

23rd America's Challenge Updates Archive: 2019

Race of Champions: 23rd America's Challenge Has Something for Everybody

September 8, 2019

After a one-year hiatus, the America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons returns to the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta with its largest field in this decade. Nine teams – veterans and newcomers are scheduled to take flight – weather permitting -- at approximately 6 PM on Saturday, October 5 from Balloon Fiesta Park. They'll embark on a journey across America that is both scenic and demanding, one of the great challenges of skill and stamina in aviation.

While several of the teams are flying in their first America's Challenge, you can hardly call them "rookies." This is especially true of nine-time distance gas ballooning world champion Vincent Leys of France, who holds the record for the most wins in the world's oldest air race, the Coupe Aéronautique Gordon Bennett. Leys will be flying with French young gun Eric Decellieres. Another race rookie, Al Nels of the US, has twice won both the world and U.S. national hot air balloon championships, and is partnered with Andy Baird, the President of Cameron Balloons US. Baird and Nels recently finished 6th and 13th in the U.S. Nationals.

The newcomers will challenge some of the America's Challenge's toughest champions, including four-time America's Challenge winners Barbara Fricke and Peter Cuneo and two-time victors Cheri White and Mark Sullivan. But no one may be hungrier for victory this year than Poland's Krzysztof Zapart – runner-up in the last three America's Challenges – and his American flying partner, two-time America's Challenge winner Andy Cayton. Zapart and Cayton's 2017 effort would have won the America's Challenge race in any other year, but they fell just short of beating Switzerland's Nicolas Tièche and Laurent Sciboz. (However, Zapart set a new Polish national gas balloon distance record.)

The other veterans in the field are veteran U.S. competitors Noah Forden and Bert Padelt, and France's Benoit Pelard and Benoit Peterle (who set a French national distance record in the 2017 America's Challenge). Austria's Christian Wagner is competing in his first America's Challenge, but his co-pilot, Thomas Lewetz, is returning to Albuquerque after a 24-year absence; he participated in the very first America's Challenge in 1995. The American newcomers are Brian Duncan and Brenda Cowlshaw, who started gas ballooning a couple of years ago.

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 – as happened in 2017 -- 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 launches from Pays de Montbéliard, France. Several of the America's Challenge pilots – including Decelleries, Leys, Cayton, Zapart, Wagner, Lewetz, Sullivan, and White – are also scheduled to participate in this year's Gordon Bennett.

The Albuquerque Balloon Fiesta's America's Challenge Web site, www.balloonfiesta.com/Americas-Challenge, and the Balloon Fiesta app for Android and iPhones, will feature live satellite-based tracking

of all the balloons' positions and race updates throughout the competition. This year the America's Challenge is adopting a new tracking system that will provide additional capabilities for those following the race online, including multiple map overlays and altitude data.

America's Challenge Competitors Aloft in Gordon Bennett

September 13, 2019

A number of America's Challenge competitors past, present, and future are in the air right now in Europe, competing in the world's oldest air race. The Coupe Aeronautique Gordon Bennett launched this afternoon MDT (approximately 2100 local time in France/2200Z) from Montbeliard in southeastern France. The Gordon Bennett is considered to be the world championships of distance gas ballooning.

Two teams are carrying the U.S. flag in this year in the Gordon Bennett.

- Team USA-1 pilot Mark Sullivan is competing in his 22nd America's Challenge; he ranks second all-time in the number of Gordon Bennett races flown. His teammate Cheri White is flying in her 10th America's Challenge. Cheri and Mark have finished as high as third in the Gordon Bennett (2009,) and are two-time America's Challenge champions.
- Team USA-2 is headed by Andy Cayton, who finished second in the Gordon Bennett last year and has twice won the America's Challenge. Andy's co-pilot in the Gordon Bennett is race newcomer John Hager.

Several international Gordon Bennett competitors are scheduled to compete this year in the America's Challenge:

- Poland's Krzysztof Zapart (POL-2 in the Gordon Bennett) is the runner-up in the last three America's Challenge races. For the second time this year, he will fly in the America's Challenge with the USA's Andy Cayton.
- Nine-time Gordon Bennett Champion Vincent Leys of France (FRA-1), will team up with Eric Decellieres (FRA-2). Both are competing in the America's Challenge for the first time.
- Austrian pilot Christian Wagner (AUT-1) will also fly in his first America's Challenge.

America's Challenge alumni competing in the Gordon Bennett this year include:

From Switzerland:

- 2017 America's Challenge winners and record holders Laurent Sciboz and Nicolas Tieche (SUI-1)
- Multiple Gordon Bennett winners Kurt Frieden and Pascal Witpraechtger (SUI-2)
- Max Krebs and Walter Gschwendtner (SUI-3).

From Spain:

- America's Challenge 2014 champions Angel Aguirre and Anulfo Gonzalez Redondo (ESP-1)

From Germany:

- Four-time Gordon Bennett Champion Willi Eimers – veteran of many America’s Challenge races – is competing with his son Sebastian (GER-3)
- Benni Eimers, who competed in the 2017 America’s Challenge is flying in the Gordon Bennett with Willi’s longtime flying partner Matthias Zenge (GER-2).

From Poland:

- Last year’s Gordon Bennett Champion, Mateuz Rekas (POL-1), flew in the America’s Challenge with Krzysztof Zapart in 2014 and finished second.

