

Sep 29, 2014

## 19th America's Challenge Has International Flair

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### Three European Teams Take On U.S. Veterans

The Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta's middle name is "international," and the event has always been enriched by the many pilots from around the world who share their cultures and traditions with Balloon Fiesta guests from around the world. Especially when compared to last year's all-American contest, this year's America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons will have a distinctly international flavor. Three European teams, from Germany, Poland, and Spain, will join four American teams in this year's event.

The America's Challenge is scheduled to launch (weather permitting) at approximately 6:30 PM on Saturday, October 4 from Balloon Fiesta Park. It is one of the world's two gas balloon distance competitions; the other is the Coupe Aéronautique Gordon Bennett, which this year launched from Vichy in France.

The object of the America's Challenge is to fly the greatest distance from Albuquerque while competing within the event rules. The balloonists often stay aloft for two to three days and must use the winds and weather systems to their best advantage to gain the greatest distance. Flights of more than 1,000 miles are not unusual, and the winners sometimes travel as far as Canada and the U.S. East Coast.

The America's Challenge field this year features an intriguing and exciting combination of experienced competitors and newcomers:

- **Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke, USA:** Cuneo and Fricke, from Albuquerque, are the defending America's Challenge champions and are the only three-time-winning team (2001, 2010, 2013). Only one pilot has more wins to his credit, the late Richard Abruzzo, who won five times with four different co-pilots. Their latest flight, of 1,426 miles (2,300 km) ended near White River, Ontario and included a nighttime transit of Lake Superior. They also finished third in the 2008 Gordon Bennett, the last time the race was held in Albuquerque. Cuneo and Fricke are also known as balloon builders (gas baskets and hot air envelopes) and for participating in a number of unusual flights, including an attempt to prove ancient balloon builders may have helped create the Nazca lines in Peru. They are each flying in their 15<sup>th</sup> America's Challenge.
- **Mark Sullivan and Cheri White, USA:** Sullivan, from Albuquerque, and White, from Austin, TX, are two-time America's Challenge winners (2008, 2012). Their winning 2012 flight of 2,623 km (1,626 miles) ended just short of the East Coast and was the fourth longest in the history of the race. They're also regular competitors in the Gordon

Bennett, finishing third in 2009. Mark Sullivan, a multiple-award-winning competitor in both hot air and gas balloons and the American delegate to the world ballooning federation, is the founder of the America's Challenge. He is the only pilot in the race to have participated in all of the previous 18 America's Challenge races. Cheri White will be flying in her tenth America's Challenge.

- **Phil Bryant and Andy Cayton, USA:** Phil Bryant and Andy Cayton are last year's runners-up in the America's Challenge, with a flight of 966 miles (1,558 km) to Long Prairie, MN. The team also finished sixth in this year's Gordon Bennett, landing in Pescara, Italy. Houston's Phil Bryant, a former president of the Balloon Federation of America, will be flying in his seventh America's Challenge. Co-pilot Andy Cayton, from the Savannah, Georgia area, is a two-time America's Challenge winner (2006 and 2007) is flying in his eighth America's Challenge; with a different co-pilot he had a podium finish (3<sup>rd</sup>) in the 2012 Gordon Bennett. His 2006 win, which included a transit to Florida over the Gulf of Mexico, is one of the most daring flights in the history of the America's Challenge.
- **Anulfo González and Angel Aguirre, Spain:** In 2011, Anulfo González and Angel Aguirre were relatively new to gas ballooning and came to Albuquerque to fly their first gas balloon distance race. The ebullient duo finished midway through the field – not bad for their first attempt – and obviously were quick studies. They took their experience back to Europe, and finished fourth in the 2013 Gordon Bennett (not bad for their second attempt!). They are returning to the America's Challenge this year after a two-year absence.
- **Dr. Heinz-Otto Lausch and Dr. Marion Lausch, Germany:** This is the Lausch's first visit to Albuquerque, but they are already experienced international competitors. Earlier this year, in just their third Coupe Gordon Bennett, they flew to Sicily and made the podium, finishing third and only 17 miles (28 km) out of first place. Dr. Lausch and Dr. Lausch are one of two married couples in the race (Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke are the other). Dr. Heinz-Otto Lausch is a dentist, and we'll let you guess what Dr. Marion Lausch's medical specialty is: their balloon is called the *White Pill in the Sky* and the registration number is D-OGYN.
- **Krzysztof Zapart and Mateusz Rękas, Poland:** Relative newcomers to ballooning, Krzysztof Zapart and Mateusz Rękas are the first team from Poland to compete in the America's Challenge. They flew a very credible race in their first Gordon Bennett race earlier this year, traveling more than 700 miles (1,100 km) to a landing in Italy and a fifth-place finish among the 17 competitors.
- **Bert Padelt and Mike Emich, USA:** America's Challenge veteran Bert Padelt and co-pilot Mike Emich are flying a smaller gas balloon built as a "club balloon" for the North Carolina Chapter of the Aero Club of America. Bert Padelt has competed in the America's Challenge 15 times and is one of the world's premier balloon designers and

