

Sep 12, 2017

Strong International Field Challenges U.S. Teams in 2017 America's Challenge Gas Balloon Race

A distinguished field of seasoned competitors will gather in Albuquerque in October to take on one of the toughest tests of skill and endurance in ballooning: the 22nd 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 Saturday, October 7 from Balloon Fiesta Park. Eight teams are scheduled to compete this year.

The object of the race is to fly the greatest distance from Albuquerque while competing within the event rules. The teams 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 took place in Switzerland. Five of the teams in this year's America's Challenge also competed in the 21-team Gordon Bennett field this year, finishing 4th, 8th, 10th, 11th, and 20th. The America's Challenge is the U.S. qualifying event for the Gordon Bennett.

Anything can happen and anyone can win in the America's Challenge, but this year's competition is especially hard to handicap because so many top international competitors are participating. To defend their title, four-time America's Challenge champions and last year's winners Barbara Fricke and Peter Cuneo will have to defeat the Iron Man of international distance gas ballooning, four-time world champion Wilhelm Eimers from Germany, as well as the very tough Swiss team of Nicolas Tièche and Laurent Sciboz, second in the world in 2016 and fourth in 2017. Among American competitors, Mark Sullivan and Cheri White have won the America's Challenge twice, as has Andy Cayton, flying as co-pilot to formidable two-time America's Challenge runner-up Krzysztof Zapart of 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' positions and race updates throughout the competition.

Meet the Competitors in the America's Challenge

Update: October 4, 2017

Who are the men and women who will be competing in this year's America's Challenge, the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta's distance race for gas balloons?

The eight teams in this year's race come from different backgrounds and different nations. They share a love of flying, an adventurous spirit, and the will to win. They will see America in a way few others have before them – suspended thousands of feet aloft as mountains, plains, cities, farms, and rivers glide below them. And . . . they are an elite: they rank among the best balloon pilots in the world. To get to know them better, read on!

- Phil Bryant and Mike Emich, USA: Ten-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 second 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's lifelong fascination with balloons began when he was 12, when he started working with the great pioneers of American gas ballooning in the Akron Lighter-Than-Air Society. He 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.
- Wilhelm Eimers and Sebastian Eimers, Germany: There aren't enough superlatives to describe Wilhelm Eimers' storied ballooning career. To hit just a couple of the highlights: he is a four-time Gordon Bennett winner (world champion), and since 1995 has held the world duration record for competition-size gas balloons of an astonishing 92 hours 11 minutes. Eimers' luck in the America's Challenge hasn't been as good, but in his nine appearances in Albuquerque he's made it into the top three four times. This year son Sebastian is Eimers' co-pilot, as the Iron Man of distance gas ballooning starts to wind down a storied career and hand his legacy over to Sebastian and his other son, Benni. In all, between the Gordon Bennett and America's Challenge, this will be Eimers' 36th distance gas race.
- Noah Forden and Bert Padelt, USA: It was the feel-good story of the 2016 America's Challenge. After Bert Padelt's co-pilot had to drop out of the race at almost the last minute, Padelt – a seasoned America's Challenge competitor and master balloon builder – invited Noah Forden along as co-pilot. Forden, though an experienced hot-air balloonist and fixed wing aviator, had only had his gas balloon rating for all of six months. They went on to finish third, Forden grinning from ear to ear throughout at his good fortune. This year, Forden – who trained with Padelt and members of the Aero Club of America – will be competing in his newly-built Padelt gas balloon with Bert flying as his co-pilot. Padelt may be best-known in Albuquerque as the builder of the Two Eagles 350,000 cu. ft. balloon envelope that carried Troy Bradley and Leonid Tiukhtyaev more than 6,600 miles (nearly 10,700 km) across the Pacific in 2015. Padelt could arguably claim to be the man who has kept gas ballooning in the U.S. alive through

developing hydrogen-capable U.S.-built gas balloon systems that are reasonably affordable to fly.

- Barbara Fricke and Peter Cuneo, USA: Fricke and Cuneo, from Albuquerque, are the only four-time-winning America's Challenge team (2001, 2010, 2013, 2016). 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 are coming off a top-10 finish in this year's Gordon Bennett and were fourth in that race in 2016. Fricke and Cuneo are also known as balloon builders (three hot air balloons and a gas balloon basket) and for participating in a number of unusual flights, including the re-creation of an attempt to prove ancient balloon builders may have helped create the Nazca lines in Peru. Both have served in leadership positions in many ballooning organizations (Barbara is currently a member of the Balloon Fiesta Board of Directors and the board of the Balloon Federation of America gas balloon division). They are each flying in their 19th America's Challenge; in previous races they've crossed Lake Superior, Lake Huron, and Lake Michigan.
- Benôt Pelard and Benôt Péterlé, France: This team of French veterans are longtime Gordon Bennett competitors and the other feel-good story from last year's America's Challenge. Pelard and his co-pilot for last year's race, Laurent Lajoie, captured hearts when they took advantage of an unusual track to the west in an attempt to fly to the Grand Canyon. They didn't quite make it to the big gorge, but were very excited they got to see the Painted Desert from the air and touched by the warm welcome when they landed on the Navajo (Diné) reservation. And oh, the other adventures this team has had! They hail from Lorraine (where Joan of Arc was born) and named their balloon Marie Marvingt, after the pioneering balloonist and aviatrix who pioneered air ambulance services and crossed the English Channel by balloon in a fierce storm in 1906. Pelard, Péterlé, and Lajoie recreated that 1906 flight (sans storm) in 2010, flying from Nancy in France to Sissinghurst in England. Pelard and Péterlé finished just out of the top 10 in this year's Gordon Bennett and are competing for the third time in the America's Challenge.
- Mark Sullivan and Cheri White, USA: There is one competitor who has flown even more distance races than Eimers – Albuquerque's Mark Sullivan. He just completed his 21st Gordon Bennett flight, the second most in the 61-year history of the race, and his 41 combined America's Challenge and Gordon Bennett starts bests Willie's 36. 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. 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. Cheri White will be flying in her 13th America's Challenge and is a formidable competitor in hot air as well as gas balloons. She's the reigning US Women's National Hot-Air Balloon Champion, and finished third in the most recent Women's World Hot Air Balloon Championships.

