta. Cheri is the defending U.S. women's champion and recently finished third in the Women's World Hot Air Balloon Championships in Lithuania. Those interested in following this competition can visit the BFA Competition Division website at <http://2016uswnc.weebly.com/>. Also sighted aloft during mass ascensions: John Kugler, Barbara Fricke, Peter Cuneo, and Mark Sullivan.

Once the America's Challenge begins, you can follow the teams' progress at www.balloonfiesta.com, or through the Balloon Fiesta's comprehensive app. Try it, you'll like it! It can be downloaded free to your favorite Apple or Android device.

Meet the America's Challenge Competitors

Update 9:30 PM (0330 UTC) Monday, October 3

It takes a certain and special kind of person to fly in a gas balloon distance race like the America's Challenge. As launch day (Wednesday) draws closer and the teams prepare for their first briefing on Tuesday, let's introduce you to the men and women who pursue this purest form of high adventure, traveling on the whims of the wind and weather and their wits.

They are extraordinary ordinary people who work (or worked – some are retired) as educators, engineers, lawyers, business people, and, yes, aviators. To pass them on the street, you'd never guess they spend days aloft in a space the size of a small closet, trying to outmaneuver their competitors and travel the greatest distance from the starting point. They share a camaraderie, a bond, an intensity known only to elite aeronauts around the world who follow a unique star as far as it can take them. They are the men and women of the America's Challenge:

- **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. Fricke and Cuneo were the top US team in the just completed world championships (Gordon Bennett), finishing fourth in a formidable 24-balloon field. The incredible flight included a spectacular – and frigid – moonlit nighttime transit of the Alps within a few miles of the Matterhorn. 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 18th America's Challenge; in previous races they've crossed Lake Superior, Lake Huron, and Lake Michigan.
- **Krzysztof Zapart and Bazyli Dawidziuk, Poland:** They're relatively new to competitive gas ballooning, but are already making their mark, having finished in the top ten in the last two world championships. Krzysztof Zapart, the jovial pilot from Poland, finished second in his America's Challenge debut in 2014. His co-pilot this year, Bazyli Dawidziuk, is relatively new to competitive gas ballooning, but is also an experienced hot air balloon pilot who has won a number of championships in Europe and in 2010 made one of the first balloon flights ever in Iran.
- **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 one of the iron men of distance gas balloon competition. He just completed his 20th Gordon Bennett flight, the fourth-most in the

nearly 50-year history of the race, and his 40 combined America's Challenge and Gordon Bennett starts bests the legendary Wilhelm Eimers' combined 35 races. A multiple-award-winning competitor in both hot air and gas balloons and the current president of 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 20 America's Challenge races. Cheri White will be flying in her twelfth America's Challenge and recently finished third in the Women's World Hot Air Balloon Championships in Lithuania.

- **Benôt Pelard and Laurent Lajoie, France:** This is only their second America's Challenge, but they're longtime Gordon Bennett competitors, and Pelard is no stranger to the hot air balloon side of the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta. And oh, the other adventures they've had! The team from Lorraine (where Joan of Arc was born) named their balloon *Marie Marvingt*, after the pioneering balloonist and aviatrix who (among other things, including arguably inventing the concept of the air ambulance) crossed the English Channel by balloon in a fierce storm in 1906. Pelard and Lajoie, with fellow balloonist Benoit Peterlé, recreated that 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.
- **Phil Bryant and Mike Emich, USA:** Nine-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. Although this is Mike Emich's first America's Challenge, he has one of the most impressive resumes in ballooning; his early experiences in gas ballooning brought him into contact with some of the greatest American balloonists of all time, including Ward T. van Orman, who won his first of three Gordon Bennett races in 1926! Emich has built and flown both hot air and gas balloons, has set several world records, and was a key member of the support team for the Earthwinds attempts to fly non-stop around the world. Oh, and he's sky-dived out of a Boeing 727.
- **John Kugler and Bert Padelt, USA:** If these names sound familiar, it may be because both were key participants in the record-breaking Two Eagles transit of the Pacific. Padelt, perhaps the premier US balloon builder, built the 350,000 cu. ft. balloon envelope that carried Troy Bradley and Leonid Tiukhtyaev more than 6,600 miles (nearly 10,700 km) across the ocean. Kugler (along with America's Challenge fellow competitors Mark Sullivan and Peter Cuneo) was one of the technical advisors and was the man on the phone advising Bradley during the dramatic landing.