builders, most recently developing and promoting American-built hydrogen gas balloons including several competing in this race. Although this is Mike Emich's first America's Challenge, he has one of the most impressive resumes in ballooning; he has built and flown both hot air and gas balloons, has set several world records, and was a key member of the support team for the *Earthwinds* attempts to fly non-stop around the world. Oh, and he's sky-dived out of a Boeing 727.

The America's Challenge is the U.S. qualifier for the Coupe Aéronautique Gordon Bennett. The top three American finishers are generally invited by the Gas Division of the Balloon Federation of America to represent the United States in the Gordon Bennett.

The Albuquerque Balloon Fiesta Web site, [www.balloonfiesta.com](http://www.balloonfiesta.com), and the Balloon Fiesta app for Android and iPhones, will feature live computerized tracking of all the balloons and race updates throughout the competition.

Oct 3, 2014

## **America's Challenge Readies For Saturday Late Night Launch**

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**Seven teams from four nations answered the roll call as the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta welcomed a distinguished international field of competitors to the 19<sup>th</sup> America's Challenge distance race for balloons.**

At the opening briefing this afternoon (Friday, October 3), race officials provided the pilots with a variety of information they need to safely navigate across the country. This includes procedures required to traverse various types of airspace and talk to air traffic controllers, and the operations of the Command Center which tracks the balloons and provides support to pilots and chase crews.

The America's Challenge is affected both by winds in Albuquerque for the launch and the weather forecasts downrange in the direction the balloons will travel. The weather team headed by Dan Pagliaro told pilots the forecast trajectories for the race take the balloons eastward through the southern states.

The next pilot briefing is scheduled for 3 PM Saturday, October 4, with inflation beginning right after the Twilight Twinkle Glow and fireworks on Saturday evening at Balloon Fiesta Park. It will be a great opportunity for those attending the balloon glow and fireworks to experience the drama of a nighttime gas balloon launch, as the teams slowly ascend to the strains of their national anthems.

A highlight of the inaugural pilot briefing is the determination of the launch order by random draw:

Team 1: Phil Bryant/Andy Cayton, USA

Team 2: Dr. Heinz-Otto Lausch/Dr. Marion Lausch, Germany

Team 3: Bert Padelt/Mike Emich, USA

Team 4: Mark Sullivan/Cheri White, USA

Team 5: Peter Cuneo/Barbara Fricke, USA

Team 6: Krzysztof Zapart/Mateusz Rękas, Poland

Team 7: Anulfo Gonzalez/Angel Aguirre, Spain

We will provide regular updates as the balloons prepare for an anticipated launch Saturday night, and once the balloons take off, you can follow their progress via live tracking at [www.balloonfiesta.com](http://www.balloonfiesta.com).

Oct 4, 2014

## **America's Challenge Go for Late Saturday Evening**

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**Sometime late tonight, seven balloons competing in the 19<sup>th</sup> America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons will head skyward with one simple goal – fly further than anyone else in the race. Launch is anticipated sometime around or after 10:30 PM, after the Twilight Twinkle Glow and fireworks on Saturday evening.**

At the 3 PM (2100Z) briefing, meteorologist Dan Pagliaro told the teams that winds in the Albuquerque area should decrease after sunset, and that the balloons should head southeast after launch. The forecast trajectories, as anticipated earlier, should take the balloons into the southeastern United States.

Pilots are headed to Balloon Fiesta Park to lay out their equipment and prepare their baskets for launch. This is a meticulous process, because the teams need to make sure everything is in working order and that everything they'll need for a two to three day flight is loaded into the gondola. After all, once aloft, the balloon can't stop at the nearest convenience store for snacks and toilet paper.