- Nicolas Tièche and Laurent Sciboz, Switzerland: This Swiss team of up-and-coming young guns is competing in their first America's Challenge, but they're a team to watch and could sneak in to frustrate the veterans. They've proved themselves to be tough to beat in the Gordon Bennett, finishing third in 2015, second in 2016, and fourth this year after coming into the race as one of the favorites. Tièche and Sciboz were the rousingly-cheered home team at this year's Gordon Bennett, which was hosted by their home town of Fribourg and launched from nearby Gruyères, a stunning mountain valley setting not far from the Swiss Alps.
- Krzysztof Zapart, Poland, and Andy Cayton, USA: In a very short period of time, Krzysztof Zapart the jovial pilot from Poland, has established himself as a force to be reckoned with in the gas ballooning world. He's finished in the top ten in the last three world championships and has been runner-up twice in the America's Challenge (2014 and 2016). This year he teams with two-time America's Challenge winner Andy Cayton, known for daring victories in 2006 and 2007 which involved crossing the Gulf of Mexico in 2006 and a dramatic landing in Saskatchewan in 2007. Both Zapart and Cayton have demonstrated a willingness to hang it all out there to win, and should be a force to be reckoned with.

Weather permitting, the America's Challenge will launch from Albuquerque's Balloon Fiesta Park at around 6 PM on Saturday, October 7. Once the balloons launch, you can follow their progress and receive regular updates through the Balloon Fiesta website, balloonfiesta.com, and the free Balloon Fiesta apps for iPhone and Android.

Saturday Launch Anticipated for America's Challenge Gas Race

Update 4 PM (2200Z) Friday, October 6, 2017

Conditions are looking favorable for a launch Saturday evening, October 7, for the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta's 22nd America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons.

All of the members of the eight teams in the distinguished international field answered the roll call at the opening briefing Friday afternoon. Event Director John Petrehn, Command Center Director Ruth Lind, and the meteorological team of Randy Lefevre and Brad Temeyer briefed the teams on rules, launch and air traffic procedures, and above all, the weather anticipated in Albuquerque for launch and downrange as the race progresses.

Light winds are forecast in the late afternoon Saturday in Albuquerque, with a launch anticipated soon after the opening of the launch window at 6 PM (0000Z). The most likely trajectories at higher altitudes should take the balloons out to the east and northeast, with the possibility of long flights towards the upper Midwest or New England and into Canada. As Randy Lefevre put it, these could be fun

flights! The meteorologists and teams are watching Tropical Storm Nate, expected to come onshore along the Gulf Coast Saturday evening, but anticipate the balloons will be able to miss the storm.

The launch order is determined by random draw, and the briefing concluded with Scoring Officer Jim Byrd doing the honors. The launch order will be:

Team 1: Barbara Fricke / Peter Cuneo, USA

Team 2: Phil Bryant / Mike Emich, USA

Team 3: Cheri White / Mark Sullivan, USA

Team 4: Kryzstof Zapart, Poland / Andy Cayton, USA

Team 5: Wilhelm Eimers / Sebastian Eimers, Germany

Team 6: Nicolas Tièche / Laurent Sciboz, Switzerland

Team 7: Noah Forden / Bert Padelt, USA

Team 8: Benoît Pelard / Benoît Péterlé, France

The next briefing will be at 12 noon (1800z), at which time the pilots will get an updated weather briefing and a further determination will be made on the launch time. Once the race begins, you can see live tracking on the Balloon Fiesta website, balloonfiesta.com, and on the free Balloon Fiesta apps for Android and iPhone.

America's Challenge Launch a Go for Saturday 6 PM (0000Z)

Update 1:20 PM MDT (1920Z) Saturday, October 07, 2017

The eight teams competing in the America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons are beginning preparations for a late Saturday afternoon launch. It should be a spectacular evening at Balloon Fiesta Park as the gas balloons depart on their journey across America, followed by the Twilight Twinkle Balloon Glow and a terrific fireworks display.