At tomorrow afternoon's pilot briefing, the order of launch will be determined by random draw and teams will hear from race officials and the weather experts about prospects for a launch at the scheduled time around sunset MDT Wednesday (around 0000Z Thursday). Stay tuned!

America's Challenge Teams Watching Weather for Wednesday Launch

Update 10 PM MDT (0400 UTC) Tuesday, October 4

Six teams answered the roll call on Tuesday afternoon, October 4 at the opening briefing for the 21st America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons. The race remains scheduled to launch sometime Wednesday evening, October 5.

At the briefing, Event Director John Petrehn announced that pilot John Kugler has had to withdraw from the event. The officials have permitted Bert Padelt to take over as the primary pilot on their team, with Noah Forden coming on board as co-pilot.

As to the weather . . . after meteorologist Randy LeFevre's briefing, Petrehn joked, "So, when's the last time you heard the words calm, thunderstorms, slow, fast, cold, turbulence, wind, rain, and hurricane at a gas balloon briefing?" It got chuckles from the teams and officials, but describes pretty well the quandary faced by the officials and weather teams in determining the best time to launch. A Wednesday evening liftoff remains a possibility with very fast trajectories to the Midwest and Canada, but there is concern about weather along the frontal boundary east of the projected track and very fast ground winds for landing. Slower winds later in the launch window would keep the balloons closer to New Mexico and make for an interesting tactical race, but some forecast models suggest developing weather downrange. The officials and weather team want to wait overnight to see later forecasts of the weather pattern both west and east of Albuquerque before a final decision is made as to when to launch.

Pilots will receive additional weather information at a briefing at noon on Wednesday (1800 UTC), at which time Event Director John Petrehn and his team will provide additional information and a determination as to whether the launch will proceed on Wednesday. It should be noted that the race can be postponed until as late as Saturday, if needed, to assure the teams have the best possible weather for a safe and successful long distance flight.

During the briefing, the pilots also received information about safety procedures before and during the launch and the many services provided by the Command Center, whose controllers provide support to the pilots throughout the race. These include 24-7 availability to pilots and crews, assistance with air traffic control and customs coordination, and if necessary initiate search and rescue services across the country and in Canada.

The briefing traditionally concludes with a drawing which randomly determines the launch order. This year's order and team numbers will be:

Team 1: Kryzstof Zapart and Bazyli Dawiduik, Poland

Team 2: Bert Padelt and Noah Forden, USA

Team 3: Mark Sullivan and Cheri White, USA

Team 4: Phil Bryant and Mike Emich USA

Team 5: Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke, USA

Team 6: Benôit Pelard and Laurent Lajoie, France

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 new and improved app, developed in cooperation with the Albuquerque Journal. You can download it free to your favorite Android or Apple mobile device.

P.S. By the way, the weather forecast for Balloon Fiesta's hot air events and Wednesday's Flight of the Nations looks terrific!

America's Challenge Launch Postponed 24 Hours

Update 1300 MDT (1900 UTC) Wednesday, October 5, 2016

Weather concerns in the Midwest will cause at least a day's postponement of the scheduled launch of the America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons. The launch is now tentatively scheduled for early Thursday evening (0000 UTC Friday) at Albuquerque's Balloon Fiesta Park.

At today's noon briefing, America's Challenge meteorologist Randy LeFevre told the teams and officials that if the balloons launch tonight as originally scheduled, they could run into rain and thunderstorms along a frontal boundary in eastern Kansas and Nebraska. This system should weaken on Friday, making for safer flights with a later launch.

The teams will meet again at noon on Thursday to look at the weather and evaluate the possibility of a Thursday night launch. The balloons would go off during or after the Special Shapes Glowdeo also scheduled for Thursday evening at Balloon Fiesta Park. Liftoff would be scheduled for sunset, but could be delayed later into the evening or overnight if conditions then would make for a safer launch.