The plan is to have the teams begin inflation right after the fireworks following the Twilight Twinkle Glow, about 8:30 PM. The launch would begin approximately two hours later, so balloons should begin ascending at about 10:30 PM. However, depending on the winds, inflation and launch could be pushed back later depending on wind conditions at Balloon Fiesta Park.

We will continue to provide updates as the afternoon continues, and once the race begins you can follow live tracking of the balloons' positions at [www.balloonfiesta.com](http://www.balloonfiesta.com).

Oct 4, 2014

## **America's Challenge Postponed Until Monday or Tuesday**

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**The balloons were laid out, the pilots and teams were ready, and the race was a go – and then the winds came and just wouldn't go away. So the launch of the America's Challenge race for gas balloons is on hold until at least Monday evening.**

The decision to put the race on hold was made after stubborn ground winds that were forecast to die shortly after sunset persisted. It was expected that the wind would die off around 8:30 PM MDT (0230Z) to the 5-7 knot level needed for a safe inflation. However, changing weather conditions kept the winds at 10+ knots, with winds at the Albuquerque airport reported at 18 knots – too high for a safe launch.

The next pilot briefing for the America's Challenge teams will be at noon on Monday, at which time officials will look at weather conditions in Albuquerque and downrange where the balloons will travel, with the possibility of a Monday or Tuesday evening launch.

We'll continue to update this website with the latest information. Once the race starts, you can follow live tracking of the balloons' positions via [www.balloonfiesta.com](http://www.balloonfiesta.com) and the Fiesta 2014 app.

Oct 5, 2014

## **America's Challenge Update**

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**The members of the seven America's Challenge teams have been taking it easy in Albuquerque Sunday, while race officials consider options for a launch sometime in the next two to three days.**

Event Director John Petrehn, Deputy Director Sam Parks, Fiesta Event Director Don Edwards, and the meteorological team are looking at two basic factors in making a determination. The first is weather and wind conditions on the launch site at Balloon Fiesta Park during the time the balloons are inflating and taking off. This is the main issue which caused postponement of the race Saturday evening; the ground winds became too strong and unpredictable to assure the launch could be completed safely.

The second factor is forecast trajectories and weather in the direction the balloons will travel. The race officials want to avoid sending the competitors toward bad weather and especially thunderstorms. They are also looking for wind conditions aloft that will allow for the longest possible flights for the teams – after all, this is a distance competition!

On Monday at noon (1800Z), the teams and officials will get back together to take a look at weather conditions and try to set a launch time. The balloons could launch as early as sunset on Monday, but could be delayed until later Monday or even into Tuesday evening.

We'll provide an update following the Monday briefing, and will of course keep you posted as the 19<sup>th</sup> America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons progresses.

Oct 6, 2014

## **Monday Evening Launch Set for America's Challenge (Update 1 PM (1900Z) Monday October 6)**

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**The seven teams competing in the 19<sup>th</sup> America's Challenge race for gas balloons will soon be headed to Balloon Fiesta Park to begin assembling their equipment in anticipation of a launch this evening.**

The latest trajectory forecasts offer the competing pilots several options in planning their flights. It's expected the balloons will generally head east out of Albuquerque across Texas and into the southeastern U.S. However, there is an option that could potentially take the balloons on a track further northward through Missouri and eastward.

Pilots are expected to begin assembling their equipment around 4-5 PM (2200-2300Z) this afternoon. The pilots and officials will briefly meet again at 6:30 to take a final look at weather conditions. Assuming wind conditions at Balloon Fiesta Park remain favorable, it is expected actual inflation will begin sometime around 7 PM this evening. Launch could occur as soon as two hours after inflation.

We'll keep you posted with any changes to this plan. Once the race starts later this evening, you'll be able to cheer for your favorite team(s) by following live tracking at [www.balloonfiesta.com](http://www.balloonfiesta.com) or via the 2014 Balloon Fiesta app.

Oct 6, 2014

## **America's Challenge Launch Update: Mon 10/6/14 10:30 PM MDT (0430Z)**

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**Throughout this evening, the America's Challenge launch has been on hold waiting for strong winds across the launch site to dissipate. The winds at Balloon Fiesta Park have now decreased to acceptable levels. Officials are waiting to be sure the winds will stay calm before beginning inflation. Assuming the winds stay light, inflation should begin within the next few minutes and a launch can be anticipated in the wee hours of the morning.**

The launch order, determined by random draw, is expected to be: Team 1: Bryant/Cayton, USA; Team 2: Lausch/Lausch, Germany; Team 3, Padelt/Emich, USA; Team 4: Sullivan/White, USA; Team 5: Cuneo/Fricke, USA; Team 6: Zapart/Rękas, Poland, and Team 7: Gonzales/Aguirre, Spain.