We are very pleased to let you know the America's Challenge launch and all tonight's festivities will be streamed live on Balloon Fiesta TV, the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta's new online channel. You can access the feed from the Balloon Fiesta website, balloonfiesta.com (link on the right-hand side of the page). This is the first time we've tried this, and we hope it will allow our friends around the world who cannot be at Balloon Fiesta Park the opportunity to see the launch.

During the 12 noon (1800z) briefing, meteorologist Randy Lefevre advised the pilots they should still be able to track between two weather systems trailing across the United States, one along the east coast and another approaching from the west. The remnants of Hurricane Nate will be caught up in the

eastern system. Although the teams' trajectories should keep them to the west of the wet weather, the pilots and their meteorologists will be monitoring the storm's progress closely as the race progresses. The projected trajectories still suggest possibilities for flights toward the Midwest and on to the East Coast and Canada.

In the next hour or so, the teams will begin moving onto the launch field to begin preparations for the flight. The pilots will carefully lay out and check their equipment, fill the balloon with hydrogen, and load sandbags and all the equipment and essentials they will need for the duration of a flight that could last as much as three days.

If all goes on schedule, defending champions Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke's balloon (Team 1) will be moved onto the launch platform at Balloon Fiesta Park at exactly 6 PM MDT (1800Z). Launchmaster Thomas Hora will work with the pilots to "weigh off" the balloon to make sure it is buoyant and will safely clear the field. Once Team 1's balloon ascends, each balloon is "walked" to the platform in turn, so that all the balloons take off from exactly the same spot. By tradition, the national anthem of each team's country is played when the first team from that country takes off.

Once the balloons are aloft, they should move towards eastern and northeastern New Mexico, and overnight the strategies concocted by some of the best balloonists in the world will start to unfold. You can monitor the balloons' progress in real time via live tracking and our updates at balloonfiesta.com or via the free iPhone and Android Balloon Fiesta apps.

America's Challenge Underway on Spectacular Night at Balloon Fiesta Park

Update 9:30 PM MDT Saturday, October 7, 2017 (0330Z Sunday, October 8, 2017)

What a gorgeous night for the beginning of the 22nd America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons! Tens of thousands of people witnessed the launch from Balloon Fiesta Park in Albuquerque, followed by an amazing balloon glow and fireworks display.

The on-field crowd built throughout the afternoon as the eight teams prepared and inflated their balloons, and for the first time our friends throughout the world were able to see much of the inflation via our new Balloon Fiesta TV live stream. Shortly after sunset, the first balloon in the launch order, the defending champions, Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke from Albuquerque (Team 1), were moved to the launch platform. The four-time winners and home town favorites got a rousing cheer as they lifted off to the strains of the U.S. national anthem, "The Star Spangled Banner." The Polish, German, Swiss, and French national anthems hailed the ascension of our international teams from Balloon Fiesta Park.

The scene on the launch platform was both businesslike and emotional, as Event Director John Petrehn, Assistant Director Sam Parks, Launchmaster Thomas Hora, and other race officials and crew members wished the teams good luck. Several teams dropped balloon cards to excited kids below. The crowd

got a chuckle during four-time world champion Wilhelm Eimers' launch as he and co-pilot Sebastian Eimers slyly answered the most frequently-asked America's Challenge question. A bucket hung off the side of the basket with a sign reading "Wilhelm's WC". (German speakers may spot a further double-entendre, as "Eimer" translates to "bucket.") The final team to launch, Houston's Phil Bryant and Akron's Mike Emich (Team 2) jettisoned their signature confetti, and with it some water ballast that inadvertently wiped out the sound system at the launch platform. It was the only real mishap of the evening.

Almost the moment Bryant and Emich cleared the launch site, more than 200 hot air balloons let loose with the first of many crowd-pleasing balloon glow "all burns". The teams leaving Balloon Fiesta Park got a really incredible show as they headed southeast from the field and through the Tijeras Canyon "gap" in the Sandia Mountains. This trajectory allows the teams to cross the mountains east of Albuquerque at a much lower altitude than the 10,600 foot (3,231 meter) summit, thus saving ballast they'll need later in the flight.

At this writing the teams are past the mountains and headed across eastern New Mexico. We apologize for some of the difficulties we have had with the interface between our tracking software and the Balloon Fiesta website. You should now be seeing live data at our tracking website, <http://www.balloonfiesta.com/gas-balloons/gas-tracking>. You may also access live tracking from the Balloon Fiesta apps for Android and iPhone.

Already in Kansas and Moving On Out!

Update 6:30 AM MDT (1230Z) Sunday, October 8, 2017

Well, so much for the forecast that the teams in the 22nd America's Challenge would hang around eastern New Mexico overnight on the first night of the race . . . The current leaders are already in Kansas and simply hauling northeast.

The leaders at this writing are the Swiss newcomers to the race, Nicolas Tièche and Laurent Sciboz (Team 6). They picked up a turn to the northeast before midnight last night and have been – pick your favorite adjective – screaming, motoring, well, anyway, moving right along at (as of this update) 41 mph/66 kmh. They're already southeast of Dodge City, KS. Most of the other teams now have picked up the northeast turn and are beginning to exit into Oklahoma at similar (or even greater) speeds. They've been closely bunched and trading positions most of the night, but at this writing defending champions Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke of the U.S. (Team 1) are second, with the French team of Benoît Pelard and Benoît Péterlé (Team 8) third.