Delays are not unusual in the America's Challenge, since the pilots are looking both for calm conditions at Balloon Fiesta Park in Albuquerque for the launch and for clear weather and favorable winds downrange in the direction the balloons will travel. The trajectories continue to suggest flights into the Midwest and Great Lakes region, possibly extending into Canada. Once the balloons launch, you can follow all the action on via live tracking on the Balloon Fiesta website, www.balloonfiesta.com, or the Balloon Fiesta app on your favorite mobile device.

Go for Liftoff! Late Evening Thursday Launch Planned for America's Challenge

Update 1300 MDT (1900 UTC) Thursday, October 6, 2016

America's Challenge officials have given the teams their marching orders and they're headed to Balloon Fiesta Park to start staging their balloons and equipment in anticipation of a late evening beginning for the America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons.

The six teams will prepare their equipment for inflation in the late afternoon, around the start of the Special Shapes Glowdeo. The hydrogen trucks will move into the area immediately after the AfterGlow Fireworks display scheduled for 8 PM, and depending on the strength of the ground winds the pilots should be able to begin inflation around 8:30. Launch is anticipated sometime around midnight.

Spectators will have a good view of the inflation process from the perimeter of the launch area on the west side of the field. For safety reasons, during inflation access to the balloons is restricted to pilots, crew, and officials. When the launch begins, each balloon is moved to a central platform so all of the teams take off from exactly the same point. The object – fly the greatest distance from Balloon Fiesta Park.

The weather remains a challenge. (As Event Director John Petrehn put it, "There's a reason this race is called the America's Challenge!") The one-day delay has proved to be a good idea, since thunderstorms are developing today as expected in the Midwest. This weather system should break up later Friday and into Saturday. A low pressure system should start pushing into New Mexico later on Friday, which could be a concern for any balloons that remain in this area. The team is also closely watching Hurricane Matthew as it moves into the southeastern US, as in addition to the Midwest track discussed earlier, some trajectories are developing that head more towards the east and southeast.

The teams also celebrated a milestone for one of the pilots who has already had a very good week in Albuquerque, whatever happens in the America's Challenge. Cheri White is the new U.S. Women's National Hot-Air Balloon competition champion, having won the competition staged during the first five days of the Balloon Fiesta. Cheri received a standing ovation from the America's Challenge competitors when she arrived at the briefing immediately after receiving her trophy.

Once the balloons launch, you can follow all the action on via live tracking on the Balloon Fiesta website, www.balloonfiesta.com, or the Balloon Fiesta app on your favorite mobile device.

They're Flying! 21st America's Challenge Heads Skyward

Update 0045 MDT (0645 UTC) Friday, October 7, 2016

Glowing special shapes, spectacular fireworks, and a flawless gas balloon launch! What a sendoff for the five America's Challenge gas balloon teams now aloft in the skies over New Mexico!

Concerns about ground winds at the launch site evaporated as an inversion set in earlier in the evening than expected and the winds calmed enough for most of the special shapes to glow for an enormous crowd at Balloon Fiesta Park. The gas balloon teams were able to enjoy the shapes and the fireworks while they awaited the arrival of the hydrogen trucks. Inflation went quickly, and at about 11:45 PM (0545 UTC) an enthusiastic Polish contingent accompanied pilots Krzysztof Zapart and Bazyli Dawidziuk to the launch platform. They got a rousing ovation from a small but dedicated crowd of onlookers as they soared south across the park and off into the night.

In quick succession the three American teams weighed off and headed aloft – first, Bert Padelt and co-pilot Noah Forden. Recruited to fly the race just a couple of days ago, when John Kugler was unable to continue, Forden hollered "We're really doing this!" as their ground team brought the balloon to the launch platform. Phil Bryant and Mike Emich dropped their signature red, white, and blue confetti as they ascended. The Albuquerque team of Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke were all business on the launch platform as, like all of the teams, they were escorted on stage by a loyal ground crew that also supports their hot air flights.

Last off were the French team of Benoit Pelard and Laurent Lajoie, who effusively embraced several members of the crew as they prepared to weigh off. Since the late hour of the launch prevented the use of a sound system and the playing of the anthems, in deference to local residents and noise ordinances, several crew members sang the opening bars of the French national anthem, La Marseillaise, as the team ascended.

