

A Concise History of Air Racing

By Don Berliner

Chapter 3

Part One-1929

The Golden Age of Air Racing Begins

As the USA was pummeled by the Great Depression, leaving thousands of businesses wrecked and millions out of work, air racing paradoxically entered its most glorious and glamorous era. Hundreds of thousands filled airport grandstands, seeking momentary relief from their increasingly drab lives. Air racers responded with a flood of highly individual, custom-built airplanes

The All-American Air Races

The beginning of this long series of multi-class air meets was in Miami, Florida, over the weekend of January 7-8. Information is hard to find, and so will be added as it becomes available.

The Ninth King's Cup Race

The July 5-6 race started at Heston and extended for 590 miles north to Blackpool. Forty one pilots started. On the second day, the 26 remaining in the race continued north into Scotland and returned south to Heston, for 580 miles. The winner was Richard Atcherley in a Gloster Grebe Mk.II at 150 mph. Second was L. G. Richardson in a deH.60 Gypsy Moth at 100.2 mph, while in third was two-time winner W.L. Hope in another Gypsy Moth.

The Cleveland National Air Races

Under the direction of brothers Cliff and Phil Henderson, America's National Air Races found a home at Cleveland Municipal Airport. With strong backing from many elements of the community, including major manufacturers, stability was created and led to steady growth in the popularity and significance of what quickly became one of America's leading spectator events.

The 1929 races, held from August 24 through September 2, were crowded with cross-country races, pylon races, novelty races, aerobatic acts, military demonstrations, band concerts and fireworks displays. In a few days, naïve spectators became authorities on the sport of airplane racing.

The most heavily publicized event was the Women's Transcontinental Race from Los Angeles, unfortunately plagued by controversy, starting with the threat of a boycott by some of the nation's leading female pilots. The two divisions of the long, multi-stop grind were won by Louise Thaden in a TravelAir in 20:02:02, and Phoebe Omlie in a Monocoupe in 25:10:36.5.

Another step en route to the classic Bendix Trophy Race was taken with the 2,042-mile Non-Stop Los Angeles to Cleveland Derby. The winner, in 13:15:07 and 154.09 mph, was Henry Brown in

a Lockheed Air Express. Not far behind was Lee Schoenhair in a Lockheed Vega in 13:51:10 for 147.407 mph. Roscoe Turner arrived third in a Vega, but after the deadline for arrivals.

What turned out to be the most important race on the schedule was listed as merely “Event #26 – Unlimited Free-for-All”. It was open to both military and civilian airplanes of any design or power. Leading all the way (5 laps of the 10-mile course) at 194.90 mph was young Doug Davis, in a custom-built racer, the TravelAir “Mystery”, which out-ran the best the Army and Navy could field, to win \$750 and the Thompson Cup. This would soon be replaced by the Thompson Trophy, one of aviation’s classic awards.

Hundreds of thousands packed the stands, while much of the country became aware of the excitement on Cleveland’s west side, thanks to the skills and imagination of the Hendersons. For the next 20 years, Cleveland would be the center of air racing.

The 11th Schneider Cup Race

The race was scheduled for Calshot, Isle of Wight, off the south coast of England, for September 6-7. Fourteen entries included one from the USA, one from Germany, and two from France, all of which were withdrawn, leaving a starting line-up of three British Supermarines and three Italian Macchis. The up-dated Supermarine S.6 had a 1,900 hp Rolls Royce “R” engine, while the Macchi M.67 had a 1,400 hp Isotta-Fraschini.

Henry Waghorn, in one of the S.6’s, blasted seven times around the 50-km./31-mi. course in 39:42.8 for a closed-course record of 328.63 mph. Tomaso dal Molin, in the 900 hp Macchi M.52R, was second at 284.11 mph, while both M.67’s went out with mechanical troubles. This was the second straight solid win for the British.