We will provide another update once the balloons launch (or if they don't), and once the balloons launch you can follow live tracking at [www.balloonfiesta.com](http://www.balloonfiesta.com) or via the 2014 Balloon Fiesta app.

Oct 7, 2014

## **America's Challenge Is Aloft! Tue 10/7/14 1:30 AM MDT (0730Z)**

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**Patience paid off for pilots, crews, and a handful of stalwart spectators at Balloon Fiesta Park who were witness to a spectacular nighttime launch for the 19<sup>th</sup> America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons.**

Pesky winds that plagued the Park earlier in the evening finally died off about 10 PM, and inflation began around 10:30. Shortly after midnight, the balloons were filled with hydrogen, flight instruments, food, and supplies were loaded, and the teams were ready to go.

At 12:30 AM the first balloon piloted by Phil Bryant and Andy Cayton (Team 1) was walked to the launch platform. All of the balloons take off from this platform, so they all begin their journeys from the exact same point. Four minutes later they were airborne, to the delight of the small crowd.

Mark Sullivan and Cheri White (Team 4) were the next to launch, followed by Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke (Team 5), Kryzstolf Zapart and Matiesz Rękas, the Polish team (Team 6) and the Spanish entry piloted by Anulfo Gonzalez and Angel Aguirre (Team 7). The German team of

Heinz-Otto and Marion Lausch (Team 2) were last to launch, at 1:04 AM (0704Z). Most of the teams have now cleared the mountains east and south of Albuquerque and are headed across New Mexico's eastern plains.

Team 3, Bert Padelt and Mike Emich, is at this writing still on the ground at Balloon Fiesta Park. Their balloon is only about 2/3 the size of the other balloons (24,000 cu. ft. vs. 35,000 cu. ft.). Because it is smaller, it is not really competitive in the race and the team always planned to do a shorter, fun flight. They are planning to fly out early this morning, before the hot air balloon events begin.

We are pleased to let you know that live tracking is now operational! You can follow the competition on your favorite computer, tablet, phone, or other electronic gadget at [www.balloonfiesta.com](http://www.balloonfiesta.com) or via the 2014 Balloon Fiesta app.

Oct 7, 2014

## **America's Challenge Teams Already in Texas**

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**Update: 9:45 AM (1545Z) Tuesday, October 7**

**The six seriously competing America's Challenge teams have been clipping right along over the past nine or so hours, and most have now crossed or are about to cross the New Mexico-Texas border.**

Four teams – Team 7 (Gonzalez/Aguirre), Team 1 (Bryant/Cayton), Team 5 (Cuneo/Fricke) and Team 6 (Zapart/Rekas) are flying virtually the same track and have been trading the race lead around since they launched early this morning. They're now near to or approaching Lubbock, the largest city in the Texas Panhandle. The folks in the Lubbock area will get quite a show!

Meanwhile, the beginnings of what might be different strategies are emerging. Team 4 (Sullivan/White) has pursued a track south of and behind the other teams. They've just passed north of Roswell, NM (see any aliens?). Team 2 (Lausch/Lausch) is slightly north of and behind the four-team train to Lubbock. We'd note that at this point in the race being "behind" has absolutely no bearing on where things will be at the end of the race. Lots of teams have "come from behind" to win.

You'll notice that Team 3 (Padelt/Emich) took off shortly after 5 AM MDT (1100Z), and are still meandering over Albuquerque's northeast heights. As noted earlier, they are flying a smaller balloon and are doing a fun "day" flight, giving people in Albuquerque a much closer look at a gas balloon overhead than they usually get to see. Because this balloon is smaller and built for a different purpose – fun-flying and training – it is not really competitive in a distance race against larger balloons.



In the meantime, the Command Center reports things are going well, as the controllers provide routine assistance to the pilots and crews as they cross the country.

You can continue to follow the teams' progress through the Lone Star State via live tracking at [www.balloonfiesta.com](http://www.balloonfiesta.com) or through the 2014 Balloon Fiesta app.