Some readers may be wondering what happened to the sixth team, Mark Sullivan and Cheri White. They withdrew from the race late this afternoon due to a lingering ear infection that has been bothering Mark since before their launch in the Gordon Bennett. They had hoped Mark's condition might improve enough to allow him to make the flight, but in the interest of safety he and Cheri reluctantly decided they should not fly the race.

At this early stage the balloons are headed south across Albuquerque, and should swing east as they reach higher altitudes. The teams in consultation with their weather advisors are honing their strategies, and you can see them play out via live tracking on the Balloon Fiesta website, www.balloonfiesta.com, or the Balloon Fiesta app on your favorite mobile device. The tracking site is showing the balloons' positions and distance from the launch site, and other data should be forthcoming soon.

America's Challenge Balloons Head Out of Albuquerque

Update 0645 MDT (1245 UTC) Friday, October 7, 2016

Good morning from Albuquerque, where the balloons are flying – both hot air and gas! The America's Challenge race for gas balloons is now in its seventh hour, and the teams are eagerly awaiting the warmth sunrise brings. Those long dark nights aloft are chilly, especially for teams at high altitude. In addition, the teams get a free ride aloft to their chosen altitude as the sun warms the hydrogen in the envelope and the gas expands.

While we try to be careful about discussing what could be secret strategy on the part of the teams, this one is so obvious we'll provide a little analysis. Two very distinct strategies emerged in the first hours of the race. Two teams – the Polish entry of Krzysztof Zapart and Bazyli Dawidziuk (Team 1) and the US team of Bert Padelt and Noah Forden (Team 2) went "high and fast," crossing the Sandia Mountains east of Albuquerque. This strategy requires expending some of their sand ballast (expendable weight used to cause the balloon to go up) to make the climb over the mountains. The Polish team has a huge lead at this point and are already well into the panhandle of Texas. The other three teams (Team 4, Phil Bryant and Mike Emich; Team 5, Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke; and Team 6, the French team of Benoit Pelard and Laurent Lajoie) stayed in the Rio Grande Valley and Teams 4 and 5 are still within a few miles of the launch site in Albuquerque. (As Peter put it, roughly: "We've been in the air for 2 hours 45 minutes and are still over Balloon Fiesta Park. What fun!") This is excruciating in a distance race, but can save ballast the teams might need later and extend the duration of the flight.

Which strategy is better? It depends. In many races of this type, lagging behind can be an advantage, but in the most recent Gordon Bennett (World championships) just concluded a couple of weeks ago in Europe, the teams that finished in the top four all went high and caught the fast winds early.

As some may have noted, we were having difficulty getting real time tracking data to translate from the Command Center to the America's Challenge web tracking page. We are pleased to let you know this is now fixed and you can now see real time speed and track data. Yes, the Polish team is really hauling – 63 km/hr! (Official race distances are metric, but that translates to about 39 miles per hour.)

Join us on Balloon Fiesta website, www.balloonfiesta.com, or the Balloon Fiesta app on your favorite mobile device for continued updates and live tracking of the balloon's speed and position, as well as updated results.

First Landing in America's Challenge

Update 1115 MDT (1715 UTC) Friday, October 7, 2016

The America's Challenge Command Center is reporting that Team 4, Phil Bryant and Mike Emich, has landed in a remote area of the Santa Ana Pueblo west of Algodones, about 15 miles north of Balloon Fiesta Park.

Bryant and Emich's chase crew was able to quickly reach them and the team is retrieving the balloon (the advantage of landing only 15 miles from the launch point!). Phil told the Command Center the Santa Ana residents and tribal authorities were very welcoming and helpful and thanks them for their support.

Meanwhile, the race leaders, Krzysztof Zapart and Bazyli Dawidziuk of Poland (Team 1), are absolutely streaking to the east and are at this writing west of Oklahoma City, OK. They're tracking east-southeast at a whopping 73 km/hr. (45 mph or 39 kt.), which is about twice as fast as the other balloons that are in slower winds back in New Mexico. Teams 2 and 5 (Padelt/Forden and Cuneo/Fricke) are headed to and through northeastern New Mexico.