From Austria:

- Austria’s Gerald Sturzlinger (AUT-1) has flown from Albuquerque in both the America’s Challenge and in the Gordon Bennett and finished second in the 2008 Gordon Bennett.

During the launch of the Gordon Bennett, we spotted several other old friends directing launch operations. They include America’s Challenge launchmaster Thomas Hora from Germany, who has also flown in the America’s Challenge as a competitor. Also, a big hello to France’s Benoit Pelard and Benoit Peterle, who will be headed to Albuquerque soon to fly in their third America’s Challenge.

We wish all of the competitors in the Gordon Bennett safe flights and the best of luck. [You can follow the progress of the Gordon Bennett here.](#)

America's Challenge Champions Win Gordon Bennett, World Title

September 17, 2019

Congratulations to Switzerland’s Laurent Sciboz and Nicolas Tieche, the 2017 America’s Challenge champions, who are the apparent victors in the just completed Coupe Aeronautique Gordon Bennett. Their spectacular flight of 1102.79 miles (1,774.77 km) ended early this morning on the Danube River delta in Romania, just south of the Ukraine border. They were in the air approximately 83 hours and landed within meters of the Black Sea.

Unofficial results show another Swiss team, two-time world champions Kurt Frieden and Pascal Witprachtiger, in second place. They were aloft more than 89 hours and flew 1,087 mi. (1749.57 km), also landing on the shores of the Black Sea. Third place goes to nine-time world champion Vincent Leys and Christophe Houver from France, who flew 1,068 miles (1717.97 km) and were aloft more than 90 hours.

All of the Gordon Bennett teams have now safely landed. Seven of the 20 teams flew into or through a fourth night aloft – almost unheard of in a 1,000m gas balloon race – in what turned out to be a very tactical competition. For the first 36 hours there was almost no wind – a maddening thing to deal with in a distance race. The teams that were able to save ballast through those first 36 hours and then avoid other problems (equipment failures, air traffic control issues) once the winds picked up were the ones that ultimately prevailed.

The Gordon Bennett is considered to be the world championships of distance gas ballooning. We congratulate all of the competitors and officials on a race that will be one for the history books. We look

forward to welcoming many of the pilots and officials involved in the Gordon Bennett (see our previous post) to Albuquerque and the America's Challenge in a couple of weeks.

America's Challenge 2019 Competitors

September 22, 2019

Who are the men and women who will take on one of the greatest challenges in aerostation?

- [**Andy Cayton, USA and Krzysztof Zapart, Poland:**](#) In the last America's Challenge, this team did pretty much everything but win. They smashed the former America's Challenge record as well as the record for the greatest distance ever flown in a Coupe Gordon Bennett, the race recognized as the world championships for distance gas ballooning. They made it to eastern Quebec, within shouting distance of the Atlantic. But they ran out of real estate and resources, and after flying 2,186 miles (3,526 km) they had to land, losing the race, by less than 100 miles, to Swiss competitors Nicolas Tièche and Laurent Sciboz. Andy Cayton is a two-time America's Challenge champion (2006 and 2007), a world and national record holder in hot air balloons, a former Army special forces aviator, and the runner-up in the 2018 Gordon Bennett. His daring America's Challenge victories involved crossing the Gulf of Mexico in 2006 and a dramatic landing in Saskatchewan in 2007. He and co-pilot John Hagar finished 9th in this year's Gordon Bennett. 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 three of the last four world championships and has been runner-up three times in the America's Challenge (2014, 2016, 2017).
- [**Eric Decellieres and Vincent Leys, France:**](#) This is their first America's Challenge race, but if the Vegas handicappers were setting odds on this race, this team might very well be the odds-on favorites. Vincent Leys is arguably the greatest gas balloon competitor of all time, a skilled pilot and strategic wizard who has won the Coupe Aéronautique Gordon Bennett a staggering nine times. He and teammate Christophe Houver made the Gordon Bennett podium again this year, finishing in a declared tie for third. However, this will be Leys' first competition in the U.S. His teammate is Eric Decelleries, a relative newcomer to gas balloon competition, but who already has three Gordon Bennetts to his credit.
- [**Brian Duncan and Brenda Cowlshaw, USA:**](#) This team of Texans are experienced hot air balloon pilots competing in their first-ever gas balloon competition. They recently acquired their balloon from now-retired longtime America's Challenge competitor Phil Bryant. Duncan and Cowlshaw trained in Germany with master pilot and long-time America's Challenge competitor Wilhelm Eimers and his sons Benni and Sebastian, and also flew a training flight from Balloon Fiesta Park with America's Challenge champion Peter Cuneo.
- [**Noah Forden and Bert Padelt, USA:**](#) Noah Forden began flying gas balloons just four years ago and got into his first America's Challenge almost by accident, when Bert Padelt invited him to fill in for an ailing teammate. Padelt is a 17-year America's Challenge competitor and one of the world's premier builders of gas balloons. This year, they're competing in their third America's Challenge together. Forden, an experienced fixed-wing and hot air balloon pilot, trained in gas