Sunrise is imminent where the balloons are, and the teams are generally very happy to see it. The warmth of the sun is welcome after a cold night aloft, often at high altitudes. (The Command Center team says Benoît and Benoît requested "a hot cup of coffee;" the controller on duty offered to Fed Ex

it...) Also, as the sun warms the gas in the balloon, it expands and provides the teams a “free ride” to the altitude of their choice without their having to drop any ballast (expendable weight) to ascend.

We’ve solved our tracking interface gremlins and [live tracking of the balloons’ positions](#) is ticking along like a fine watch. You can follow along at <http://www.balloonfiesta.com/gas-balloons/gas-tracking>, or on the Balloon Fiesta free apps for Android and iPhone.

Common Strategies . . . and not . . . On the America’s Challenge Weather Highway

Update 4:45 PM MDT (2245Z) Sunday, October 8, 2017

The Swiss team of Nicolas Tièche and Laurent Sciboz (Team 6) continues to lead the way in the 22nd America’s Challenge for gas balloons, but an interesting strategic race is unfolding as the teams decide where to position themselves along a “weather highway’ to the Midwest and Northeast.

In less than 24 hours, Tièche and Sciboz, top-five finishers in the last three world distance championships, have traveled more than 625 miles, setting a blistering pace. They’re in eastern Nebraska, well to the north and west of most of the other competitors and have thrown down the gauntlet in their bid to travel further than any of the other teams. Also pursuing this western track is another European powerhouse, four-time world champion Wilhelm Eimers (Team 5) flying with his son Sebastian.

Teams 6 and 5 are positioned towards the west of a “weather highway” – an area of good weather between two fronts with wind trajectories generally to the northeast. In the center of the corridor are teams 1, 3, 4, and 7 (Fricke/Cuneo, Sullivan/White, Zapart/Cayton, and Forden/Padelt), and to the south and east are Teams 2 and 8 (Bryant/Emich and Pelard/Péterlé). It’s a very competitive race – seven of the eight teams are within about 60 miles of each other, in terms of distance traveled.

So the teams are all essentially doing the same thing – flying north and east – but pursuing different strategies. The challenge for the teams is where to position themselves along this “highway” to gain the maximum distance, by catching the most favorable winds and avoiding any inclement weather that might develop as weather systems progress across the country. The differences in position – where some teams look like they’re ahead of teams that appear to be “behind” and vice versa – have to do with how far east the teams are. Further east is good for gaining distance in this race, where distance is measured in “great circle” terms (a straight line with an adjustment for the curvature of the earth).

The next big decision point for the teams will come in the next couple of hours, as the sun sinks slowly over the horizon. The setting sun causes the gas in the balloon to contract and cool, and the balloon will lose lift, requiring the pilots to get rid of ballast (expendable weight carried in sandbags or jugs of water)

to maintain altitude. If teams decide to land, they often do so at this point, while they have light to see landing sites.

And one final note – it's only fitting that the America's Challenge, a race for hydrogen balloons, is occurring on World Hydrogen Day (yes, they have a day for everything!). The atomic weight of hydrogen is 1.008, and it just happens to be 10/8.

Whose strategy is the smartest? You can find out at <http://www.balloonfiesta.com/gas-balloons/gas-tracking>, or on the Balloon Fiesta free apps for Android and iPhone.

Note to media: Tièche is pronounced tee-ESHE, and Sciboz SEE-bow.

A Quiet, Hotly Contested America's Challenge Night

Update 9:30 PM MDT Sunday, October 8 (0330Z) Monday, October 9

It's a quiet night aloft in the U.S. Midwest and in the America's Challenge Command Center in Albuquerque, but underneath the quiet an intensively competitive race has been developing. The teams competing in the America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons are at this writing scattered across six states. But in terms of distance from the launch point in Albuquerque, seven of the eight teams are separated by only about 80 miles. The difference between first and second? Only *five* miles!

Earlier this evening, the defending champions Barbara Fricke and Peter Cuneo of the U.S. (Team 1) snatched the lead from the Swiss duo of Nicolas Tièche and Laurent Sciboz (Team 6), who had been in front from the outset. Tièche and Sciboz are the farthest north of the teams – they've just crossed into Iowa north of Omaha, NB – but Fricke and Cuneo are further east, just past Kansas City, MO. Most of the other teams are in eastern Kansas, with the southernmost two – Teams 2 (Bryant/Emich) and 8 (Pelard/Péterlé) crossing from Texas into Arkansas and Missouri.

As they huddle in the nighttime cold, the teams converse with air traffic control and with their meteorologists and ground support team, plotting their next moves. Those moves will most likely begin to unfold around sunrise, as the sun's rays warm the gas in the balloons, causing it to expand and the balloon to rise. The teams will try to catch winds they believe will carry them further than their competitors, while trying to avoid weather they *don't* want.

As the teams keep watch through the night, you can too, via our live tracking website at <http://www.balloonfiesta.com/gas-balloons/gas-tracking>, or on the Balloon Fiesta free apps for Android and iPhone.