Oct 7, 2014

## **The Aero Club of America (NC Chapter) and an America's Challenge Debut**

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**Tue 10/7/14 12:15 PM MDT (1915Z)**

**The competitors in the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta's 19<sup>th</sup> America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons continue to head across Texas at a respectable clip: in the 20-30 mph (34-47 kmh) range. The trend continues to be generally east to northeast, but several different strategies seem to be developing.**

The Spanish team (Team 7, Gonzales and Aguirre) is taking a more northeasterly track, the defending champions (Team 5, Cuneo and Fricke) are staying more to the south, Teams 6 (Zapart/Rekas) and 1 (Bryant/Cayton) are sort of splitting the difference, and Team 2 (Lausch and Lausch) are headed in sort of the same direction, but further north. These differences in track probably reflect differences in altitude; however, in the America's Challenge race altitude data is not reported since it is key to the strategies being pursued by the teams. Meanwhile, lurking behind ready to pounce (?) are two-time winners Mark Sullivan and Cheri White (Team 4). Stay tuned!

The only real action this morning has been the short, slow flight of Team 3, Bert Padelt and Mike Emich, who gave students at Albuquerque's Jackson Middle School a thrill by landing near their school in the Northeast Heights. The landing site was near the intersection of Indian School and Morris (most folks in Albuquerque knows where that is). Many hot air flights out of Balloon Fiesta Park go further than that!

Which is precisely the point. In some parts of the world (parts of Germany come to mind), gas ballooning is much like hot air ballooning is in the US, with shorter "day flights." Bert Padelt, Mike Emich, and the other members of the Aero Club of America North Carolina chapter are pioneering this concept in U.S. gas ballooning. Their club balloon is only about 2/3 the size of the other balloons (24,000 cu. ft. vs. 35,000 cu. ft.). It was built by Padelt, a master balloon builder and developer of American-made hydrogen balloons (two other full-size Padelts are in the race, being flown by Teams 1 and 5). The smaller size of the balloon makes it more affordable to fly and a good option for pilot training as well as shorter fun flights.

It is the club's hope that others will follow their example and that clubs can help to grow the sport of gas ballooning in the United States. Indeed, hot air ballooning in Albuquerque began largely as a collection of "clubs" which owned hot air balloons collectively. As their members learned how to fly, they then bought their own balloons, beginning to grow Albuquerque into the ballooning center it is today.

All of which is to say that the race is progressing well and things are quiet in the Command Center, as the controllers continue to track the balloons' progress. You can follow along, too, at [www.balloonfiesta.com](http://www.balloonfiesta.com) or via the 2014 Balloon Fiesta free app.

Oct 7, 2014

## Your Questions About the America's Challenge

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**Tue 10/7/14 7:30 PM MDT (0130Z)**

**While the race continues and the teams are cruising across Texas – hey, it's a BIG state! – and now into Oklahoma, this might be a good time to answer some of the many questions we've received over the last few days about gas balloons and the America's Challenge race.**

The America's Challenge is followed by enthusiasts from all over the globe, from the world's elite gas balloonists to total neophytes. We beg the indulgence of the former as we engage in a bit of "Gas Ballooning 101" for readers who might be curious about the balloons, the race, and the people who fly in it. We would also note that this is written by someone who has never flown a gas balloon and who therefore has a somewhat basic knowledge of how they work (but who is a hot air balloon pilot) -- so our apologies for any oversimplifications or imperfections. It's going to be a bit long for a race post, but the fact we had time to write it will tell you how uneventful the day in the Command Center has been.

**What is a gas balloon?** Gas balloons use a lighter-than-air gas, such as hydrogen or helium, to provide lift. The most commonly-used gas now is hydrogen, the lightest of the gases. Helium, which until recently was the gas of choice in the United States due to its stability, has become prohibitively expensive and scarce.

By contrast, hot air balloons, which are far more common, use heated ambient air to create lift – as you'll remember from school, hot air is lighter than cold air.

**How do gas balloons "work"?** The lifting gas (hydrogen) is contained in an envelope (the "balloon" part of the balloon) that is built out of heavy, non-porous, conductive fabric. However, as the gas expands and contracts with the normal heating and cooling cycles during the day, some hydrogen is lost. To maintain altitude, the pilot must then get rid of

weight. So gas balloons carry expendable weight, referred to as “ballast,” usually in the form of sand which is carried in bags hung on the side of the basket.

