



Flying Machines Roar and Soar at the Reno Air Races

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by Ed Anderson



Air Highways

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Reno Air Races 2008

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The 45th National Championship Air Races & Air Show called "A Celebration", presented by Breitling, kicked off September 10 and ran through September 14, at Reno Stead Field, some eight miles north of Reno, NV. This year, again, the Reno Air Races comprised six classes of pylon to pylon racing aircraft, involving:

ü Formula One (F-1): single wing homebuilt or kit assembled, powered by a 100-hp engine, fixed landing gear, and fixed pitch propeller. Speeds can reach 250 mph over a 3.1875-mile egg-shaped course. Qualified entries numbered 20 aircraft. Prize purse monies-\$55,000.00.

ü Biplanes: small aerobatic aircraft such as the Pitts Special, the Mong, and the Smith Miniplane also taken airborne from a positional ground start into a similar track, 3.1761-mile egg-shaped course. These nifty little 'Bipes' can often attain speeds of between 175 and 250 mph. Qualifiers numbered 17 this year. Prize purse-\$55,000.00.

ü T-6: Texan, Harvard, or SNJ aircraft types, each powered by a single

P&W Wasp R-1340-AN-1 radial engine. Collected and released by a pace plane for an air race start onto a 5.0693-mile oval course, where speeds can reach upwards of 240 mph. Total competitors numbered 21 aircraft. Prize purse-\$105,000.00.



an air-start onto an almost circular 6.9992-mile course, can often touch speeds of 375 mph. Twenty-three qualifiers made the cut competing for a cash purse of \$115,000.00.

ü Jet: match racing between L-29 Delphin, L-39 Albatros and Fouga jets on a rather oblong 8.4371-mile course (similar to that of the Unlimited Class power racers) involved some 10 aircraft for a posted total purse of \$5,000.00.

ü Unlimited: open to any piston-driven aircraft having an empty weight greater than 4,500 pounds. This class normally includes stock or modified, ex-military fighters of WW II and Korean War vintage, such as

the P-51 Mustang, Hawker Sea Fury, F8F Bearcat, F7F Tigercat, and Russian Yaks. On 'Gold Race Sunday' it is not uncommon to witness some of the more highly modified Unlimiteds reach or surpass the 480 mph mark. Total qualifying aircraft numbered 24, chasing a prize purse of \$765,000.00.

The individual race-heats normally run six to eight course laps having seven/eight aircraft in each heat. Early every morning before 8:00 it all got going with the mini-might Formula Ones and the 'Bipes'. Each day progressed accordingly, fitting in all race classes with daily position exchanges as to their placings, leading up to final standings, and the National Championships on 'Gold Race Sunday'.

In between the daily race heats, the Reno Air Race Association hosted a fully sanctioned airshow. This year's performers featured the United States Air Force Thunderbirds Air Demonstration Team, military flypasts, military and civilian flying displays, topped with civilian aerobats.

For many of us who attend the annual National Championship Air Races, associated with aviation or not, there isn't much that can beat the sights, sounds and excitement inherent with pylon to pylon air racing at Reno, Nevada in September. Once the qualifying was done, Thursday kicked off the competitive heat races, made up of Bronze, Silver, and Gold categories.



Poor weather conditions and breakdowns naturally often change hopeful and expected outcomes. Such however, were not the common fare in the high desert this year. The weather couldn't have been better, and although a few planes broke down and fell out of the running, there was not the onslaught of 'gremlins' of past years, all of which made for some pretty darn good racing. When all was said and done on the final day of racing, and the posting of official results, the Formula One Championship was captured by Steve Senegal of San Bruno, CA in #11, "Endeavor" (a Dave Hoover AR-6) posting an impressive winning speed of 246.119 mph. The (Sport) Biplane winner was Tom Aberle of Fallbrook, CA in his modified Mong Sport, "Phantom" with an amazing speed of 251.975. The T-6 Gold Medal Champ was Ken Dwelle of Auburn, CA, who set a class record in good ol' "Tinkertoy", #7 with a surprising speed of 244.523 mph. Lee Behel of San Jose, CA captured first place in the Sport Gold Race in his Lancair Legacy "Breathless" at a speed of 335.464 mph. The SuperSport Gold, as it turned out, was no contest for Jon Sharp, as he flashed the course at 392.252 mph in his NXT "Nemesis". Former space shuttle commander Curt Brown of Hudson, WI bested his challengers in an L-29 Delphin "Viper", turning a speed of 507.124 mph. **The Unlimited Breitling Gold race** was, with little doubt, the most an-

anticipated Unlimited contest in recent memory. The fastest and most popular heavy weights were all together in the final quest for supremacy and bragging rights. Six time National Champion Dago Red, #4, a P-51 Mustang, with Dan Martin of San Jose, CA. aboard, had the so-called pole position. Michael Brown of Carson City, NV, hungry to repeat his 2006 win, had second position with the big Hawker Sea Fury, #232, "September Fury". A step behind in the grid was none other than the returning Bill (Tiger) Destefani of Bakersfield, CA, ready to do battle driving his six time winning P-51 Mustang "Strega", #7. And, following in 4th position was last year's Champion, John Penny from Evergreen CO, looking to repeat his 2007 win in the eight time National Champion F8F Bearcat "Rare Bear". The rest of the pack, potential winners all, would not run with the leaders this day. Completing the usual pre-race introduction ceremonies, the racers quickly went airborne, trailing the Planes of Fame T-Bird pace-plane to the point of release and the words "Gentlemen You Have A Race". Into the "Chute", power up, the fabulous four are gone, a Sea Fury, two Mustangs and a Bearcat. Around the course to the "Valley of Speed" and the indescribable sounds of powerful race engines at their peak. Here it was, truly, "The World's Fastest Motor Sport". It took but seconds

to know that this was indeed a race, the likes of which had not been seen for some time. Then from third spot Tiger gave the 'Witch' her due, and the sleek Mustang answered leaping into the lead with surprising speed, to not be caught. If the words could be heard I'd bet they'd be "Where the S... did he come from"? Mid way through the pounding and sweltering hard driving conditions, "Rare Bear" broke, streaming smoke and clawing for altitude, where Penny assessed his situation to quickly and expertly guide the broken Bearcat down to safety. Then it was further efforts to push and break "Strega", but to no avail, the lead was too great and the P-51 had the power. Brown in #232 had let his moment slip, as the Mustangs flew the course low and fast, giving Destefani first place with a course speed of 483.062 mph. Martin held second spot, marking 474.305 mph, and Brown took third at 473.816 mph.

For Bill "Tiger" Destefani it was his seventh championship, and the end of a long racing career. Well done!! And, the Mustangs are back!!

For further details and full racing results, refer to website www.airrace.org

Story and Photos By Ed Anderson