America's Challenge Leaders Pass Minneapolis, 1,000-Mile (1,609.34 km) Mark

Update 845 AM MDT (1445Z) Monday, October 9, 2017

Only 38 hours have passed in the America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons, and the leaders have been clocking a blistering pace across the country. The first and second-place teams are now past the 1,000 mile mark and increasing their distance at the rate of 40-50 mph or more (roughly 60-70 kph). In a balloon, that's moving.

The Command Center has received word that Team 7, the USA's Noah Forden and Bert Padelt, made a safe landing about 7:30 AM MDT (1330Z) near Ogden, IA, just west of Ames. However, up to that point, all eight balloons had stayed aloft through the 36-hour mark, unusual in a race where usually at least one team lands on the first day. The teams will all be thrilled they've had scenic, long flights.

Meanwhile, the Swiss team of Nicolas Tièche and Laurent Sciboz (Team 6) continues to head through Wisconsin to the upper Great Lakes. Overnight, they regained the lead from Team 1, Barbara Fricke and Peter Cuneo of the U.S., but the defending champions from Albuquerque are still only a few miles behind. The top two have put some distance between themselves and the rest of the competitors, but in a race where come-from-behind wins are not uncommon, any of the teams still in the air could still emerge victorious.

The teams are continuing to pass through a weather corridor between the remnants of Hurricane Nate along the East Coast and a cold front to the west. The pilots' goal is to position themselves to get the fast winds they want to gain the greatest distance while avoiding weather they don't want.

You can watch this amazing distance race unfold via live tracking on the Balloon Fiesta website, <http://www.balloonfiesta.com/gas-balloons/gas-tracking>, or on the Balloon Fiesta free apps for Android and iPhone.

Teams Reach Great Lakes at 40-Hour Mark of America's Challenge

Update 11:00 AM MDT (1700Z) Monday, October 9, 2017

The lead two America's Challenge gas balloon teams have reached a major milestone -- the Great Lakes -- in their quest to win one of the greatest races in ballooning by traveling the greatest distance from the launch point in Albuquerque.

Team 6 (Swiss team Tièche/Sciboz) and Team 1 (USA's Fricke/Cuneo) have been trading the lead through the last 20 hours and at this writing, Team 6 is slightly ahead. Barbara Fricke and Peter Cuneo began to transit Lake Michigan around 10:15 AM MDT (1615Z). It's their second time crossing Lake Michigan in an America's Challenge race; they also did it in 2010 enroute to victory and a landing in

Windsor, Ontario. Meanwhile, Nicolas Tièche and Laurent Sciboz are approaching Lake Superior and have passed the 1,200-mile (1,931 km) mark in their journey across North America.

While Teams 6 and 1 have so far dominated the lead, it remains anyone's race. Five other teams are poised to overtake the leaders should either of them falter.

Follow your favorite teams via live tracking on the Balloon Fiesta website, <http://www.balloonfiesta.com/gas-balloons/gas-tracking>, or on the Balloon Fiesta free apps for Android and iPhone.

By the Numbers: 22nd America's Challenge Could Be Epic Race

Update 5:45 PM MDT (2345Z) Monday, October 9, 2017

The America's Challenge leaders are approaching the 1,500-mile (2,414 km) mark, and having transited Lake Superior are over a remote area of southeastern Ontario and streaking towards Quebec at 58 mph (93 kph). Team 6 (Nicolas Tièche and Laurent Sciboz of Switzerland) has opened up about a 90-mile lead on their closest pursuers, Americans Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke of Albuquerque (Team 1).

Cuneo and Fricke just crossed their second Great Lake in a day. Earlier they crossed Lake Michigan, and at this writing are headed towards the southern end of Lake Huron and toward Canada.

Seven of the eight teams have now passed the 1,000-mile (1,609.3 km) mark in the race, tying an America's Challenge record that has stood since 2005, a year with a similar weather pattern. In that year also, seven balloons went more than 1,000 miles, but there were also more balloons – 12 – competing in the race that year. If weather conditions remain favorable and the teams have sufficient resources (gas and ballast) to remain aloft, they could challenge the 1,998-mile (3,215.5 km) America's Challenge distance record set in 2000 by the late David Levin and his brother Alan. The world record of 4,227.1 km (2,626.6 miles) will be harder to beat, since it was set during a transatlantic flight by 2011 America's Challenge champion Sir David Hempleman-Adams of Great Britain. The longest flight from Albuquerque – and the previous distance record for the size AA-6 balloons used for the America's Challenge is 3,400.39 km (2,112.9 miles), set in 2005 by Bob Berben and Benoît Simeons of Belgium in the 2005 Coupe Gordon Bennett.

One team has landed in the last couple of hours: Team 2 – Phil Bryant and Mike Emich of the US – has made a safe landing about 35 miles SSE of Terre Haute, IN. Interestingly, any of the six teams remaining aloft has a reasonable shot at unseating the leaders and winning the race. But there are a lot of "ifs" in the equation: if the weather remains favorable, if they can catch the right winds to carry them to the right point on the east coast, if they have sufficient resources left to continue the flight.