Part 2 – 1930

The Second All-American Air Races

While the military predominated in demonstrations during the January 13-15 meet at Miami, the racing was mainly for civilian pilots in civilian airplanes. Pylon events were limited by piston displacement, with almost all entrants flying commercially built machines. The highest winning speeds in any of the 15-mile races were Dale Jackson’s 150.5 mph and 146.3 mph in the 800 cu. in. events, both in a 300 hp Cessna 300SP.

The Ninth King's Cup Race

This long handicap race was for 753 miles, starting and finishing at Hanworth on July 5. A record 88 pilots started and 61 finished, with the winner being Miss Winifred Brown, flying an Avro Avian III at 102.75 mph. Next came Alan Butler in a cleaned-up Gypsy Moth at 130 mph, while in third was Henry Waghorn in a Blackburn Bluebird IV at 100 mph.

The Chicago National Air Races

The August 24-September 1 event was moved to Chicago’s Curtiss-Reynolds Airport because of construction work at Cleveland. Most of the races were for classes of airplanes limited by their

engine displacement: 110 cu. in., 275 cu. in., 350 cu. in., 450 cu. in., 650 cu. in., 800 cu. in., 1,000 cu. in.

The main events included the no-holds-barred Non-Stop Los Angeles to Chicago Derby, the 1,760-mile immediate forerunner of the Bendix Trophy Race. It was won by Wiley Post, in a Lockheed Vega, at 192.326 mph. Second was Art Goebel in a Vega at 182.315 mph, and in third was Lee Shoenhair in yet another Vega, at 177.793 mph.

The other feature was the first Thompson Trophy Race, for any kind of airplane with any size engine, for 20 laps of a 5-mile course. The winner was Charles "Speed" Holman in a pure racer, the Laird "Solution", at 201.91 mph. Less than 20 seconds behind him was Jimmy Haizlip in a new TravelAir Mystery at 199.80 mph, followed by Benny Howard in his little "Pete" at 162.80 mph. Among the non-finishers was Errett Williams in the first of the Wedell Williams Racers. One pilot died: Navy Capt. Arthur Page, in the Curtiss XF6C-6, a sleek parasol monoplane built from the F6C-3; probably from inhaling carbon monoxide.

Part 3 – 1931

The All-American Air Races

On January 8-10, a major meet was held at Miami Municipal Airport, near what became the Opa-Locka Naval Air Station. It was promoted as an excuse for pilots living well to the north to have a vacation in the Florida sun.

The only race with no displacement limit was the Cincinnati Trophy Race, won by Art Davis in a Waco Taperwing at 149.37 mph. Close behind, in second, was Johnny Livingston at 147.906 mph. At the other end of the scale, three Goodyear blimps had a race in which first place went to the slowest! In a novelty race for amphibians, each pilot had to land in Biscayne Bay and catch a fish before crossing the finish line.

The 10th King's Cup Race

New rules were in place for this race, held July 25 at Heston, England. It was open to amateur pilots (and effectively to civil airplanes), and their airplanes had to be capable of at least 100 mph. The 983-mile cross-country handicap saw 40 starters and 21 finishers. The winner was E.C.T. Edwards in a Bluebird IV at 117.8 mph, second was F.G. Gibbons in a Simmonds Spartan at 109.1 mph, and third was Geoffrey Rodd in a deHavilland Puss Moth at 127.5 mph.

The National Air Races

They were back in Cleveland, August 30-September 7, with a more permanent facility on a part of the airport now occupied by NASA. A half mile of grandstands seated 50,000, and there was now a race administration building. The future of air racing looked bright.

After years of development, it was time to run the first Bendix Transcontinental Derby from Los Angeles. Of eight pilots entered, six flew various Lockheed monoplanes, one flew the TravelAir Mystery in which Doug Davis won the 1929 Thompson Cup. And 1925 Schneider Cup winner Jimmy Doolittle flew the hot little Laird "Super Solution" biplane, winning by more than an hour, and averaging 223.04 mph, to just 199.82 mph by Harold Johnson in a Lockheed Orion.