Since ballast is essential for maneuvering and especially landing, there are essentially two “consumables” that affect the amount of time a gas balloon can stay aloft and – indirectly – the distance it can travel: gas and ballast. The pilots that do the best job of conserving both often are in the best position to win a race like the America’s Challenge.

**How do you fly a gas balloon?** This is obviously a very complicated question to answer, but in the simplest terms, to go up you get rid of weight by dropping sand or water ballast (or anything else that has weight, if you’re desperate enough). To come down, you “valve” gas by pulling a rope in the basket that opens a panel in the top of the balloon to release hydrogen. Pilots can also take advantage of the natural expansion of gas due to solar heating after sunrise to go up, and the contraction of gas as the air cools around sunset to come down. Needless to say, pilots try to valve and ballast as little as possible, since gas and sand are the equivalent of fuel in a car and they can’t stop at the gas station to get any more!

**Why are gas balloons usually all white?** White is the color that keeps the balloon the most stable in that the reflectivity lessens the impacts of solar heating and cooling on the gas inside the envelope, helping to minimize loss of gas throughout the flight and maximize flight time.

**What is the America’s Challenge Gas Balloon Race?** The America’s Challenge is one of two distance races for gas balloons in the world. The other is the Coupe Aéronautique Gordon Bennett, the world’s oldest air race, founded in 1906. The America’s Challenge was founded by the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta in 1995 to provide a consistent American venue for gas ballooning. This is the 19<sup>th</sup> year for the race. The results of the America’s Challenge are used to determine the qualifying U.S. pilots for the next year’s Gordon Bennett.

**How do you win?** It’s simple: the winner is the team that flies the greatest distance (measured in Great Circle distance) from the launch point, Balloon Fiesta Park in Albuquerque, while competing within the event rules.

**What do you win?** A trophy and lots of attaboys (or girls) and bragging rights. There is no prize money associated with winning the America’s Challenge.

**Who has won the most America’s Challenge races?** That record is held by the late Richard Abruzzo, who won the race five times with four different co-pilots. Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke have won three times. Mark Sullivan and Cheri White, David and Alan Levin, and Andy Cayton (with different co-pilots) have won twice.

There have been four female America’s Challenge winners: Barbara Fricke, Cheri White, and two who have passed on: Janet Folkes and Carol Rymer Davis.

Three international teams have won: Janet Folkes from Great Britain, flying with American co-pilot Bill Arras in 2005, David Hempleman-Adams of Great Britain and Jon Mason of Australia in 2011, and Anulfo Gonzalez and Angel Aguirre of Spain in 2014.

**How big are the balloons?** The maximum size for balloons competing in the America's Challenge is 1,000 cubic meters (about 37,000 cu. ft.). Smaller balloons can participate, as has been the case this year with the Aero Club of America's 24,000 cu. ft. balloon, but smaller balloons are at a disadvantage in a distance race.

**How do they refuel?** They don't. Once the balloon takes off, the pilots have at their disposal only the gas, ballast, instruments, and supplies (food, water, clothing, etc.) that they carry on board.

**How far can they go?** It depends on the winds and weather, but America's Challenge competitors have flown some of the longest gas balloon flights in history for 1,000 cu. meter balloons. The record for the race is 1,998 miles (3125.5 km), set in the year 2000 by David Levin and Alan Levin. Flights of more than 1,000 miles are common.

**How long can they stay up?** The duration record for the America's Challenge of 70 hours 51 minutes was set in 2011 by David Hempleman-Adams of Great Britain and Jon Mason of Australia (mixed-nationality teams are allowed in the America's Challenge). Flights of 60 hours are not unusual. However, the world duration record for 1,000 cubic meter balloons is an astounding 92+ hours, set by Germany's Wilhelm Eimers (a frequent America's Challenge competitor) in the 1995 Coupe Gordon Bennett.

**How much does this cost?** It isn't cheap. Depending on the manufacturer and the size, new gas balloon systems can cost in the upper five figures. A hydrogen "fill" in the U.S. for a balloon the size of those flown in the America's Challenge can cost about \$1,000 for a single (albeit multi-day) flight; in parts of Europe the cost for hydrogen is much less. Then there is all the associated equipment, a chase vehicle, and expenses for pilots and chase crew.

**Do gas balloons have chase crews?** Yes they do, since as is the case with hot air balloons they rarely return to the launch point. The difference with a gas flight is that the balloon often travels many hundreds of miles, and while the balloon flies in a straight line and moves 24 hours a day, the roads don't go in a straight line and the crew has to rest occasionally. Gas chases can be real adventures and require a lot of stamina (the chase crew for 2013 winners Cuneo and Fricke drove from Albuquerque to, and completely around, Lake Superior).