We've thrown a lot of numbers into this update, but what it adds up to is we are witnessing an astonishing balloon race. You can keep track of all of the teams via live tracking on the Balloon Fiesta website, <http://www.balloonfiesta.com/gas-balloons/gas-tracking>, or on the Balloon Fiesta free apps for Android and iPhone.

Five Teams Remain in America's Challenge

Update 7:00 PM MDT Monday, October 9 (0100Z Tuesday, October 10)

The Command Center has received word from Team 5, Wilhelm Eimers and Sebastian Eimers, that they made a safe landing south of Wausau, WI shortly before 6 PM MDT (0000Z) after a flight of 1,094 miles (1761 km).

The leaders continue to be the Swiss team of Nicolas Tièche and Laurent Sciboz (Team 6), who are about to cross into a remote area of Quebec from a remote area of Ontario, not far south of James Bay. They've traveled about 1,675 miles (2,702 km) and are moving at a breathtaking 69 mph (111 km/hr!). The current second place team, Americans Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke, are crossing north of Toronto, Ontario, Canada. They just passed the 1,500 mile mark (2,424 km) and are moving 40 mph (64 km/hr). The remaining teams aloft in order are Polish/USA team Krzysztof Zapart and Andy Cayton (Team 4), near the junction of Lakes Superior, Huron, and Michigan; Americans Cheri White and Mark Sullivan (Team 3, near Toledo, OH), and French team Benoit Pelard and Benoit Péterlé (Team 8, west of Indianapolis, IN). Zapart/Cayton are about 150 miles behind the lead, but remember that many times teams have come from behind to win the America's Challenge.

We are aware of problems with the tracking map and are diligently trying to get it working. You can still mouse over the balloons and get data for the individual teams. The status page, accessible from the menu (triple bar) icon in the upper left hand corner of the screen, will give you the race order, distance traveled, speed, and other data (but not altitude, which is kept confidential so as to not compromise the teams' strategies). Until we get the problems fixed, we will also periodically post the teams positions periodically in these updates. The tracking website is <http://www.balloonfiesta.com/gas-balloons/gas-tracking>, or on the Balloon Fiesta free apps for Android and iPhone.

America's Challenge Record Falls, Four Teams Remain Aloft

Update 5:45 AM MDT (1145Z) Tuesday, October 10 (1145Z)

It is breakfast time on the U.S. and Canadian East Coast, and the old America's Challenge distance record is toast.

The results will not be official until the scoring team goes through all the data and confirms there have been no violations of race rules . . . but Switzerland's Nicolas Tièche and Laurent Sciboz (Team 6)'s flight appears to be one for the record books. They've not only taken out the America's Challenge

distance record of 1998.1 miles (3,215.5 km), but also beaten the longest distance ever flown in the Coupe Aéronautique Gordon Bennett (the World Championships) of 3,400.39 km (2,112.9 miles). This record was set by Bob Berben and Benoît Simeons of Belgium in the 2005 race, which launched from Albuquerque.

The real race now is for the podium in this distance race for gas balloons: second and third places. The current runners-up, defending champions Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke from the USA (Team 1) has flown more than 1,900 miles (3058 km) – a distance that would win the race in almost any other year. They are in northern Vermont. The Polish/USA team of Krzysztof Zapart and Andy Cayton is over southern Quebec, and the USA's Cheri White and Mark Sullivan in west-central Pennsylvania.

The sun is up where the teams are still flying, and this will give the teams the opportunity to gain altitude without expending ballast or to find a good landing spot. The French team of Benoit Pelard and Benoit Péterlé (Team 8) has now done just that, safely landing southeast of Indianapolis. Over the next few hours, the other teams will begin to run out of real estate as they approach the east coast.

We haven't mentioned duration (time aloft) in awhile, as distance is the important factor in the race -- the winner of the America's Challenge is the team that flies the greatest distance from Albuquerque. The teams have now been aloft approaching 60 hours and they're tired as they prepare for landing, one of the most difficult phases of the flight. The duration record for the race is 71 hours, set in 2011.

Under the race rules, the teams have up to four hours to report they have landed, and we post teams as having landed only after we have received confirmation from the pilots or their crew. This is one reason you sometimes will see balloons being reported as flying that appear from the tracking to have landed.

You can follow the final hours of this race for the record books at <http://www.balloonfiesta.com/gas-balloons/gas-tracking>, or on the Balloon Fiesta free apps for Android and iPhone.

America's Challenge Defending Champions Land, Three Still Flying

Update 7:25 AM MDT (1325Z) Tuesday, October 10

The America's Challenge Command Center has received word that Team 1, Albuquerque's Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke, has landed safely near Brighton, VT.

Three teams remain aloft: Team 6 (Tièche/Sciboz), Team 4 (Zapart/Cayton), and Team 3 (Sullivan/White). We would note that Teams 6 and 4 are in remote areas of Quebec and Labrador, with limited signal reception for our trackers. We are able to add position data manually, but this is why you sometimes see track and speed as "0" even though the balloon is still moving.

Under the race rules, the teams have up to four hours to report they have landed, and we post teams as having landed only after we have received confirmation from the pilots or their crew. This is one reason you sometimes will see balloons being reported as flying that appear from the tracking to have landed.