balloons with Padelt and members of the Aero Club of America. 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. He can 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 flying in their 20th America's Challenge and are the only four-time-winning America's Challenge team (2001, 2010, 2013, 2016). Only one pilot –the late Richard Abruzzo – has more individual America's Challenge wins to his credit. Fricke and Cuneo have finished on the podium (2nd or 3rd) an additional seven times and have placed as high as third in the Gordon Bennett. In the epic 2017 America's Challenge, they flew their best distance ever – more than 1,900 miles (3,122 km) – but in this fiercely competitive race wound up third. 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.
- **[Al Nels and Andy Baird, USA:](#)** Here is another team where the term “rookie” hardly applies, even though this is both pilots' first America's Challenge Race (as competitors, anyway). Al Nels is one of the world's premier hot air balloon competitive pilots with the record to prove it: he is a two-time US national champion and a two-time world champion. Andy Baird is especially known as a balloon manufacturer, the President and General Manager of Cameron Balloons U.S, but he's also a formidable hot air balloon competitor. In this year's US Nationals, Baird finished 6th and Nels was 13th. Although this is his first America's Challenge aloft, Andy has been part of the race's official family for several years as chair of the race jury. Interestingly, though the pilots are flying in their first gas balloon race, the balloon they're flying has actually won the America's Challenge: it's the balloon David Hempelman-Adams and Jon Mason flew to victory – and the race duration record – in 2011.
- **[Benoit Pelard and Benoit Peterle, France:](#)** This team of French veterans are longtime Gordon Bennett competitors who have fallen in love with touring the U.S. by balloon in the America's Challenge. Pelard and his 2016 co-pilot 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 (Dine) reservation. In 2017, Pelard and Peterle set a French distance record before landing near Indianapolis. 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, Peterle, and Lajoie recreated that 1906 flight (sans storm) in 2010, flying from Nancy in France to Sissinghurst in England. Pelard and Peterle were part of the team of officials for the just completed Gordon Bennett.
- **[Christian Wagner and Thomas Lewetz, Austria:](#)** Thomas Lewetz is returning to Albuquerque after an absence of nearly 25 years. With his longtime flying partner Silvia Wagner, Lewetz competed in the very first America's Challenge in 1995. He is a veteran of five Gordon Bennett

racers, and as is the case for so many balloonists, he says flying in long-distance gas balloon races is an escape from the office – from normal life. Christian Wagner just completed his third Gordon Bennett, making it into the top 10. He comes from a ballooning, flying, and skydiving family, and says the fascination of ballooning to him is the peacefulness. Of participating in the Gordon Bennett, Wagner wrote that it means to him, “spending some special time with his father.”

- [Cheri White and Mark Sullivan, USA](#): Albuquerque’s Mark Sullivan is the iron man of distance gas ballooning, having flown more races than any competitor in history. He just completed his 23rd Coupe Gordon Bennett and is slated to complete his 21st America’s Challenge. Sullivan has teamed with Cheri White, from the Austin, TX area, since 2002. This formidable team 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 the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta. 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, and is the President of the Balloon Federation of America.

Countdown Underway for America's Challenge Launch

October 1, 2019

Posted 11:50 PM MDT (0550Z)

With the scheduled launch of the America’s Challenge just four days away, preparations for the race, and for the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta, are in high gear!

Pilots are beginning to arrive in Albuquerque, and over the next couple of days they will be checking over their balloons and equipment, filling sandbags, and making sure they have all the supplies they may need for up to four days in the air. They’ll also formally register for the event and receive their credentials and tickets for social events.

The teams will first gather together as a group at 1 PM MDT (1900Z) on Friday, October 4 at the general briefing. (Though most know each other from previous Gordon Bennett and America’s Challenge races, so it’s really a renewal of old friendships.) The briefing includes the formal roll call, presentations by the event officials on essential information the pilots will need for their flight, and – most importantly – a detailed weather briefing. At the end of the briefing, the teams will draw numbers to determine their launch order. The briefing will be followed by the Welcome Party, a chance for the balloon teams and the America’s Challenge officials and staff to relax and unwind before gearing up for the launch.

A second briefing is scheduled for noon on Saturday, which will include a weather update and a decision on whether or not to launch at the scheduled time, approximately 6 PM MDT (0000Z) on Saturday, October 5.

We hope you'll bookmark the [America's Challenge page](#) on the Balloon Fiesta website, www.balloonfiesta.com, to follow our regular updates, video broadcasts, and live tracking. To follow the race via your favorite mobile device, download the YB Tracking app (it's free), and then subscribe to the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta race (a.k.a. the America's Challenge – also free.)

Officials Studying Weather Options for America's Challenge Launch

October 4, 2019

Launch Still Planned for Saturday Evening, October 5. [View our first video update here](#), including interviews with Zapart/Cayton, Pelard/Peterle, and Forden/Padelt!

The teams are in Albuquerque and the excitement is building for the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta's 23rd America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons.

The nine teams, along with their crews and race officials, gathered at 1 PM (1900Z) for hellos, hugs, and the official general briefing. Event Director Sam Parks, Assistant Director John Petrehn, Safety Officer Wally Book, Command Center Director Ruth Lind, and scoring officer Jim Byrd reviewed detailed information the pilots will need on their journey across America.

Event meteorologist Randy Lefevre's weather briefing detailed a number of factors that could affect the timing of the race, both in Albuquerque and downrange. Some of these concerns include stormy weather – including precipitation and thunderstorms -- that will develop in Oklahoma late Sunday, along with high ground winds in Texas and southern Oklahoma. Monday and Tuesday fast winds aloft develop that could provide the teams a fast ride to the north and Midwest. Depending on the launch time, pilots would have a number of trajectory options that could carry them into northeastern Texas and Louisiana, or to the north and northeast towards the Midwest and Canada.

