

A Concise History of Air Racing

By Don Berliner

Chapter 5 – After the Second World War

Part 1 – 1946

Post-World War II American air racing experienced the biggest changes in the sport's history. Most obvious was the shift from a mixture of custom-built and modified factory-built airplanes to ex-military airplanes, sold dirt-cheap to returning Army and Navy pilots. They offered the additional major advantages of unprecedented speed and durability, with the result that no pre-war racer was ever raced against them.

In addition, there was the beginning of a structural shift in the sport to the dividing of airplanes into clear-cut classes, starting with what was eventually called the Unlimited Class. The classic Thompson and Bendix Trophy Races continued for a few years, but were split into Reciprocating and Jet Divisions, though the latter were open only to the military and were never much more than spectacles.

The world's first pylon race that included jets was the September 1 Lympne High Speed Handicap, at Lympne, England, one day before the first Thompson-Jet Division race. Finishing the three-lap affair in first place was a Hawker Fury at 342 mph. But in second was W. Humble in a deHavilland Vampire jet fighter at 427 mph, while in third was Geoffrey deHavilland Jr. in a deH. Hornet at 343.5 mph.

The National Air Races

Cleveland Airport was again the scene of the Labor Day extravaganza, on August 30 to September 2. The field was full of war surplus fighter planes: P-38 Lightnings, P-39 Airacobras, P-51 Mustangs, P-63 King Cobras and F4U Corsairs, along with AT-6 trainers to be raced by women who were still excluded from men's pylon races, though not from the Bendix.

The first event was the 2,048-mile grind from Los Angeles for the Bendix Trophy. Entries included 14 P-38's, 4 P-51's, 2 P-63's, one Corsair and an A-26 attack bomber. Early model Mustangs took all four of the top spots, with pre-war veteran Paul Mantz winning at a record 435.501 mph. He was able to speed non-stop on internal fuel, thanks to a then-novel wet wing. In second was veteran Jackie Cochran at 420.925 mph, and in third was Tommy Mason, flying Mantz's other Mustang, at 408.220 mph.

The Halle Trophy Race for women saw Margaret Hurlburt win the 75-mile race at 200.59 mph. In second, trailing by less than one second, was Jane Page at 200.46 mph, and in third was Ruth Johnson at 196.22 mph

The Thompson Trophy Race extended for 10 laps of a 30-mile course. Winner Alvin "Tex" Johnston, in a factory-prepared Bell P-39 "Cobra II", raced for more than 48 minutes, finishing at a record 373.908 mph. In second was pre-war racer Tony LeVier at 370.193 mph in a P-38 thought by most to be too large for pylon racing. Third went to veteran Earl Ortman in a Mustang at 367.193 mph.

Part 2 – 1947

The All American Air Maneuvers

The January 10-12 winter fixture was resumed with emphasis on the encouragement of private flying, along with aerobatics and a limited schedule of racing. In view of the visual appeal of Cleveland's Thompson and Sohio Trophy Races, they held a race for similar airplanes over 15 laps of a 15-mile course. The winner was Paul Penrose in a P-51 Mustang at 307.605 mph. In second was Charley Walling in a P-38 at 304.740 mph, and in third was Bruce Raymond in the P-51 "Galloping Ghost" at 302.775 mph.

The National Air Races

Opening the August 30-September 1 meet was the Bendix Race in which half the entrants flew P-51's, and each of them beat every other type of airplane, solidifying the Mustang's superiority in long-distance competition. Winner for the second time was Paul Mantz, at a record 460.423 mph. Joe DeBona was two minutes behind in second at 458.203 mph, while third went to Ed Lunken at 408.723 mph.

The entry list for the women's race grew from 5 to 12, as more airframe modifications were permitted. The winner was Ruth Johnson at a record 223.29 mph, well ahead of Grace Harris at 215.09 mph and Edna Gardner Whyte at 210.79 mph. The pilots of both Ranger V-12 powered AT-6E's dropped out.

The big new idea for 1947 was the 190 Cu. In. Class of 85 hp custom-built midget racers weighing as little as 500 lbs. With a \$25,000 purse offered by the Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co., it drew 13 modified-pre-war and newly-built racers. In first place after a series of elimination and semi-final heats, was Steve Wittman protégé Bill Brennand in "Buster" at 165.857 mph. Paul Penrose was second in Art Chester's V-tailed "Swee' Pea" at 165.393 mph, just two seconds behind. In third and fourth were "Fish" Salmon in the Cosmic Wind and Tony LeVier in the identical "Little Toni". The Goodyear midgets were an immediate hit with the crowd, producing the close, safe competition at a reasonable cost which had been promised as an antidote to the problems facing the races for ex-military airplanes.

As usual, the last event on Monday's program was the race for the Thompson Trophy. Four of the pilots flew rare Goodyear F2G Corsairs with their 4,000 hp engines. Cook Cleland won at a record 396.131 mph, followed by his partner, Dick Becker, at 390.133 mph, both in F2G's. Jay Deming was two seconds back in the 1946-winning airplane at 389.837 mph.