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Swiss America's Challenge Team Lands with Lead

Update 8:30 AM MDT (1430Z) Tuesday, October 10

The Command Center has been notified that Team 6, Nicolas Tièche and Laurent Sciboz of Switzerland, have landed safely north of Labrador City near the border between Labrador and Quebec. They landed in the lead and have already beaten the old America's Challenge distance record of 1,998.1 miles (3,215 km).

This leaves two teams still flying: Team 4 (Krzysztof Zapart and Andy Cayton), and Team 3 (Cheri White and Mark Sullivan), who at this writing are third and fourth in the race. It is possible either or both teams could improve their distance enough to displace the teams currently in first and second that have already landed (Team 6 and Team 1, Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke of the USA).

Will we see a come-from-behind dash for the podium? Find out on live race tracking at <http://www.balloonfiesta.com/gas-balloons/gas-tracking>, or on the Balloon Fiesta free apps for Android and iPhone.

Polish/American Team Last Aloft in 22nd America's Challenge

Update 9:30 AM MDT (1530Z) Tuesday, October 10

Team 3, Cheri White of Austin, TX and Mark Sullivan of Albuquerque, NM, has landed safely just outside State College, PA to clinch fourth place in the 22nd America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons.

The Command Center reports that Sullivan and White flew over Penn State University in what is known as Happy Valley, and Mark and Cheri were happy to be there. They landed in a balloonist's backyard, which definitely helps when it comes time to pack up the equipment.

This leaves just one team still flying: the Polish/American entry of Krzysztof Zapart and Andy Cayton (Team 4). They are still moving at a blistering 65 mph (105 km/hr) and have just overtaken the USA's Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke to claim second place. They have a chance to reel in the first place

team, Nicolas Tièche and Laurent Sciboz of Switzerland (Team 6), but are still about 350 miles (563 km) behind.

We would note that all results are provisional until the teams complete their debriefing with Scoring Officer Jim Byrd and their tracking data is confirmed.

Will Zapart and Clayton land with second or do they have the gas and ballast left to go after first place? Find out over the next hours via live race tracking at <http://www.balloonfiesta.com/gas-balloons/gas-tracking>, or the Balloon Fiesta free apps for Android and iPhone.

Final America's Challenge Team Lands Safely

Update 6:20 PM MDT Tuesday, October 10 (0020Z Wednesday, October 11)

The final team to land in the 22nd America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons is safely on the ground after nearly three days in the air. Poland's Krzysztof Zapart and Andy Cayton of the US (Team 4) landed at about 3:50 pm MDT (1550Z) near the border between Quebec and New Brunswick in Canada. As the tracking data does not always indicate a team's actual position at landing, the Command Center is awaiting confirmation of the coordinates of their final position before publishing unofficial results for this distance race for gas balloons, which will most likely occur tomorrow morning.

Based on tracking data and landing coordinates provided by the teams, at this point, the Swiss team of Nicolas Tièche and Laurent Sciboz (Team 6) achieved the greatest distance in this distance race, at 2,278 miles (3,666 km). They landed in a remote area near Labrador City, not far from the border between Labrador and Quebec, Canada. The team is in good shape and has been helicoptered out, and are awaiting arrival of their ground crew to attempt to retrieve the balloon. Their distance far exceeds the America's Challenge distance record of 1,998.1 miles (3,215.5 km), set in the year 2000 by the late David Levin and his brother Alan Levin.

Zapart and Cayton's tracking position would put them in second place, with a stellar distance of 2,185 miles (3,516 km), which if confirmed would also exceed the old record. The defending champions, the USA's Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke (Team 3), got oh-so-close to the record with a flight of 1,938 miles (3,119 km) and a landing near Brighton, VT. Seven of the eight teams achieved distances exceeding 1,000 miles, along with memories of a race that will be talked about in gas ballooning circles for a long time.

Once the Command Center receives final coordinates from Team 4, it will be able to provide unofficial results which remain provisional until the scoring team analyzes the data coming back from the balloons' trackers and debriefs the pilots.

Swiss Team Unofficial Winners of America's Challenge

Update 12:45 PM MDT (1845Z) Wednesday, October 11

The Swiss team of Nicolas Tièche and Laurent Sciboz, newcomers to the America's Challenge but experienced international competitors, are the apparent winners of the 22nd Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta's America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons. All results are unofficial pending analysis of tracking data, pilot debriefings with the scoring team, and imposition of any point deductions for rule violations.

Tièche and Sciboz (Team 6) appear to have achieved the greatest distance, at 2,278 miles (3,666 km). They landed in a remote area near Labrador City, not far from the border between Labrador and Quebec, Canada. The pilots were helicoptered out and their team is working on retrieval of their balloon and equipment. Their distance far exceeds the America's Challenge record of 1,998.1 miles (3,215.5 km), set in the year 2000 by the late David Levin and his brother Alan Levin.