The number one consideration in determining the timing of the launch is will be safety, but the officials also want the pilots be able to fly a fun, strategic race that will require them to really think through the options the weather conditions provide to gain the greatest distance. The last America's Challenge, in 2017, resulted in several teams traveling record distances, and everyone would love to see that happen again this year.

The next briefing is scheduled for noon Saturday, October 5 (1800z). Throughout the next 18 hours, the America's Challenge officials will continue to evaluate the weather and determine whether to launch as scheduled on Saturday evening or to delay the launch until Sunday or Monday.

The launch order is determined by random draw at the briefing, and can be significant because weather conditions can change both in Albuquerque and downrange during the hour or so it can take to complete the launch. The order of launch will be as follows.

1. Team 4 Noah Forden/Bert Padelt
2. Team 2 Eric Decellieres/Vincent Leys
3. Team 3 Brian Duncan/Brenda Cowlshaw

4. Team 9 Cheri White/Mark Sullivan
5. Team 7 Benoit Pelard/Benoit Peterle
6. Team 5 Barbara Fricke/Peter Cuneo
7. Team 6 Al Nels/Andy Baird
8. Team 8 Christian Wagner/Thomas Lewetz
9. Team 1 Andy Cayton/Krzysztof Zapart

At the end of the briefing, competitors Andy Baird and Bert Padelt had a big surprise for Bert's flying partner Noah Forden. Andy and Bert presented the Balloon Federation of America's Anthony Fairbanks Sportsmanship Award to Noah, who has put a great deal of effort into developing an affordable source of hydrogen in Tennessee for U.S. gas balloonists. The high cost of lifting gas in the United States has been a big detriment to the growth of gas ballooning in the U.S. The Fairbanks Award recognizes gas balloonists for significant and ongoing contributions to the sport of gas ballooning in the U.S.

The object of the race is to fly as far as possible from the launch point at Balloon Fiesta Park. Throughout the America's Challenge, you can follow live tracking of the balloons as they cross the country on the Balloon Fiesta website, [www.balloonfiesta.com/America's Challenge](http://www.balloonfiesta.com/America's%20Challenge). This site will also include regular written updates and analysis, as well as links to video interviews and updates from pilots and officials.

Posted 4:45 PM MDT (2245Z)

America's Challenge Launch Postponed

October 5, 2019

Posted 6:15 am (1215z)

The launch of the 23rd America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons is being postponed due to weather concerns in Texas and Oklahoma, in the direction the balloons would travel if the race began as scheduled Saturday evening.

Weather in Albuquerque at Balloon Fiesta Park is good, with huge crowds on the field anticipating this morning's mass ascension. Weather tonight at the launch site is also expected to be great for tonight's Twilight Twinkle Glow, and would make for good launch conditions for gas balloons.

However, forecasts show that with a Saturday night launch, the balloons would be in Texas and Oklahoma late Sunday afternoon, where the weather is expected to be windy at best and stormy at worst. Pilots could face the choice of having to fly into thunderstorms or trying to land in very high winds, either of which would pose a danger to the pilots' safety.

Race officials stressed at yesterday's general briefing that their number one consideration in determining the timing of the launch is safety. Postponement of the competition to Sunday or Monday should allow the pilots the opportunity to fly a fun, strategic race, with a variety of possible trajectories and options for longer flights.

The next briefing has been scheduled for noon on Sunday, October 6, at which time a decision will be made about whether to attempt a Sunday evening launch in conjunction with the Balloon Fiesta's balloon glow.

Video Interview: Event Director Sam Parks on America's Challenge Postponement

October 5, 2019

https://balloonfiesta.com/files/galleries/AC_update_Sam_Parks_interview_100519.mp4

Categories: [AC 2019](#)

https://balloonfiesta.com/files/galleries/AC_update_Sam_Parks_interview_100519.mp4

America's Challenge Launch Scheduled Monday, October 7

October 6, 2019

Posted 2:00 pm (2000z)

[Video update from Event Director Sam Parks](#)

Posted late Sunday night: [Competitors unwind and reflect on tomorrow's race at Peter and Barbara's legendary lasagna party!](#)

At a 12 noon (1800Z) briefing, pilots were advised that officials have decided to once again postpone the the 23rd America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons. **Launch is now anticipated Monday evening, October 7.**

Hot air events at Balloon Fiesta Park on Sunday evening will go on as scheduled, including the balloon glow, skydivers, and fireworks.

The race officials will hold a briefing at 1 PM (2000z) on Monday to provide pilots with updated weather and final details. Immediately following the briefing, the teams will move to Balloon Fiesta Park to begin preparing their balloons for launch. **Actual inflation should begin around 4:30 PM, with the launch sometime in the 8-9 PM time frame. Admission to Balloon Fiesta Park for this event is free.** The launch will also be streamed live on Balloon Fiesta Live! on YouTube or at <https://balloonfiesta.com/live-stream>.

The delay in the launch will help to assure possible development of canyon winds in Albuquerque does not affect the launch of the gas balloons. Also, the 24-hour delay will allow the teams to take advantage of developing strong low-level winds across the central and Midwest United States, making for an exciting long-distance race.