And far to the west, the French entry of Pelard and Lajoie are blazing a trail all their own in almost the opposite direction of their fellow competitors. They've just crossed the border into Arizona – yes, you read that right, Arizona – and are headed towards Sanders, AZ on I-40. Before launching last night, the team said they would like to fly to the Grand Canyon! Looks like they're taking their best shot at visiting one of America's great natural wonders in a most unique way.

In the weather briefing yesterday, meteorologist Randy LeFevre noted that as the race continued, potential trajectories out of New Mexico would take the teams just about any direction they wanted to go, and that seems to be happening at least to some degree. Despite the Polish team's large lead, the race is still in its very early stages and a lot can happen! Keep track of the balloons via live tracking on the Balloon Fiesta website, www.balloonfiesta.com, or the Balloon Fiesta app on your favorite mobile device.

Through the Night: Three Teams Aloft in America's Challenge

Update 2200 MDT Friday, October 7, 2016 (0400 UTC Saturday, October 8)

It's a quiet night in the America's Challenge Command Center as controllers keep an eye on the three teams still flying as the race nears the 24-hour mark.

Earlier today, Team 6, Benoit Pelard and Laurent Lajoie from France, gave up on getting to the Grand Canyon and landed on the Navajo reservation of eastern Arizona near the town of White

Ruin. This area is just east of the fabled Painted Desert, so even though they didn't make it to the Grand Canyon they got to see some marvelous Southwest scenery.

Out east, the Polish team of Zapart and Dawidziuk (Team 1) continues to enjoy a healthy lead and are about 300 miles ahead of the second and third place teams. At this writing, they are flying north of Sulphur Springs, TX and actually have come back a little bit to the west. Team 2, Bert Padelt and Noah Forden, are locked in a tight battle with Team 5, Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke. Cuneo and Fricke have found considerably more speed than Padelt and Forden and have slowly reeled them in; at this writing they're nearly neck and neck.

While the two trailing teams are a considerable distance behind the leaders, it really still is relatively early in the race. We're nearing the 24-hour mark in a race which frequently stays aloft 60 hours or more. The next key milestone will be sunrise, where the teams will decide whether they should land with daylight or take the "free ride" to the altitude of their choice as the morning sun warms and expands the gas in the balloons. There's a lot of flying still to do, and you can follow it all via live tracking on the Balloon Fiesta website, www.balloonfiesta.com, or the Balloon Fiesta app on your favorite mobile device.

Two Teams, Two Strategies: Who Will Win?

Update 1020 MDT Saturday, October 8, 2016 (1620 UTC)

The America's Challenge Command Center reports that Team 2, the USA's Bert Padelt and Noah Forden, have made a safe landing south of Dodge City, KS after a flight of approximately 689 km (428 miles). They actually sent the Command Center a little video showing their landing site in a nice open field. That means that two teams – one from Albuquerque and one from Eastern Europe – will duke it out for top honors in the 21st annual distance race for gas balloons.

From the very first stages of the race, the ebullient team from Poland, Krzysztof Zapart and Bazyli Dawidziuk (Team 1) have set the pace. At one point, they were 300 miles (480 km) ahead of their nearest competitors. But last night over northeastern Texas they took a big swing to the south and even back to the west slightly, actually losing a little bit of distance at times. At this writing, they're east of San Antonio, TX and headed south towards the Mexican border. Since Mexico is closed to competition, unless they can find wind taking them back east and north, they are running out of flying room.

Meanwhile, to the north, Albuquerque's Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke (Team 5) have been slowly and steadily reeling in the leaders. The three-time America's Challenge winners are currently in the Wichita, KS area heading almost due east. From the beginning Team 5 has pursued a very different strategy from Team 1, hanging back in the Rio Grande valley overnight

on the first night before heading out to the northeast. They're at this writing about 130 miles (220 km) behind, but are in a position where they can continue to gain ground.

Who will prevail? Find out via live tracking on the Balloon Fiesta website, www.balloonfiesta.com, or the Balloon Fiesta app on your favorite mobile device.

America's Challenge Race Continues Into the Night

Update 1815 MDT Saturday, October 8, 2016 (0005 UTC Sunday, October 9)

Darkness is approaching in the American Midwest and in Texas, the locations of the final two balloons in the 21st America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons.