In the Thompson Trophy Race, a pair of GeeBees were in the spotlight. The Granville Brothers (hence GB) ran a small shop and saw racing as a way to become better known. In their stubby, single-seat Model Z was Lowell Bayles, who won the 10-lap, 100-mile race by almost a minute, averaging a record 236.24 mph, to 227.99 mph for Jimmy Wedell in a new Wedell Williams Racer.

The distinctive shape and yellow-and-black color scheme of the “Z” captured the imaginations of millions, and lifted air racing to the next rung of popularity.

The 12th Schneider Cup Race

The long run of the Schneider ended at Lee-on-Solent, in southern England, on September 13. The record dash by John Boothman in the new Supermarine S.6b with its 2,300 hp Rolls Royce “R”, predecessor of the later Griffon, was an anti-climax. No other entries appeared to challenge the British, and they took possession of the Cup with a third straight win. Boothman’s 340.08 mph for 7 laps and 218 miles was a world mark for closed courses. Three weeks later, G. H. Stainforth became the first human to exceed 400 mph, when he flew an S.6b over a 3-km. course at 406.99 mph, an Absolute World Record.

When the Schneider ended, there were a lot of highly impressive racing seaplanes being developed with great power and advanced streamlining. In France, there were the Nieuport-Delage 450, the Dewoitine D.412 and the Bernard HV-220. In Italy, Mario Castoldi had designed the MC.72 with a pair of Fiat V-12 engine in tandem. Five were built by Macchi, at least two of which were lost in fatal crashes before the final Schneider Race. Eventually, one of them would set the 3-km. record for piston-engined seaplanes at 440.681 mph, which still stands.

Part 4 – 1932

The All-American Air Races

No information yet available on the Miami races of January 7-9.

The 11th King's Cup Races

The race was on two days for a total of 1,223 miles, with the start and finish at Brooklands, on the south-west side of London. The first three-time winner was W.L. Hope in a Fox moth at 124.25 mph. Second place went to E.H. Fielden in a racey little Comper Swift at 156 mph, and in third, W.L. Runciman in a Puss Moth at 130 mph. Harry Brown turned in the fastest time—176 mph—in an Avro Mailplane.

The International Aviation Meeting

On July 23-26, near Zurich, Switzerland, an air meet was conducted, consisting of races for a variety of civilian, military and commercial aircraft, along with an aerobatics competition. The fastest of the races appears to have been the International Speed Contest, won at 213 mph by Cassinelli, of Italy, in a Fiat CR.30. His teammate Pietro Scapinelli, was second in a CR.30 at 209 mph, and Nyffenegger, of Switzerland was third in a Lockheed Orion, at 205 mph.

The National Air Races

The unquestioned star of Cleveland's August 27-September 5 meet was the barrel-shaped Gee R-1, with its brilliant red-and-white paint job, even though Wedell Williams Racers racked up a much better record. The R-series of GeeBees quickly became the symbol of air racing, a title they still hold.

The L.A.-to-Cleveland Bendix Race saw a Wedell Williams sweep of the first three places. Jimmy Haizlip was first at 245.28 mph, Jimmy Wedell was second at 232.37 mph, and Roscoe Turner was third at 225.99 mph. Lee Gehlbach was fourth in the lower-powered GeeBee R-2.

In the Thompson, Jimmy Doolittle flew wide and cautiously in the GeeBee R-1, yet still managed to win by a full minute and set a record of 252.69 mph. Next came the same three Wedell Williams: Jimmy Wedell at 242.50 mph, Roscoe Turner at 233.04 mph, and Haizlip at 231.30 mph. It was the most complete domination by one make in pre-war National Air Racing.

Part 5 – 1933

The All-American Air Races

The January 5-7 races at Miami, Florida...information still be sought.

The Coupe Deutsch de la Muerthe

The third series carrying this name and sponsorship began May 29 at Etampes, France. The race consisted of 10 laps of a 100-km./62-mile course, followed by a rest period, and then another 10 laps, for a total of 2,000 km./1,243 mi. It was billed as an all-out international race for airplanes with engines having no more than 6 litres (375 cu. in.) piston displacement. Only one non-French pilot competed in the series. Instead, it became a showcase for the slim little racers carrying the Caudron name.