Once the race begins, you can follow the balloons' progress across America at https://balloonfiesta.com/America's_Challenge-Live. Or, download the YB tracking app (free) and subscribe to Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta (also free, it's possible the name will change to

America's Challenge). Some of the teams will also have social media sites where you can follow their progress, and we will post a list of those as we get them.

Ready To Go the Distance: America's Challenge Teams Prepare for Monday Launch

October 7, 2019

Posted 2:00 pm (2000z)

The formal briefings are completed, the field is being prepared, and the nine international teams in the America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons are in the final stages of preparing for their flights across America.

The teams are in the process of moving their equipment to Balloon Fiesta Park. Over the next few hours, they will be preparing their balloons for flight and going through their checklists to make sure they have everything with them they will need for the two or three days they will remain aloft. Actual inflation should begin around 5:30 PM (2330z), with the launch scheduled to begin at 8 PM (0200z).

Parking and admission to Balloon Fiesta Park for this event is free! Live coverage of the launch on [Balloon Fiesta Live!](#) begins at 6:30 PM; [click on this link](#) or view it on the Balloon Fiesta's Facebook or YouTube channels.

At the final race briefing at 1 PM MDT (1900z), meteorologist Randy Lefevre advised that surface conditions at launch should be favorable, with 5-8 knot winds. The trajectory forecasts are quite consistent and indicate the balloons should travel north-northeast across Kansas, up into Minnesota, and on into Canada, with a possibility of reaching Hudson's Bay. There is also an option for a higher-level trajectory headed towards Lake Michigan.

Once the race begins, you can follow the balloons' progress across America at [balloonfiesta.com/America's Challenge-Live](http://balloonfiesta.com/America's-Challenge-Live). Or, for mobile devices, download the YB tracking app (free) and subscribe to Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta (also free, it's possible the name will change to America's Challenge). Some of the teams will also have social media sites where you can follow their progress, and we will post a list of those as we get them.

America's Challenge Airborne! Teams Float Northward

October 7, 2019

Posted 10:45 PM MDT (0445z)

[View Balloon Fiesta Live's broadcast of the launch here!](#)

After two days of delays due to weather both in Albuquerque and downrange, it was all worth the wait. On a picture-perfect Monday evening at Balloon Fiesta Park, the nine teams in the America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons took flight, cheered on by several hundred spectators who waited through the long inflation process to witness the launch.

The teams began staging equipment and assembling their balloon systems around midafternoon, with the first balloon taking on hydrogen around 6 PM. The French team of Eric Decellieres and Vincent Leys were first in line to receive hydrogen since they fly a traditional-style netted balloon, which requires a larger crew and takes longer to inflate. The final team to take hydrogen, the American-Polish entry of Andy Cayton and Krzysztof Zapart, finished inflating shortly after 8:30 PM MDT (0230z), and shortly afterward the safety officials dropped the flagging around the launch site, giving the crowd an opportunity to walk onto the launch field and briefly view the balloons up close before the launch began.

At about 8:45 PM the first team to launch, Noah Forden and Bert Padelt of the US (Team 4) was walked to the platform and weighed off under the direction of Launchmaster Tomas Hora, Event Director Sam Parks, and Assistant Event Director Sam Parks. At 8:51 PM Forden and Padelt were aloft to the strains of “The Star Spangled Banner” and the cheers of the crowd. They were followed in quick succession by the other eight teams, with the last to launch (Team 1, Cayton /Zapart) drifting slowly upward at 9:28 PM (0328z). Each team was honored with the playing of their national anthem and applause and cheers from an appreciative audience.

Trajectory forecasts suggest that the teams will move north and east into the center of the US and will catch very fast mid- and upper-level winds taking them north towards the Great Lakes and into Canada. The real strategies will begin to materialize tomorrow morning as the sun rises and heats the hydrogen inside the envelope, giving the balloons additional lift and a free ride to their altitude of choice.

The America’s Challenge has now adopted the same satellite-based tracking platform used by the Coupe Aeronautique Gordon Bennett, from YB Tracking. ([Click here for a summary of the features this platform offers.](#)) With the adoption of the new platform, the America’s Challenge will report altitude data from the balloons for the first time, providing a further dimension for those “armchair quarterbacks” second-guessing the pilots’ strategies.

You can follow live tracking and receive regular updates from the race Command Center 24/7 at the America’s Challenge website <https://balloonfiesta.com/Americas-Challenge-Live>. To follow the race on a mobile device, download the YB Tracking app (it’s free!) onto your favorite mobile device and subscribe to Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta (also free).

Welcome Sunrise: America's Challenge Teams in Texas

October 8, 2019

Posted 9:00 AM (1500z)

Sunrise over Texas: [Video from Team 8 Christian Wagner and Thomas Lewetz \(AUT\)](#)

The nine teams competing in the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta’s America’s Challenge race for gas balloons are approaching their 12-hour mark aloft, and already they are east of Dalhart, Tx. Folks in Dalhart are relatively used to seeing the America’s Challenge balloons over their town, as the winds out of Albuquerque take the balloons in their direction every few years.

So far, the teams seem to be following the course several of the pilots described to Balloon Fiesta Live last night – to use fast mid-level winds (around 10,000-12,000 feet) forecast over the central U.S. to streak towards the Great Lakes. The trajectories released to the pilots before the race suggested flights deep into Canada, perhaps as far as Hudson’s Bay, could be a possibility.

