

The Coupe Gordon Bennett in Albuquerque
By Kim Vesely

In 1906, spectators gathered in Paris' famed Tuileries Gardens, in the shadow of the Louvre, to cheer on the competitors in history's first air race. Newspaper entrepreneur James Gordon Bennett, Jr., an American newspaper publisher living in France, sponsored the race that still bears his name, the Coupe Aéronautique Gordon Bennett. An American team, Frank Lahm and Henry Hersey, flew to victory, traveling nearly 400 miles (641 km). Their victory brought the race to the United States for the first time.

Since then, 28 cities in seven nations have had the honor of hosting a Gordon Bennett. Only three cities have hosted the race more than three times. Brussels, Belgium, Paris, France – and Albuquerque, USA.

Cities/Countries Hosting the Gordon Bennett			
City	Country	Events hosted	Years
Albuquerque	USA	4	1993, 1999, 2005, scheduled 2008
Antwerp	Belgium	1	1926
Arc-et-Senans	France	1	2003
Basle	Switzerland	1	1932
Berlin	Germany	1	1908
Birmingham	USA	1	1920
Bregenz	Austria	2	1988, 1989
Brussels	Belgium	6	1921, 1923, 1924, 1925, 1937, 2007 (cancelled)
Chatelerault	France	1	2002
Chicago	USA	1	1933
Cleveland	USA	1	1930
Detroit	USA	2	1927, 1928
Geneva	Switzerland	3	1922, 1985, scheduled 2009
Kansas City	USA	1	1911
Lech	Austria	3	1990, 1991, 1994
Leige	Belgium	1	1938
Paris	France	4	1906, 1913, 1983, 1998 (cancelled)
Salzburg	Austria	1	1986
Seefeld	Austria	1	1987
St. Hubert	Belgium	1	2000
St. Louis	USA	3	1907, 1910, 1929
Stuttgart	Germany	2	1912, 1992
Thionville	France	1	2004
Waasmunster	Belgium	1	2006
Warsaw	Poland	3	1934, 1935, 1936
Warstein	Germany	3	1996, 1997, 2001
Wil	Switzerland	1	1995
Zurich	Switzerland	2	1909, 1984

By tradition, the home country of the team that wins the race is afforded the honor of hosting the event the next year (recently changed to two years later). In 1993 and 2005, Albuquerque became the host city after American teams won the previous year's Gordon Bennett (David Levin and James Herschend in 1992; Richard Abruzzo and Carol Rymer Davis in 2004). But in 1998 and 2007, there was no Gordon Bennett winner because the race was cancelled. So in those years, the world air sports governing body, the Fédération Aéronautique Internationale, solicited bids from cities wishing to host the Gordon Bennett, and both times, Albuquerque was chosen to host the next year's race.

Albuquerque is known for being the launch point for very long gas balloon flights. The Gordon Bennett distance record was set at an Albuquerque-hosted event, and fully 1/3 of the longest gas balloon competition flights ever originated in Albuquerque. Prevailing winds across the US tend to run west to east or southwest to northeast, so competitors can fly a long way before reaching an ocean and being forced to land. Also, airspace issues caused by crossing international borders are at a minimum, since past Gordon Bennett flights originating in Albuquerque remain in U.S. or Canadian airspace.

The 1993 Race:

When David Levin and James Herschend won the 1992 race in Stuttgart, Germany, Albuquerque seemed a logical choice to host the event in 1993. The international ballooning community was very familiar with the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta® and knew the organizers had the experience to run a high-profile international event. The Balloon Fiesta also had some expertise with running gas balloon races because through most of the 1980's the event included gas balloon competition. The prevailing winds and lack of international borders suggested pilots could fly a long distance.



Nonetheless, some of the pilots had some trepidation about flying out of Albuquerque. In most communities, the Gordon Bennett is a stand-alone event and gets all of the attention; at the Balloon Fiesta, the race would be one of many events. International pilots were also concerned that Albuquerque's high altitude (5,100+ feet above sea level) and the fact that helium would be used as the lifting gas (hydrogen predominates in Europe) would limit the amount of ballast the balloons would carry and hence would limit the duration and distance of the flights. Pilots were also concerned about the weather: the high desert is well known for convective activity such as thermals and thunderstorms. All of the above proved true – but it was a great race that, true to the rules laid down by James Gordon Bennett, the race identifies “the best pilot in the world.”

The Balloon Fiesta pulled out all the stops to make the Gordon Bennett special. The launch included every bit of pageantry the city of Albuquerque could concoct, including a live performance by the New Mexico Symphony Orchestra. As each pilot lifted off, the Symphony played that country's national anthem. Thousands of spectators came to cheer the competitors and watch the 20 balloons lift off and disappear into the evening sky.