The Polish team of Zapart and Dawidziuk's last reported position is southeast of San Antonio, TX. They've led the race since the beginning, and have traveled 1,080 km (681 miles). The team (Team 1) contacted the Command Center shortly after 3 PM to report their landing plans. The Command Center will post their official landing position as soon as it is available.

Meanwhile, the hometown team of Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke (Team 5) continues to ever-so-slowly overtake the Polish team. At this writing they're about 35 miles (56 km) behind the leaders, just east of Manhattan, Kansas, heading north-northeastward. The Command Center is manually updating their team's current position in close to real time. The speed reporting of the equipment is not currently reporting; however, the team is in contact with the Command Center enabling us to provide current position updates.

This may be one of the most interesting America's Challenges ever in terms of the many different tracks the participating teams chose in their quest to travel the greatest distance. Upon reaching east Texas, Team 1 found a course that took them almost directly south. Team 5, flying across Kansas, turned almost straight north. And this is the first time anyone in the Command Center can remember a team actually heading west and landing in Arizona, as did the French entre of Pelard and Lajoie. They landed yesterday on the Navajo (Diné) reservation and are touched by the very warm welcome they received, including an invitation to join a local family ceremony and meal, a great honor in Native American culture.

As the race continues through what is likely to be its final night, we'll keep you posted via our tracking site on the Balloon Fiesta website, www.balloonfiesta.com, or the Balloon Fiesta app on your favorite mobile device.

New Race Leaders Head Into Sunrise

Update 0545 MDT Sunday, October 9, 2016 (1145 UTC)

The new leaders of the America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons are in Missouri, headed into daylight and toward the Mississippi River.

Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke of Albuquerque (Team 5) took the lead overnight from Team 1, the Polish entry of Krzysztof Zapart and Bazyli Dawidziuk. The Command Center received landing confirmation from the Polish team last evening.

This would be Cuneo and Fricke's fourth win in the America's Challenge, more than anyone except the late Richard Abruzzo, who won the race five times. The husband-wife team is flying in their 18th America's Challenge, and in addition to their wins have finished second four times. They've been on a roll this year, having also finished fourth in a formidable 24-team field in the gas distance world championships, the Coupe Aeronautique Gordon Bennett.

Zapart and Dawidziuk also had a fine flight, setting the pace for most of the race before landing in south Texas yesterday. It's Zapart's second America's Challenge flight and second win. Bert Padelt and Noah Forden of the USA achieved the third-greatest distance. All results are provisional until the teams complete their debriefing with Scoring Officer Jim Byrd and their tracking data is confirmed.

The Command Center is continuing to follow Cuneo and Fricke's progress and you can as well via tracking on the Balloon Fiesta website, www.balloonfiesta.com, or the Balloon Fiesta app on your favorite mobile device. We'd note that the speed reporting capabilities of Team 5's tracking is not currently reporting, but the Command Center is updating the team's position in close to real time.

Albuquerque Team Lands; Are Provisional America's Challenge Winners

Update 0745 MDT Sunday, October 9, 2016 (1345 UTC)

The Command Center reports that Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke of Albuquerque, the last team aloft, has landed near Monroe City, Missouri, about 20 miles west of Hannibal, MO, as the apparent winners of the 21st Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons. All results are provisional until the teams complete their debriefing with Scoring Officer Jim Byrd and their tracking data is confirmed.

Peter reported to the Command Center that they made a stand-up landing in a field at about 7:45 AM CDT (1245 UTC) and that the landowner was happy to see them. Their chase crew along with local balloonists from the area are in the process of retrieving the balloon. Provisional data shows Cuneo and Fricke flew 866 miles (1,394 km) and flew 54 hours and 39 minutes.

In a race where weather patterns took the five competing teams in at least three distinct directions, Cuneo and Fricke were the tortoises to the pace-setting Polish team's hare. Krzysztof Zapart and Bazyli Dawidzuik chose a "high and fast" strategy that put them well ahead of the other teams. They flew an impressive race to a second-place finish and a landing in south Texas.

Meanwhile, the first night Cuneo and Fricke hung back over the Rio Grande Valley. About three hours into the flight, Peter wrote an e-mail to his crew: "After 2:45 hrs of flight we are directly over AIBF [Balloon Fiesta Park]. What fun." They then moved out of the Albuquerque area after sunrise and pursued a slower course towards the northeast. The team was able to conserve ballast and stay aloft a third night, which greatly increased both their distance and duration.