Part 3-1948

The All American Air Maneuvers

The success of the first Goodyear Trophy Race at Cleveland encouraged the January 9-11 Miami races to follow suit, and they enrolled Continental Motors Corp. as sponsor, since its C-85 engines were performing so well in all the midget racers. Twelve pilots qualified, many of them the same as at Cleveland. Bill Brennand set a national one-lap qualifying record at 170.213 mph and then won the 12-lap, 24-mile finals at 166.473 mph. In second was "Fish" Salmon in LeVier's Cosmic Wind, at 158.532 mph, and in third, Art Chester in his "Swee' Pea" at 145.650 mph.

The National Air Races

The futility of entering anything but a P-51 in the Bendix Trophy Race was recognized by its short entry list: 5 Mustangs and a deHavilland Mosquito. One of the Mustangs dropped out, and the others took the first four places. Paul Mantz won his third consecutive Bendix with a speed of 447.980 mph. His other airplane, flown by Linton Carney, finished one minute back, at 446.112 mph. Jackie Cochran was third by 10 seconds, at 445.847 mph, for the closest finish in Bendix history.

Twenty-seven pure racing airplanes showed up for the Goodyear Trophy Race, with the top qualifier being Art Chester, who set a national class record of 180.00 mph in his new "Swee' Pea II". Winner of the Finals was "Fish" Salmon in his Cosmic Wind "Minnow", 2¼ seconds ahead of Steve Wittman in his new little "Bonzo", who was 2 seconds ahead of Chester. They were clocked at 169.608 mph, 168.862 mph and 168.201 mph. The competitiveness of the new class was obvious.

In the Kendall Trophy Race for women flying AT-6's, Grace Harris was the easy winner at a record 234.962 mph. Kaddy Landry edged Dot Lemon for second place by ½ second.

The Thompson Trophy Race looked like a big win for Chuck Brown in "Cobra II", as he broke the qualifying record with 418.300 mph, and set a one-lap race record of 413.097 mph while stretching his lead to more than a lap. But with just a few miles to go, he slowed and then dropped out with vapor lock. Cleland's and Becker's F2G's had pulled out early, with damaged air scoops. With just three of the 10 starters flying at the finish, Anson Johnson won in a stock-looking P-51, averaging 383.767 mph while having flown one lap at 394 mph.

Part 4 -- 1949

The All-American Air Maneuvers

The Continental Trophy Race, from January 7 to 9, drew just nine entries. Art Chester led time trials at 174.334 mph. In the 24-mile Finals, Steve Wittman won at 176.867 mph, with Bill Brennand second in Steve's older midget, at 174.193 mph. Bob Heisel was third in Curtiss Pitts' first racer, at 170.011 mph.

Regional Midget Races

One of the goals of the new class was the spread of regional racing. Three such races were scheduled for April and May in California. In the first—the San Diego Gold Cup Race, April 23-24—designer/builder/pilot and President of the Professional Race Pilots Association (PRPA) Art Chester high-speed stalled, crashed and died. That meet continued and the other two were held successfully at Newhall on May 8 and at Ontario on May 22, giving pilots and crews valuable experience which would pay off in national races.

The 18th King's Cup Race

After a gap of 10 years, the classic British handicap race was resumed on July 30 at Elmdon. Conducted for three laps around a four-pylon, 20-mile course, it attracted the 13 pilots who had survived a series of elimination races at prior meets. The winner was J.N. Somers in a Miles Gemini light twin at 164.25 mph. In second, at 184 mph, was Ron Paine in a Miles Hawk Speed Six which had been racing since 1935. And in third place was Tony Cole in a 1930's Comper Swift at 126 mph.

The National Air Races

The Bendix Race was won at a record speed of 470.136 mph by Joe DeBona in the P-51B he had raced previously. Mantz's two Mustangs followed, Stanley Reaver in second at 450.221 mph, and "Fish" Salmon in third at 449.214 mph, a mere 36 seconds slower after more than four hours of racing.

In the Women's Trophy Race, Grace Harris repeated as winner, averaging just 216.673 mph, as fewer modifications were permitted this year. Placing second was Kaddy Landry at 214.876 mph, and third was Helen McBride at 210.097 mph.

The Goodyear Trophy Race drew a record 37 entries and 25 starters, with Billie Robinson setting a qualifying record of 183.326 mph in "Little Toni", as LeVier was concentrating on test flying for Lockheed. The Finals, for 12 laps around the 1¾-mile oval course, went to Bill Brennand for the second time, at 177.340 mph. Keith Sorenson placed second in "Deer Fly" at 176.726 mph, and Steve Wittman was third in "Bonzo" at 176.244 mph. The first six airplanes crossed the finish line in the space of less than six seconds.

