

A Concise History of Air Racing

By Don Berliner

Chapter 6 – A Low Point

Part 1 – 1953

The year 1953 was the first in modern American history in which there was no air racing without a war to blame. The sponsors dried up, and the big meets had passed into history. All that was left was the pilots and owners and midget racing planes of the Professional Race Pilots Association (PRPA). It would be up to them to keep the sport alive, a task for which they were not well equipped. If there were to be any races, it would be up to them to hustle prize money, to plan and to organize and to publicize.

In 1953, there was nothing to the American air racing scene but vague talk.

The 21st King's Cup Race

Keeping the world from forgetting air racing completely was the British National Air Races, at Southend-on-Sea, June 20. Three qualifying races, each for three laps around the 10-mile course, led to the King's Cup Race. The 12 finalists flew six laps, with Pat Fillingham winning in a deHavilland Chipmunk at 142 mph. W.P. Bowles was second in a Miles Messenger at 133 mph, and D.R. Robertson was third at 115 mph in a deHavilland Moth Minor.

Part 2 - 1954

The 22nd King's Cup Race

Baginton Airport, Coventry, was the scene of the June 19 race, which began with a series of qualifying races to select the 15 British pilots to start the main event, for 4 laps of the 17-mile course. The winner was H. Wood in a Miles Messenger at 133 mph, second was M.A. d'Arcy in another Messenger at 129 mph, and third was Miss Freydis Leaf in a Miles Hawk Major at 138 mph. She also won the annual point championship.

The Western New York Air Races

Thanks to the hard work of members of PRPA, now based at Rochester, New York, a small meet was organized for Dansville, N.Y. (population 5,000), and having a total purse of \$4,000. Eleven pilots showed up, eager to race. Among the newcomers was TWA Capt. Tom Cassutt with his yellow midwing #111. Time trials around the 2-mile, 6-pylon oval course were won by Bill Falck at 190.982 mph, though he lost any chance at the Finals by cutting a pylon in a preliminary heat. The Finals went to Jim Miller in his "Little Gem" at 181.956 mph, with Dick Ohm second in "Shoestring" at 180.942 mph and Bob Porter third in "Buster" at 176.326 mph.

Part 3 – 1955

The Western New York Air Races

This second race at Dansville, N.Y., (July 2-3) was much like the first: small, competitive, fun for those present, and unknown to the rest of the world. Bill Falck won the Finals at 186.851 mph, to Wittman's 185.328 mph and Dick Ohm's 181.818 mph. Newcomer Cassutt placed fourth at 180.678 mph.

Through all the ups and downs of American air racing, the King's Cup Race remained steady and reliable. On August 20, Coventry again saw three qualifying races leading up to the feature race. Fifteen pilots took part, with the winner over four laps of a 17-mile course was Peter Clifford in the sole surviving Percival Mew Gull at 213.5 mph. In second was Peter Vanneck in a deHavilland Tiger Moth at 106 mph, and in third, J.R. Johnston in a Miles Hawk Trainer at 140 mph.

Part 4 – 1956

Regional Midget Races

There were three small regional races for the 190 Cu. In. Class on the American schedule, a hint that better times might be coming. The first was at Springfield, Illinois, on May 26-27, which attracted seven entries. Bill Falck won the feature race at 191.07 mph to Wittman's 190.02 mph and Cassutt's 188.77 mph. The second race was at Niagara Falls, New York, on July 7-8, where longer straightaways contributed to Falck's record speed of 208.81 mph, to Wittman's 204.54 mph and Cassutt's 203.16 mph. The final regional race of the summer was at Oshkosh, Wisconsin, not yet the sporting aviation capital of the world, where Wittman won on the short course at 196.84 mph, followed by Falck at 196.72 mph and Dick Ohm at 188.45 mph.

The 24th King's Cup Race

This July 21 race at Coventry combined several others, for which trophies were awarded. The course for the top 15 in the Championship point standings was four laps of 17 miles, each. The winner was James Denyer in an Auster Alpha at 124 mph, second was Alfred Paine in a Percival Proctor at 153.5 mph, and third was David Ogilvy in a Comper Swift at 133 mph.

Part 5 - 1957

The 25th King's Cup Race

Highlight of the July 14 event at Coventry was the debut of the Miles Sparrowjet, much of whose airframe had raced as a Sparrowhawk from 1935 to 1950. It was now powered by a pair of small French turbojet engines. The race was for one lap of a 42-mile triangular course, and was won by Fred Dunkerley in the Sparrowjet at 228 mph. Placing second was J. Rush in a Miles Falcon Six at 172.75 mph, and third was Walter Bowles in a Miles Monarch at 137.75 mph.

International Air Show & Races

This was a small race with a big name, though it occupied the same part of Oshkosh, Wisconsin's Winnebago County Airport as would the EAA Fly-Ins, starting 13 years later. The August 11 12-lap race around the 1¾-mile, six-pylon oval was won by local hero Steve Wittman at 192.76 mph, followed by Tom Cassutt at 187.04 mph and Bill Falck at 186.39 mph..

The First National Championship Air Races

Another race with an exaggerated title, it was the start of a four-year run at Baer Field, Fort Wayne, Indiana, August 29-31. Twelve pilots and airplanes were on the field, with Wittman leading time trials at 203.16 mph and the steadily improving Cassutt second at 201.79 mph. In the 12-lap, 30-mile Finals, Falck beat Wittman by one second: 196.65 mph to 196.29 mph. Cassutt placed third at 191.42 mph.