The spectacular video of sunrise over Eastern New Mexico and West Texas was shot this morning by Christian Wagner and Thomas Lewetz from Austria (Team 8). When you view this video, note the balloon’s altitude (quite low for a gas flight), and the speed with which the balloon is moving over the ground; the balloons have been traveling at more than 30 mph (43.8 kph). The square panel hanging down below the balloon is a solar collector used to help power the balloon’s avionics and other equipment.

Sunrise is welcome to the teams for a couple of reasons. As the sun heats the balloon, the hydrogen gas inside expands, providing lift. So the pilots get a “free ride” to the altitude of their choice, they can gain height without expending ballast. Also, those are long cold nights aloft, and the sun’s warmth does wonders for the pilots’ spirits.

As the race continues, you can follow live tracking and receive regular updates from the race Command Center 24/7 at the America’s Challenge website <https://balloonfiesta.com/Americas-Challenge-Live>. On the website, by clicking on a balloon, you can view an altitude profile of the balloon’s track, and can view as many as four teams’ data simultaneously. To follow the race on a mobile device, download the YB Tracking app (it’s free!) onto your favorite mobile device and subscribe to Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta (also free).

All Nine Teams Still Flying as America's Challenge Begins Second Day

October 8, 2019

Posted 8:00 PM (1500z)

It has been a quiet, routine day in the America’s Challenge Command Center, which usually means it has also been a routine day – as routine as it gets in a gas balloon race – for the nine international teams in the America’s Challenge distance race for gas balloons.

The teams continue to ride fast winds to the northeast, heading through Nebraska roughly towards Sioux Falls, SD and Minneapolis, MN. Winds in this area, in advance of a cold front and large weather system to the west, are quite strong; at this writing most of the teams are clocking in excess of 40 MPH (64.4 KPH). It is now dark in the U.S., and given the lack of light and the wind speeds, it is likely all of the teams will remain aloft through the night.

The next big decision point in the race will be at sunrise tomorrow morning in the U.S. Central Time Zone, approximately 7 AM (6 AM MDT, 1200z), when teams make the decision to keep flying or to land once they have enough light to see. They consider a number of factors in making that decision, including weather forecasts, the amount of remaining ballast (sand, required for maneuvering and landing), and their own physical state.

We have received some stunning photos and videos from the pilots during the day, and will be sharing those with you as soon as we compile them tonight. Meanwhile, we would note several teams have Facebook pages where they are posting photos and short messages:

- <https://facebook.com/TeamAUT2/> -- Christian Wagner and Thomas Lewetz, Austria. They have sent us some incredible photos and videos (Team 8)
- <https://facebook.com/FlyGas/> - Cheri White and Mark Sullivan (Team 9): Ditto.
- <https://facebook.com/groups/LeGrainDeFolieEnAmerique/> - Eric Decellieres and Vincent Leys, France (Team 2)
- <https://facebook.com/PadeltForden> - Noah Forden and Bert Padelt (Team 4)
- <https://facebook.com/fcgasballooning/> -- Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke (Team 5)
- <https://facebook.com/GasBalloonTeamNels-Baird> -- Al Nels and Andy Baird (Team 6)

As the race continues, you can follow live tracking and receive regular updates from the race Command Center 24/7 at the America's Challenge website, <https://balloonfiesta.com/Americas-Challenge-Live>. On the website, by clicking on a balloon, you can view an altitude profile of the balloon's track, and can view as many as four teams' data simultaneously. To follow the race on a mobile device, download the YB Tracking app (it's free!) onto your favorite mobile device and subscribe to Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta (also free).

We would note that the tracking page on the Balloon Fiesta website is now reporting distances in miles, which is the standard in the U.S. Altitude is still being reported in meters: 1 meter = approximately 3.28 feet, so to U.S. observers used to seeing altitude indicated in feet, the balloons are actually more than three times higher than the distance in meters suggests. On the YB tracking app, distances are still being reported in kilometers, the official measure used to determine distances in the America's Challenge.

First America's Challenge Team Lands

October 8, 2019

Posted 9:45 PM MDT (0345z)

The Command Center has just received word that Team 6, Americans Al Nels and Andy Baird, have made a safe nighttime landing near Superior, Nebraska, just north of the Kansas-Nebraska border. Their chase crew is close by and all is well.

The other eight teams are continuing northeastward, with several about to cross into South Dakota and Iowa. Most are still achieving speeds in excess of 40 MPH (64 KPH). If they maintain these speeds, the leaders should be nearing the Canadian border by tomorrow morning.

Photos from the America's Challenge teams

October 8, 2019

Enjoy these photos sent back on October 8, 2019 from our teams flying in the America's Challenge.

- [Photo slide show](#)

Our thanks to the teams for giving us permission to share their experience!

Austrian Team Lands in Minnesota; Seven Teams Still Aloft

October 9, 2019



Posted 5:45 AM MDT (1145z)

The Command Center confirms that Team 8, Christian Wagner and Thomas Lewetz of Austria, have landed safely near Wheaton MN, close to the border with South Dakota. They sent photos back from their landing site and are in good spirits!

At this writing several teams are approaching the Canadian border and Lake Superior, and the teams are about to cross into full daylight. This is a point when teams typically make a decision about whether to keep flying through the day or land with the sunrise. We'll keep you posted as they send the Command Center information.