Tracking data shows Team 4, Krzysztof Zapart of Poland and Andy Cayton of the US, with the second greatest distance, traveling 2,185 miles (3,516 km) to a landing near the border of Quebec and New Brunswick, Canada. They also beat the old America's Challenge distance record. The unofficial third place finishers are the defending and four-time champions Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke of Albuquerque (Team 1), who landed near Brighton, VT after a near-record flight of 1,938 miles (3,119 km).

This race will long be remembered for its picture-perfect launch from Balloon Fiesta Park, where thousands of people cheered the teams as they began their long journeys, and for the long, scenic flights enjoyed by all of the eight competing teams. All eight flew distances that in some years would have been good enough to win the race.

The UNOFFICIAL order of finish is:

1. Nicolas Tièche and Laurent Sciboz, Switzerland, Distance 2,278 mi/3,666 km, Duration 59:35, landing northwest of Labrador City, Labrador/Newfoundland province, Canada
2. Krzysztof Zapart, Poland, and Andy Cayton, USA, Distance 2,185 mi/3,516 km, Duration 68:58, landing near the Quebec/New Brunswick border, Canada
3. Barbara Fricke and Peter Cuneo, USA, Distance 1,938 mi/3,119 km, Duration 58:15, landing near Brighton, VT
4. Mark Sullivan and Cheri White, USA, Distance 1,608 mi/2,588 km, Duration 61:53, landing at State College, PA
5. Benoît Pelard and Benoît Péterlé, France, Distance 1,185 miles/1,907 km, Duration 57:21, landing east of Indianapolis, IN
6. Phil Bryant and Mike Emich, USA, Distance 1,102 miles/1,773 km, Duration 44:08, landed SSE of Terre Haute, IN
7. Wilhelm Eimers and Sebastian Eimers, Germany, Distance 1,099 mi/1,769 km, Duration 47:03, landing south of Wasau, WI

8. Noah Forden and Bert Padelt, USA, Distance 819 miles/1,318 km, Duration 36:16, landing west of Ames, IA

[The tracking map and status page](#) are still available for viewing on the America's Challenge website.

It's Official! Swiss Team Smashes Record, Wins America's Challenge

Update 9 PM MDT Saturday, October 14 (0300Z Sunday, October 15)

The scoring process has confirmed what the ballooning world already knew: Switzerland's Nicolas Tièche and Laurent Sciboz rewrote the record book in winning the 22nd America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons.

[2017 Americas Challenge Official Results](#)

Tièche and Sciboz's flight establishes a new distance record for the America's Challenge, as the team flew 2,281 miles (3,670 km) to a landing near Labrador City, Newfoundland, Canada. Their distance far exceeds the America's Challenge record of 1,998.1 miles (3,215.5 km), set in the year 2000 by the late David Levin and his brother Alan Levin. Their distance also bests the greatest distance ever flown in the Coupe Aéronautique Gordon Bennett, the gas balloon distance world championships. That mark, 3,400.39 km (2,112.9 miles) was set in 2005 by Belgium's Bob Berben and Benoît Siméons in a flight from Albuquerque to Rivière-du-Loup in Quebec north of Maine.

Second place this year goes to Krzysztof Zapart of Poland and two-time America's Challenge champion Andy Cayton of the US, who also beat the old America's Challenge distance mark with a flight of 2,191 miles (3,526 km) to Amqui, Quebec, near the border of Quebec and New Brunswick, Canada. Finishing in third place are four-time champions Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke of Albuquerque, who landed near Brighton, VT after a near-record flight of 1,939 miles (3,122 km).

This race captured the imagination of people throughout the world, as the launch was witnessed by a crowd of tens of thousands at Albuquerque's Balloon Fiesta Park and watching via live stream over the Internet. All eight competing teams enjoyed long, scenic flights; seven of the eight exceeded the 1,000-mile (1,609 km) mark.

The OFFICIAL order of finish:

1. Nicolas Tièche and Laurent Sciboz, Switzerland, Distance 2,280.9 mi/3,670.76 km, Duration 59:19, landing northwest of Labrador City, Labrador/Newfoundland province, Canada
2. Krzysztof Zapart, Poland, and Andy Cayton, USA, Distance 2,191 mi/3,526.06 km, Duration 69:04, landing near Amqui, Quebec, near the Quebec/New Brunswick border, Canada

3. Barbara Fricke and Peter Cuneo, USA, Distance 1,939.3 mi/3,121.82 km, Duration 60:13, landing near Brighton, VT
4. Mark Sullivan and Cheri White, USA, Distance 1,609.5 mi/2,590.31 km, Duration 61:56, landing at State College, PA
5. Benoît Pelard and Benoît Péterlé, France, Distance 1,186.6 miles/1,909.71 km, Duration 57:08, landing east of Indianapolis, IN
6. Phil Bryant and Mike Emich, USA, Distance 1,103 miles/1,775.11 km, Duration 44:09, landed near Lyons, IL.
7. Wilhelm Eimers and Sebastian Eimers, Germany, Distance 1,099.5 mi/1,769.42 km, Duration 46:53, landing near Plover, WI
8. Noah Forden and Bert Padelt, USA, Distance 820.6 miles/1,320.56 km, Duration 36:02, landing west of Ames, IA

[The tracking map and status page](#) are still available for viewing on the America's Challenge website.