Part 6 – 1958

Central New York Air Show & Races

Fulton, New York, was host to the first race of the year, on July 5-6. Ten pilots competed, with Falck and Wittman tied in time trials at 201.79 mph, and Cassutt close at 200.89 mph. The Finals was one of the most closely fought races ever, with the lead changing as often as several time in a single lap. The winner was Falck at 196.72 mph, second was Cassutt at 196.19 mph, and third was Wittman at 192.24 mph.

The 26th King's Cup Race

Still based at Coventry, this classic event on July 12 drew the top seven finishers in each of three preliminary races. The winner of the race for four laps of an 18-mile closed course was J.H. Denyer in a Tiger Moth at 118.5 mph. Placing second was R.H. McIntosh in a Percival Proctor at 152 mph, and third was W.H. Bailey in a Miles Hawk Trainer at 128 mph.

The 2nd National Championship Air Races

This repeat race was held August 29-31 for the largest purse in several years, \$7,500. A sure sign of growth was the entry list of 14, including several airplanes that hadn't been raced in more than five years. Time trials around the 2 3/8ths-mile course was won by Tom Cassutt at 200.70 mph, with second going to Falck at 197.92 mph and third to Goodyear veteran Jim Miller (#14 "Little Gem") at 194.32 mph. In the 12-lap Finals, Cassutt gained his first victory at 195.80 mph, with Wittman second at 193.95 mph and Falck third at 193.15 mph.

Part 7 – 1959

The 27th King's Cup Race

The previous year's location, course and format were repeated for the 21 entries. Winner, at 143 mph, was A.J. Spiller in a Percival Proctor. Next was Ron Paine in the Miles Hawk Speed Six at 189 mph, and third was H.G. Davies in a Miles Gemini at 167 mph.

The 3rd National Championship Air Races

This was the only American pylon race of the year, attracting 13 entries for the September 19-21 event. Time trials saw Falck's 1956 record broken by Jim Miller, with a lap at 209.56 mph. Falck was second at 206.52 mph, while Cassutt was third at 205.53 mph in his new ultra-light (435 lbs.) midget.

The Finals was for 15 laps and 36 miles, with Jim Miller winning at 199.15 mph, to 196.94 mph for Falck, Paul Booth was third in a new Garland Pack racer at 188.49 mph, and Cassutt fourth at 182.12 mph.

Part 8 – 1960

The 4th National Championship Air Races

July 2-4 saw this meet that drew 13 entries, including the first foreign pilot to race in the USA in many years: Norwegian airline Capt. Jan Christie, new owner of the lightweight #11 Cassutt Racer. In time trials, Miller was first at 207.52 mph, Falck second at 204.06 mph and Mel Stickney third in "Deer Fly" at 197.92 mph. In the first heat, Christie became the first non-American to win in the USA since Michel Detroyat at Los Angeles in 1936.

In the Consolation, an era ended when popular pilots Jim Rice and Charlie Bishop collided at the scatter pylon and crashed fatally. After a long interval, the Finals were conducted, with Miller winning again, at 200.23 mph to Falck's 198.89 mph. Plans for the 1961 Ft. Wayne races were cancelled due to the inability to attract a military demonstration team. It would be the last American race for several years.

The 28th King's Cup Race

A week later, at Baginton, Coventry, the top seven pilots in each of three qualifying races competed for the classic trophy over 4 laps of a 17-mile course. First place went to John de M. Severne in a 30 hp VW-powered Druine Turbulent single-seater at 109 mph. In second, also flying a Turbulent, was C.P. Francis at 97.5 mph, and in third, W.H. Bailey in his Hawk Trainer at 133 mph.

Part 9 – 1961

The 29th King's Cup Race

The standard system continued for the July 9 race, with 21 entries, though foreign airplanes were allowed. The winner was Brian Iles in a Miles M.18 at 142 mph, second was R.H. McIntosh in a Cessna 175 at 145.5 mph, and third was T.G. Knox in a Proctor at 161 mph. The highest speed in the race was 298 mph by Viv Bellamy in a Spitfire Mk.VIII Trainer.

Part 10 – 1962

The 30th King's Cup Race

The August 18 race was again at Coventry and for 67½ miles. It was open to the top finishers in the Air League, John Morgan and Tiger Moth Trophy Races. First place went to Peter Clifford in a little Topsy Nipper at 101 mph, second to Ron Paine in a Hawk Speed Six at 189.5 mph, and third was a rare tie between Dennis Hartas in a Tiger Moth at 121.5 mph and A.J. Spiller in a Proctor at 145.5 mph.

While there would be no pylon racing in the USA in 1961-1962-1964, there was a development which would play a major role in the future of air racing in both the USA and Europe. In 1962, designer/builder/pilot Tom Cassutt, a self-educated aeronautical engineer, produced professional quality construction drawings to a modified version of his first midget racer, which he called the 111m. By bypassing the difficult jobs of designing and proving a new design, he speeded up the flow of new airplanes and thus new pilots into the 190 Cu. In. Class.

Part 11 – 1964

The 31st King's Cup Race

The entire 1964 world air race season occurred on August 5 at Coventry, England, when a planned 3-day meet was cut to one by bad weather. Three preliminary races were held, then the King's Cup, for four laps of the 18-mile course. The winner was Paul Bannister in a Topsy Nipper at 102.5 mph, second was Randal Porteus in a Beagle Airedale at 137.5 mph, and third was A.J. Spiller in a Cessna 18 at 162.5 mph

In the USA, where there had not been a race since 1960, there was real fear that a once great sport was gone.