America's Challenge Landing Update, Teams 9 and 4 Report Safe Landings

October 9, 2019



Posted 7:30 AM MDT (1330z)

In the past few minutes, two of the US teams have reported safe landings to the Command Center. Team 9, Cheri White and Mark Sullivan, landed near Hossmann, MN, west of Duluth. Cheri sent us the photo from their landing site. A little bit further west, Team 4, Noah Forden and Bert Padelt, landed just northeast of Nevis, MN.

Both teams reported ground winds in the area are quite brisk and that they had ripout landings (a term for deflating the balloon as it contacts or nears the

ground). You can keep track of the developments right here on the America's Challenge website, or by downloading the YB Races tracking app (free) on your favorite mobile device and subscribing to Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta (also free).

Team 5, Fricke-Cuneo, and Team 3 , Duncan-Cowlshaw, Report Safe Landings

October 9, 2019

Posted 8:20 AM MDT (1420z)

The field still flying in the 23rd America's Challenge for gas balloons is now down to three, as more of the teams report landings. With brisk ground winds in Minnesota a low-pressure system approaching from the west, and the Canadian border nearby, teams are taking advantage of generally calmer early morning conditions to end their flights.

The latest teams to report landings are US competitors Team 5, Barbara Fricke and Peter Cuneo, and Team 3, Brian Duncan and Brenda Cowlshaw. Barbara and Peter landed just to the northeast of Princeton, MN; Peter reports they landed at about 10 knots, all is well, and their crew is nearby. Brian and Brenda landed safely just south of Hibbing, MN, after a stellar America's Challenge debut (and gas balloon racing debut!) that had them dueling it out with some of the top teams in the world.

That leaves three teams still aloft. At this writing, the two French teams are neck and neck distance-wise and approaching the Canadian border. Team 7 (Benoit Pelard and Benoit Peterle) are swapping the lead back and forth with Team 2 (Eric Decellieres and Vincent Leys), who are paralleling the north coast of Lake Superior. The third team still flying, the USA's Andy Cayton and Poland's Krzysztof Zapart, have been lagging behind the other teams and flying a separate course further west since the start of the race, ready to sneak up on the leaders.

We'll keep you posted as the race gets down to the nitty-gritty, as they say in the USA. Stay tuned!

America's Challenge Leaders Land, Two Teams Still Flying

October 9, 2019

Posted 12:00 PM MDT (1800z)

The Command Center has just received word that the race leaders, Benoit Pelard and Benoit Peterle of France (Team 7), have executed a safe landing east of Atikokan in a remote area of Ontario, Canada. The pilots are OK and the Command Center staff are facilitating assistance with retrieval of the balloon.

With Team 7's landing, the lead will very quickly pass to the other French team, Eric Decellieres and Vincent Leys (Team 2). Their track has now turned northeastward away from the shore of Lake Superior and they will cross into Canada west of Grand Portage, MN. Meanwhile, lurking about 140 miles behind, is the other team still aloft, the USA's Andy Cayton and Poland's Krzysztof Zapart (Team 1). Last for most of the race, they've improved their position to fourth and appear to be headed towards a podium finish.

This two-team duel -- Team 2 vs. Team 1 -- will play out over the next several hours. You can follow it all on live tracking on the Balloon Fiesta website or via the YB Races appl (download for free and subscribe to Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta).

Interview with America's Challenge Race Meteorologist Randy Lefevre

October 9, 2019

- [Randy Lefevre interview](#)

Note: This interview was recorded before Team 7 (Pelard/Peterle) landed.

Last Balloon Standing! Cayton-Zapart Pursue Race Leaders

October 9, 2019

Posted 4:45 PM MDT (2045z)

And then there was one.

French competitors Eric Decellieres and Vincent Leys (Team 2) have reported their safe landing to the America's Challenge Command Center. They are on a road near a small lodge on the shores of Lake Kabitikwia, west of Lake Nipigon in Ontario, Canada. They are about 100 miles (161 km) north of the US-Canadian border. The team reports they are OK and awaiting the arrival of their crew to retrieve the balloon.

With Team 2's landing, just one balloon is still flying: the US/Polish entry of Andy Cayton and Krzysztof Zapart. At the time Team 2 landed, Cayton and Zapart were about 75 miles (120 km) behind and traveling at more than 40 mph (64.4 kph), steadily reeling in their rivals. At this rate, Team 1 should exceed Team 2's distance in less than two hours.

The Command Center will remain in operation until Team 1 has landed and the team and balloon are accounted for.

Second No More! Cayton-Zapart Emerge On Top At America's Challenge

October 10, 2019

Posted: 8:30 AM MDT (1430z)

In 2014, Poland's Krzysztof Zapart, a jovial newcomer to gas ballooning, flew in his first America's Challenge and impressed in his debut by finishing second. After a weather-related cancellation in 2015, with a couple of Gordon Bennett races under his belt, Zapart came back in 2016 for his second America's Challenge. Same result. Second.

In 2017, Zapart teamed up with American veteran Andy Cayton, a two-time America's Champion as hungry for victory as himself. They exceeded the former America's Challenge distance record by a

considerable margin, and Zapart set a new Polish distance record. But the Swiss team of Nicolas Tieche and Laurent Sciboz flew just a little farther and won the race. Krzysztof Zapart was second again.

So this year, do you think Krzysztof Zapart was hungry?

Well, fourth time is the charm. The time-honored strategy of coming from behind paid off, as Andy Cayton and Krzysztof Zapart flew further than any of their competitors and are the apparent winners of the 23rd America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons.

