

STARS IN THE SKY

The world's best pilots and hottest planes converge upon Reno for the National Championship Air Races

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PORTRAITS BY TOMAS MUSCIONICO

Imagine 25 vintage fighter planes, each weighing 4,500 pounds or more, racing each other 50 feet off the ground at speeds approaching 500 miles per hour. Now picture yourself watching them, surrounded by a crowd big enough to fill two football stadiums, and you begin to approach the excitement of the Reno National Championship Air Races.

Held every September for the past 43 years (with one notable break after September 11th, 2001), the National Championship Air Races are not just the best event of their kind. "This is the *only* event of its kind in the world," says Mike Houghton, president and CEO of the Reno Air Racing Association, which organizes the NCAR. Fliers come from all over the world to compete in six closed-pylon race classes, which are spread out over the weeklong eight-hour-a-day meet at Reno Stead Field.

Included are a Biplane class, an AT-6 class (all World War II-era training planes), a Sport class (for limited kit-assembly planes), a relatively entry-level Formula One class, a Jet class (virtually all entrants flying the Czech "Albatros"), and the unofficial main event, the Unlimited class, which features the biggest, fastest planes in the field, most of which are modified World War II-era fighter planes such as the P-51

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The nearly 100-year-old sport of air racing has become a highly popular, big-money event, drawing an estimated 200,000 spectators, pumping about \$85 million into the local economy and attracting the world's top fliers, including Mike Houghton, president and CEO of the Reno Air Racing Association, pictured here with a Sikorsky S-38.



Houghton, here again with the Sikorsky S-38, says the weeklong, eight-hour-a-day National Championship Air Races at Reno Stead Field bring in spectators from all over the United States and numerous countries around the world.

Mustang, Hawker Sea Fury and F-8F Bearcat, among others.

"The availability of these types of airplanes is pretty limited," Houghton points out. "You're looking at airframes that are 60 years old and engines that are pretty good at chewing up parts." These are not the type of craft that can be fixed in a "pit stop." If something breaks, Houghton says, "it takes them a few months to put them back together again." All of that adds to the excitement of the event, which was won this year by Carson City's Michael Brown, a relative newcomer who first entered the competition in 1998 with the

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declared intent to dominate. His Sea Fury was clocked doing an average of 478.512 miles per hour—and note the three-decimal point precision.

Air racing is a nearly 100-year-old tradition, dating back to within five years of the Wright brothers' Kitty Hawk flight. "As soon as something moves, man figures out a way to race it, be it a donkey, a car or an airplane," Houghton says. The sport's early years were dominated by an annual event in Cleveland, but that came to a halt after a tragic accident in 1949 (Houghton notes this year's Unlimited class included a Corsair that had once flown in Cleveland). After more than a decade of random, disorganized meets, Reno's Bill Stead in 1964 dedicated himself to reestablishing a permanent race, moving it to the decommissioned Stead Army Airbase two years later. Houghton, citing the Cleveland accident, advises that the sport is "not for the light of

heart. We've had our share of tragedies. It is a dangerous sport."

RARA doesn't encourage reckless daredevils to enter. The not-for-profit organization hosts a pylon-racing training course each June and requires racers to pass qualifying heats before being allowed to compete. RARA has just seven full-time employees and 30 advisory-board members but an astounding 2,500 volunteers, some of whom staff the annual race.

"We've got an incredible base of fans and volunteers," Houghton says, noting that the 2006 event sold an estimated 200,000 tickets to spectators from "every state in the union" and around the world—including Japan, Germany, England and Brazil. According to RARA statistics, 70 percent are from outside the Reno-Sparks-Tahoe region and 80 percent are returning fans. The event fills virtually every available hotel room in the area, bringing an estimated \$85 million into the local economy.

Giving back to the fans is also an important part of RARA's mission, Houghton says. Accordingly, between races the event features military displays, U.S. Air Force Thunderbirds demonstrations and fly-bys by the latest civilian jets. "Our air show, which is used as intermission between the races, is as big or bigger than most cities' total air-show events. We've got one of the top judgments in the country for restored aircraft." In addition, pit passes allow fans to get close to the airplanes and interact with the crews, while local school children get special tours throughout the week. "If we can get one child involved in aviation, then we've succeeded," Houghton says.

Still, while the popularity of the NCAR seems ready to surge (there are now even Reno Air Races license plates available), Houghton doesn't expect it to reach a NASCAR-level following. "We've been around a lot longer than NASCAR," he says. "We are the world's fastest motor sport." 🍌



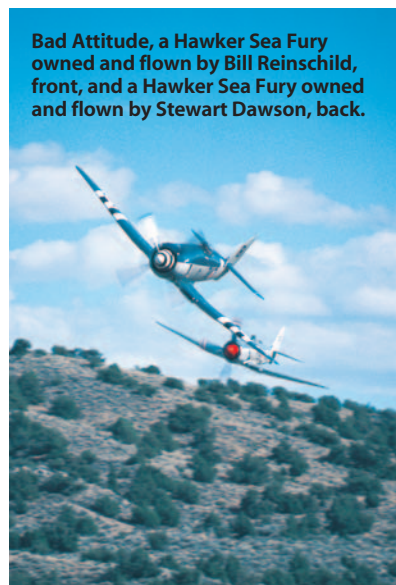
Merlin's Magic, a P-51 Mustang piloted by Stu Eberhardt.

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An AT-6 Mirage owned by Jim and Judson Thomas and piloted by Jim Thomas.



Bad Attitude, a Hawker Sea Fury owned and flown by Bill Reinschild, front, and a Hawker Sea Fury owned and flown by Stewart Dawson, back.



Riff Raff, a Hawker Sea Fury owned by Aileron Inc., flown by Robert “Hoot” Gibson.



DON 'BUCKY' DAWSON; KEVIN GRANTHAM; TOM KRAFT; CHARLES E. STEWART.