This is Cuneo and Fricke's fourth win in the America's Challenge, more than anyone except the late Richard Abruzzo, who won the race five times. Cuneo and Fricke's three previous victories came in 2001, 2010, and 2013.

Provisional results place Team 1, Zapart/Dawidzuik, in second place, Team 2, the US team of Padelt and Forden in third place the French entry of Pelard and Lajoie (Team 6) in fourth place (following a rare westward track to a landing in Arizona), and Team 4 (Bryant/Emich) in fifth place.

It's Official! Albuquerque Team Wins Fourth America's Challenge

Update 11 AM MDT (1700 UTC) October 27, 2016

In a race which may have set a new standard for directional diversity, patience paid off as Albuquerque's Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke outlasted the field to win their fourth America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons.

Cuneo and Fricke are the first team to, as a team, win the race four times (2001, 2010, 2013, 2016). Only the late, great Richard Abruzzo has more wins – five – achieved with four different co-pilots.

[See the full results here](#)

In addition to winning the America's Challenge, during the flight Peter Cuneo was announced as this year's winner of the Albuquerque Aerostat Ascension Association's (AAAA) Sid Cutter Award, one of the most prestigious awards in American ballooning. The award is given to

individuals whose extraordinary dedication has benefitted the ballooning community as a whole and whose actions and efforts are otherwise not widely or publically recognized. The award was announced at the Balloon Fiesta awards ceremony and the news was texted to Peter while he and Barbara were aloft over Kansas; Peter, whose generosity and willingness to help fellow balloonists is as legendary as his flying resume, later told us he was "blown away" on receiving the news.

By America's Challenge standards, where winning distances routinely exceed 1,000 miles (1,609 km) this was a relatively short race. Cuneo and Fricke flew 1,395 km – about 866 miles – and stayed aloft 54 hours and 39 minutes. The first part of their race was very slow: after three hours aloft, their balloon was sitting pretty much right over . . . Balloon Fiesta Park! While this was frustrating in a distance race, it was also strategic, as their plan was to stall out over central New Mexico for the first several hours of the race in order to catch a developing weather pattern which would push them into the Midwest. They eventually made it almost all the way to the Mississippi River, landing near Monroe City, MO, about 20 miles from the river town of Hannibal made famous by native son Mark Twain and the stories of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn.

Meanwhile, the second-place team, Krzysztof Zapart and Bazyli Dawidzuik of Poland, chose a totally different strategy. They climbed quickly out of the Rio Grande Valley and streaked over the Sandia Mountains and across Texas, reaching east Texas in a blistering 22 hours. But after that, they simply couldn't find winds to take them further east. They wound up heading south and landing near Smiley, TX, east of San Antonio, after a 37+ hour flight of 1,082 km (672 miles).

The third place winners, Bert Padelt and Noah Forden, followed a similar path to Cuneo and Fricke and landed near Hanston, KS after a flight of 690 km (429 miles). But the fourth-place team, France's Benôit Pelard and Laurent Lajoie, charted a different course altogether, heading in the opposite direction from their competitors and achieving an America's Challenge first – a landing on the Navajo (Diné) reservation in Arizona. Although they didn't get to the Grand Canyon, which was their aim, Pelard and Lajoie's incredibly scenic flight took them into sight of the fabled Painted Desert and ended with an unforgettably warm reception from the Navajo people near White Ruin, AZ.

Finishing in fifth place were Phil Bryant and Mike Emich, who ended their race early and had a windy landing just north of Albuquerque. The final team, Mark Sullivan and Cheri White, had to withdraw before the launch.

The Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta inaugurated the America's Challenge race for gas balloons in 1995; this was the 21st year the event has been held. The Balloon Fiesta has also hosted the world's other great distance race for gas balloons, the Coupe Aéronautique Gordon Bennett, four times (1993, 1999, 2005, 2008). The object of both races is to achieve the greatest distance from the launch point. The America's Challenge is the American qualifying event for the Gordon Bennett, which is considered to be the gas ballooning world championship event.