Sure enough, many of the pilots had problems with thermals (turbulence created by uneven heating of the ground and the air above the ground) and with the weather in general. By the end of the first full day, all but four of the competitors had expended their ballast and had to land. But the other four, through skill and luck, managed to use the weather and their skill to their

advantage and stay aloft for two or more days. In the end, the race was won by one of the greatest gas balloon pilots ever to fly in competition, Josef Starkbaum of Austria. Starkbaum and his co-pilot, Rainer Roehsler, landed near Campbellsport, Wisconsin after more than 59 hours in the air. Their flight of 1,832 km (1137 miles) is still the ninth longest winning flight in the history of the Gordon Bennett. The runner-up was Germany's Wilhelm Eimers and Bernd Landsmann, who stayed aloft for more than 66 hours and landed near Buffalo, Minnesota. In later years, Eimers and Landsmann would go on to win three Gordon Bennetts.

The home team – the USA – had gone into the race with high hopes, but the best any American team could do was 11th. Veteran competitor J. Michael Wallace, flying with Ronald Senez, landed near Wagon Mound. The other American teams finished 14th and 18th.

One outcome of the 1993 Gordon Bennett was that it demonstrated the value of good meteorological advice in winning the race. Starkbaum brought his own weather guy to the race, Dr. Pümpel, who had been the race meteorologist for the previous year's Gordon Bennett in Lech, Austria. These days, most top-level international competitors retain and regularly consult their own meteorologists, but in 1993 it was somewhat unusual. That said, it is also vital that balloon pilots know how to use the advice they get from their weather gurus. E.A. Sautter, who wrote about the 1993 Gordon Bennett (and whose account, along with Starkbaum's, provided source material for this article), noted that Starkbaum and third-place finisher Alan Fraenkel, who flew under the flag of the U.S. Virgin Islands, are both airline pilots and are very accustomed to using and interpreting weather on long-range flights.



The 1999 Race:

Albuquerque hosted its second Gordon Bennett as the result of the cancellation of the previous year's race, which had been scheduled to launch – as had that very first Gordon Bennett – from the Tuilières Gardens. By then, Balloon Fiesta Park had moved a few miles north to its present site. The weather forecast on the scheduled launch day promised good flying conditions for the first 24 hours in a window sandwiched between weather systems. With the weather likely to deteriorate downrange if the launch was delayed, the race was a “go” for Saturday, October 2nd.

Teams from 11 countries – a truly distinguished international field – prepared for launch. Spectators heard the national anthems of Austria, Belgium, Canada, France, Great Britain, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, and the USA as the balloons soared aloft.

1999 was not to be a record-breaker for distance, as the competitors threaded their way between weather fronts. The balloons headed pretty much straight east, across Texas and into Louisiana and Mississippi. Danielle Francoeur, the co-pilot of the one of the Canadian teams, noted that although the winds increased with altitude, their team meteorologist advised them to not go too high and risk “catching up” with bad weather. It proved to be a good strategy. Francoeur and pilot Leo Burman made it to Goodman, Mississippi, traveling 971 miles (1,562 km). It was good enough for second place and made Francoeur the highest-finishing woman, up to that time, in a Gordon Bennett race.

Only two teams – Austria’s Johann Furstner and Gerald Sturzlinger, and the Netherlands’ Rein Jurg and Ron van Houten – were able to stay aloft through three nights. But this was not a year when duration translated into distance. Even with the extra hours in the air, they were not able to overtake Burman and Francoeur or the race’s winners, Belgium’s Philip de Cock and Ronny van Havare.

The 2005 Race:

In 2004, Albuquerque’s Richard Abruzzo and former Albuquerquean Carol Rymer Davis won the Gordon Bennett with a bold flight that began in northeastern France and ended in northern Sweden. It was the first, and still the only, Gordon Bennett win by a woman. In the next few months Davis received two of the world’s most prestigious female aviation awards, the NAA Stinson Medal and the FAI Sabiha Gökçen Medal. At the first pre-flight pilot briefing for the 2005 race, the team was surprised with the news they had also won the NAA Harmon Trophy, adding to a long list of previous honors and world records. Not only that, team Abruzzo/Davis would be flying on their home turf. It was perhaps not surprising that the press immediately anointed them the favorites to win. They wound up finishing last – and lucky to be alive – in what was to prove to be one of the greatest Gordon Bennett races in the event’s 50-year history.