The Thompson Trophy Race's 10 starters included three in Goodyear F2G Corsairs and round-the-world record holder Bill Odom in the most extensively modified Mustang yet, the "Beguine". On lap two, he misjudged a turn, tried to correct and crashed into a house, killing a woman, her child and himself, in the first racing accident in memory which involved innocent parties. Cook Cleland went on to win his second

Thompson Trophy at a record 397.071 mph, Ron Puckett was second in another F2G at 393.527 mph, and Ben McKillen completed the Corsair sweep by placing third at 387.589 mph.

This would be the last multi-class National Air Races for 15 years, and the last race at Cleveland for 18 years. Never again would the Bendix and Thompson Trophies be awarded to winners of major races. While the fatal accident was the most obvious reason, it was far from the only reason. Major sponsors had shifted their work to jet-propelled airplanes and found it hard to justify bank-rolling races for propeller planes. The following June, when war broke out in Korea, the American military withdrew its airplanes from all air shows, and the Cleveland organizers were left with little besides the midgets, whose sponsor had completed its term.

Part 5 – 1950

The All American Air Maneuvers

At Opa-Locka Airport, January 13-15, the Continental Trophy Race drew 19 airplanes: all of the top midgets in the country, plus the first two radical pusher-prop designs, neither of which performed. Top qualifier was Keith Sorenson in the Cosmic Wind "Ballerina" at a record 186.047 mph. In the 12-lap Final Race, Steve Wittman won going away at a Finals' record 185.400 mph. In second place was Sorenson at 182.044 mph, and in third, Bob Downey in "Shoestring" at 181.334 mph.

The 19th King's Cup Race

Thirty-six pilots entered the race on June 17 at Wolverhampton. The race was for three laps of a 62-mile course, and was won by Edward Day in a Miles Hawk Trainer at 138.5 mph. Second was Peter Townsend in a Hawker Hurricane at 283 mph, and third was A.H. Wheeler in an Auster 5 at 132.5 mph.

There were four regional races for midget racers: June 24 at Westchester, New York; June 25 at San Jose, California; July 15-16 at Chattanooga, Tennessee, and September 23-24 at Reading, Pennsylvania.

The International Air Fair

Detroit, Michigan, was the site of the August 11-13 Continental Trophy Race for the 190 Cu. In. Class midgets. Bob Downey was the top qualifier in the Cosmic Wind "Minnow", setting a national record of 195.122 mph. But in the Second Elimination Heat, he and Bill Brennan flew so low and so close together that both were disqualified. In the Finals, John Paul Jones set a national Finals record of 187.785 mph in winning in the Cosmic Wind "Little Toni". Wittman followed at 185.050 mph, and Sorenson was third at 184.576 mph.

Part 6 – 1951

The season consisted of three 190 Cu. In. Class races, at Chattanooga, Reading and Detroit. The first two were regional events, with Steve Wittman winning both in his "Bonzo". He won at Chattanooga at 178.36 mph to Bob Downey's 176.32 mph in "Minnow". At Reading, it was Wittman at 184.694 mph to 180.678 mph for Bob Porter in Steve's "Buster".

The National Air Races

Detroit was granted "National" status, even though only the midgets raced, for the Continental Trophy. The leader, among 22 qualifiers, was John Paul Jones in "Shoestring" at a time trials record 199.778 mph. In the Final race, for 12 laps around the 2 ½-mile course, it was Jones at another record, 197.218 mph. Wittman was second at 192.714 mph, and Sorenson was third at 187.476 mph.

Part 7 – 1952

The Tennessee Products Cup Race

Chattanooga was the scene of a small piece of air racing history. Bill Falck, starting in 1948 with the awkward-looking "Rivets", had gradually improved its streamlining to the point that he was able to cruise past veteran Steve Wittman for his first win in what would become a great career. Falck averaged 186.953 mph to Steve's 186.790 mph.

The 20th King's Cup Race

The National Air Races, held July 11-12 at Woolsington Aerodrome, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, included three qualifying rounds of two laps of the 32.8-mile course. Twenty-three pilots placed high enough to start the King's Cup Race, for four laps and a total of 131 miles. Winner was C. Gregory in a Taylorcraft Plus D at 113.5 mph, second was G.R.I. Parker in a Percival Proctor at 146 mph, and third was P.G. Lawrence in a Proctor at 149.5 mph. The fastest lap was by J.W. Wilson in a deHavilland Vampire jet at 500 mph.

The National Air Races

The Continental Trophy Race at Detroit's Wayne Major Airport on August 30-September 1 drew 16 entries, four of which broke the imaginary "200 mph barrier" in time trials. John Paul Jones was fastest, at 203.16 mph, followed by Bill Falck at 200.89 mph, while both Steve Wittman and Jim Miller clocked 200.00 mph. The 12-lap Finals saw Wittman hold off Jones to win by 0.3 seconds: 197.29 mph to 197.16 mph. Jones was then penalized for cutting a pylon, elevating Falck to second place at 194.38 mph.

While the racing was a success, the air show had its problems. An Air Force F-89 broke up during a demonstration, killing its two-man crew, and a spectator was killed by lightning. This was the last National Air Races for a dozen years, and not only the final Continental Trophy Race, but the last American race with a national corporate sponsor for a much longer span of time