Cayton and Zapart landed at about 7:30 MDT (1330z) in a very remote area along the Muketei River about 120 miles (193 km) west/northwest of Attawapiskat, a small town on Canada's James Bay. The landing site is in tundra and is wet and marshy. The pilots are in good spirits and the Command Center is working with their ground support team to get assistance to them.

The team flew 1,616.46 miles (2601.44 km) an impressive distance in a race where the balloons routinely travel more than 1,000 mi (1609 km). They were aloft about 58 hours.

Finishing second were America's Challenge newcomers Eric Decellieres and Vincent Leys from France, logging an impressive 1,327 miles (2137.6 km). Leys, the nine-time world distance gas ballooning champion, and relative rookie Decellieres said they were looking forward to a nice, long, pleasurable, and safe flight, and they achieved that.

Finishing third was the other French team, Benoit Pelard and Benoit Peterle, who have been flying in the America's Challenge since 2014. This is the first time the team has finished on the podium.

The unofficial order of finish with approximate distances flown is as follows:

1. Andy Cayton, USA, and Krzysztof Zapart, Poland (Team 1), 1616.46 mi/2601.44 km, duration 58 hours, 2 minutes
2. Eric Decellieres and Vincent Leys, France (Team 2), 1327.23 mi/2135.96 km, duration 43 hours, 9 minutes
3. Benoit Pelard and Benoit Peterle, France (Team 7), 1216.89 mi/1958.40 km, duration 39 hours, 0 minutes
4. Brian Duncan and Brenda Cowlshaw, USA (Team 3), 1091.98 mi/1757.38 km, duration 34 hours, 44 minutes
5. Noah Forden and Bert Padelt, USA (Team 4), 1016.50 mi/1635.90 km, duration 34 hours, 20 minutes
6. Cheri White and Mark Sullivan, USA (Team 9), 1011.95 mi/1628.58 km, duration 37 hours, 27 minutes
7. Barbara Fricke and Peter Cuneo, USA (Team 5), 992.55 mi/1597.35 km, duration 34 hours, 35 minutes
8. Christian Wagner and Thomas Lewetz, Austria (Team 8), 899.67 mi/1447.88 km, duration 28 hours, 37 minutes
9. Al Nels and Andy Baird, USA (Team 6), 580.24 mi/ 933.80 km, duration 24 hours 48 minutes

All results are unofficial until the scoring team debriefs the pilots and analyzes the data from their trackers, and any penalties are applied for violations of the race rules. Official results will be released Saturday evening, October 12.

Results, Photos, and Videos - America's Challenge Flights and Landings

October 11, 2019

Posted 11 PM MDT (0500z)

We are pleased to share with you [official results for the 23rd Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta America's Challenge](#) distance race for gas balloons. These results, based on analysis of the tracking data, are slightly different from the preliminary data posted earlier, but not in any way that changes the order of finish. The distances are given in kilometers, the official unit of measurement for distance gas ballooning.

A final listing of results including additional details, such as the nearest city, will be forthcoming later this weekend.

In the meantime, we would like to share with you more photos and video!

- [Balloon Fiesta Live! America's Challenge wrapup](#) featuring photos and videos from pilots (including some not included in the list below) and commentary from Balloon Fiesta Live! host Art Lloyd Jr. and America's Challenge media liaison Kim Vesely (the author of these blogs). This was our show on Thursday evening, October 10, when high winds cancelled Balloon Fiesta events.
- Two videos shot by Team 9's (Cheri White/Mark Sullivan, USA) crew of the [balloon's landing in central Minnesota](#) on Wednesday, October 9
- [Phone interview with Team 5 \(USA\) co-pilot Peter Cuneo, including photos](#) from Barbara Fricke and Peter Cuneo of their flight and landing
- [Landing photos and a short video](#) from Team 2, Eric Decellieres and Vincent Leys of France, and from Team 4, Noah Forden and Bert Padelt (USA)

Final America's Challenge Results Released as Competitors Celebrate

October 12, 2019

Posted 10:30 PM MDT (0430z)

The results of the 23rd America's Challenge race for gas balloons are now final and confirm what everyone already knew: Andy Cayton of the US and Krzysztof Zapart of Poland (Team 1) have triumphed.

[View the official results here!](#)

Cayton and Zapart flew 1614 miles (2598.61 km), landing in a remote area in northern Ontario province in Canada. It's traditional in reporting the results to list the city or town closest to the landing site. At tonight's awards ceremony (prize-giving, to Europeans), the room erupted in laughter when the MC said, "And they landed near . . . nowhere?" In the official results the closest town is listed as Attawapiskat, Ontario, a good 130 miles (209.2km) to the east of their landing site.



Cayton and Zapart were there to receive their medals and trophies, as were the second and third place teams, both hailing from France: Eric Decellieres and Vincent Leys (Team 2) and Benoit Pelard and Benoit Peterle (Team 7). All three of the top teams landed in Ontario.

This was Krzysztof Zapart's first America's Challenge win, though he has finished second three times. Andy Cayton has now won the race three times, all with different co-pilots. He becomes only the fourth person to win The America's Challenge three or more times: the others are the late Richard Abruzzo, who won the race five times, and the team of Barbara Fricke and Peter Cuneo, who have won four times.

The next America's Challenge race will be held in October of 2020. The America's Challenge is part of the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta, the world's biggest ballooning event.