The 2005 race was also the first time the Gordon Bennett was held in conjunction with another major gas balloon race. In 1995, the Balloon Fiesta had founded its own gas balloon distance race, the America’s Challenge. The race was suspended for a year in 1999 when Albuquerque hosted the Gordon Bennett, but by 2005 the America’s Challenge was a well-established and highly competitive race in its own right. So the Balloon Fiesta decided to run both races simultaneously, with the Gordon Bennett competitors launching first and the America’s Challenge competitors immediately afterwards from the same site. The staff at the Balloon Fiesta’s Gas Command Center supported both races, which made for an intense three days.



The decision to launch both races together led to an absolutely spectacular scene at Balloon Fiesta Park. Some 26 gas balloons – 14 competing in the Gordon Bennett and 12 in the America’s Challenge – stood poised to ascend as the sun set over the West Mesa. In the background, dozens of hot-air balloons that had been scheduled to fly in an afternoon hot-air competition staged an impromptu Balloon Glow. The pre-flight events included the display of the Channel Champ, the hot-air balloon that in the early 1960’s made the first flight across the English Channel.

The weather forecast called for high low-level winds that would take the balloons northeast towards the upper Midwest and Canada and could make for some very long flights. They also made for what

proved to be some rather hazardous conditions as the balloons headed across the American Heartland.



Richard Abruzzo right before the launch of the 2005 Gordon Bennett

The first victims were Abruzzo and Davis, who were driven into a power line by a thermal. Richard was pitched from the basket some 30 feet to the ground, and the balloon screamed to 14,000 feet with just Carol aboard. Carol, not knowing whether Richard was alive or dead, managed to land the balloon alone in the 35-knot winds; she was ejected and drug behind the basket but miraculously was not seriously injured. Richard was found by a power crew and rushed to a Kansas hospital, alive but with several broken bones. He almost died of complications from his injuries before making a full recovery. Two other pilots who landed in Kansas suffered more minor injuries.

But those who managed to stay in the air were racking up record distances. With darkness approaching on the second day and thunderstorms in the area, the balloons began finding landing sites in Minnesota and in southern Canada. Already, the ballooning world and the Command Center staff knew

that the old Gordon Bennett distance record of 2191 km (1,362 miles) was history. The top four Gordon Bennett teams (and, for that matter, the top two America's Challenge balloons, both piloted by women) had already gone farther.

And then there was one, one balloon still aloft: the Belgian entry of Bob Berben, an airline pilot in "real" life, and Benôt Siméons, a professional balloonist. Berben and Siméons were good friends who jointly held the Belgian altitude record for AX-10 hot air balloons, 39,718 ft. (12,106.17 M) set Feb. 14, 2004. Benôt Siméons was born into a ballooning family and, at age 16, was the youngest balloon pilot in Europe. He has flown hot-air balloons all over the world. Bob Berben was trained by Willie Eimers of Germany, a 14-time Gordon Bennett competitor and three-time winner.

This year it was the student, not the master, who was to triumph. Eimers and co-pilot Ulrich Seel were already on the ground, having flown 2582 km (1,605 mi.) – a flight which would have won the race in any other year in the history of the Gordon Bennett. They finished second. As the race's third morning dawned, Berben and Siméons were headed eastward across Ontario and Quebec towards the east coast on what they later described as "the flight of a lifetime." As the day began to wane on the East Coast, Berben and Siméons landed safely in Quebec north of the Maine border. They had flown 3,400 km (2112 mi.), smashing not only the old Gordon Bennett record but also the world record for that size gas balloon. It also surpassed the 1,999-mile flight of David and Alan Levin in the 2000 America's Challenge to become the longest gas balloon competition flight ever made out of Albuquerque.



Alas, the full impact of this truly remarkable triumph to some degree was lost in the media's angst over the Abruzzo/Davis accident and the competitors' concern over Richard's then-grave condition,

but the team was greeted with an airport press conference and toasted at the Awards Gala. The flight will go down as one of the epic moments in the history of the Coupe Aéronautique Gordon Bennett.

The next year's Gordon Bennett, launched in Waasmunster, Belgium, also proved to be a great race, with most of the competitors spending long hours crossing the English Channel and the North Sea. 1999 winners de Cock and van Havare triumphed again with an impressive 2,450 km (1,522 mi) transit to the northern tip of Finland. With a distinguished international field scheduled to compete, one thing is certain – more surprises and adventures will be in store as Gordon Bennett teams depart Albuquerque for the fourth time.

The authors of our Coupe Gordon Bennett material gratefully acknowledge Ulrich Hohmann, Sr. and Uli Hohmann, Jr. of Germany, who have compiled in detail the history of the Gordon Bennett, along with the work done by Hans Åkerstedt of Sweden and others in compiling information on notable balloon flights and achievements. This information may be accessed through the Web Site of the Ballooning Commission of the Fédération Aéronautique Internationale, www.fai.org.