In 1933, 12 pilots entered, five started and three finished. The winner was Georges Detre, flying a radial-engined Potez 53, and averaging 200.59 mph. Second-place went to Raymond Delmotte in a Caudron 362, at 180.9 mph. Third was Nick Comper, of England, in a low-powered Comper Swift at 148.87 mph.

The National Air Races

Two fully competitive meets were held the same Fourth of July weekend: the National Air Races in Los Angeles, and the American Air Races in Chicago as part of the World's Fair. Controversy over sanctioning by the National Aeronautic Association (NAA) resulted in considerable bad feelings, and brief suspensions for those who raced a Chicago.

The official National Air Races were held at the Los Angeles Municipal Airport (formerly Mines Field) on July 1-4. Both the prestige races were conducted there, rather than at Chicago. The Bendix Race saw another Wedell Williams sweep, as two of them were the only finishers out of seven starters. Roscoe Turner won at 214.78 mph, Jimmy Wedell was second at 206.32 mph. The GeeBee R-1 was destroyed in a fatal accident on take-off at Indianapolis, killing Russell Boardman. Russell Thaw withdrew the R-2 after Boardman's accident.

In the Thompson Trophy Race, Roscoe Turner appeared to have won at 241 mph, but was belatedly disqualified for failing to deal properly with a pylon cut. This gave the win to Jimmy Wedell at 237.95 mph, and second place to Lee Gehlbach at 224.95 mph. All three flew Wedell Williams Racers. In third was Roy Minor in Benny Howard's "Mike" at 199.870 mph.

In the Shell Speed Dash (a straight 3-km. run), Turner was first at 280.274 mph, Wedell was second at 278.920 mph and Gehlbach was third at 251.930 mph.

The American Air Races

The more prestigious races at Los Angeles drew the big names and the airplanes with big engines. The meet at Chicago's Municipal Airport featured events for limited-displacement classes up to 500 cu. in. For one of the few times in the 1930's, women were allowed to race against men around the pylons.

The Baby Ruth Trophy Race was won by Johnny Livingston in the Cessna CR-3 at 201.42 mph, with Art Davis second in the CR-2 at 200.76 mph and Harold Neumann third in the Howard "Ike" at 177.10 mph. In the Aero Digest Trophy Race, it was Livingston at 204.54 mph, Davis at 202.88 mph and Neumann at 170.81 mph.

The 12th King's Cup Race

A new venue—Hatford, near the deHavilland factory, north of London—and a new system were features of this race, held July 8. There were three qualifying races of lengths from 195 to 224 mph, with the top eight going on to the 206-mile finals. The ultimate winner was Geoffrey deHavilland in the prototype Leopard Moth at 140 mph. In second place was E.C.T. Edwards in a Comper Swift at 127 mph, and third was A.J. Styran in another Leopard Moth at 139 mph.

The International Air Races

Competition for spectators and publicity from the Century of Progress—Chicago's Worlds Fair—was too much for this race, organized by the Henderson brothers. It was held on Labor Day weekend, September 1-4, , at Curtis-Reynolds Airport.

There were two main races, one being the Women's International Free-for-All, which was won by Mary Haizlip in a Wedell Williams Racer at 191.11 mph. Second was Florence Klingensmith in a GeeBee Y at 189.04 mph, while in third was Martie Bowman in a GeeBee Sportster at 168.86 mph.

In the Frank Phillips Trophy Race, Klingensmith's Y GeeBee lost several square feet of wing fabric, leading to her fatal crash. The winner was Jimmy Wedell at 245.95 mph, second was Lee Gehlbach in another Wedell Williams Racer, at 217.48 mph, while third went to Roy Minor in Howard's "Ike" at 215.15 mph.

Four major, multi-class races in one year turned out to be too much. Henceforth, there would be just two, Miami and Cleveland.

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