**How many people are in the balloons?** Each balloon has a crew of two, a pilot and a co-pilot. Although the titles might suggest otherwise, in practice on most teams the pilots fully share the responsibilities of the flight and are often equally skilled.

**What is life like in the balloon?** While ballooning has connotations of floating leisurely above the landscape admiring the view – and indeed there's some of that and pilots wax poetically about it – the teams are actually quite busy flying the balloon, navigating, talking to air traffic controllers, and planning the next steps in their flight. They sleep in shifts, with one pilot awake while the other sleeps. They're confined in a very small space for three days of what one pilot drolly terms "aerial camping." Almost all the teams say that since they are on oxygen and not moving around much, they are seldom hungry. They carry nutritious and easy to eat foods as

well as comfort foods to entice them to eat, and also have to remind themselves to drink fluids so they don't become dehydrated.

**What do they use for “facilities”?** Space pilots and balloon pilots travel at vastly different speeds, but both will tell you the same thing: the most frequently-asked question is “how do you go to the bathroom up there?” Resisting the temptation to say, “the same way you do down here,” the teams tell us they carry a bucket or other porta-potty type conveyance to facilitate their daily business – and they try to keep that business to a minimum.

Meanwhile, the race continues. It's getting dark in the areas where the balloons are flying, and all six teams are continuing to fly through the night, with a couple of distinct strategies beginning to emerge. Watch the action unfold at [www.balloonfiesta.com](http://www.balloonfiesta.com) or via the 2014 Balloon Fiesta free app.

Oct 7, 2014

## **Onward Through a Moonlit Night**

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**Tue 10/7/14 10:30 PM MDT (0430Z)**

**People who fly gas balloons will tell you one of their favorite times to fly is on those magical nights where the landscape below is softly illuminated by the light of a full moon. Tonight, the six competitors in the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta's America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons are enjoying such a night as they press on towards the 24-hour mark and the completion of their first full day aloft.**

The two southernmost teams, (Team 5, Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke and Team 1, Phil Bryant and Andy Cayton) continue to hold a slight lead over the three European teams on a more northerly course (Team 2, Heinz and Marion Lausch; from Germany Team 6, Krysztof Zapart and Mateusz Rękas from Poland, and Team 7, Anulfo Gonzalez and Angel Aguirre from Spain). Team 4, Mark Sullivan and Cheri White, are hot on their heels.

The next major decision point in the race is likely to be sunrise, as the teams decide whether to stay aloft or to land with daylight. Their choice depends largely on how much ballast – expendable weight in sand and water – they have left on board, since ballast is needed to successfully maneuver and land. The teams will also cast a wary eye on the weather; there have been severe storms along a front draped through parts of the Midwest and Southeast, and the pilots' strategies will certainly focus on gaining distance while avoiding bad weather.

The Command Center team will be watching over the teams throughout the night, and you can follow along, too, at [www.balloonfiesta.com](http://www.balloonfiesta.com) or via the 2014 Balloon Fiesta free app.

Oct 8, 2014

## **America's Challenge Team Lands with Lead**

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**One of the early leaders in the America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons has landed safely about 47 miles (76 km) east-northeast of Tulsa, OK. Team 1, Phil Bryant and Andy Cayton, were in the lead when they landed at 8:30 MDT (1430Z) between Adair and Langley, OK due to concerns with weather. They had traveled 644 miles (1,036 km).**

This leaves five teams still flying, spread along an arc from Kansas to the Oklahoma/Arkansas border. The current leaders – they've been trading the lead with Phil and Andy for much of the race – are defending champions Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke of Albuquerque (Team 5). At this writing they're nearing the 700-mile mark (1100+ km) and are south of Ft. Smith, AK. Throughout the race, they've stubbornly stayed south of the other teams and had the most easterly track.

Two other teams have chosen to head north: the German entry of Heinz-Otto and Marion Lausch (Team 2) and two-time event champions Mark Sullivan and Cheri White (Team 4). Both teams are headed north toward Interstate 70 in Kansas. In between are the Spanish and Polish teams, Anulfo Gonzales and Angel Aguirre (Team 7) and Krysztof Zapart and Mateusz Rękas (Team 6). They're in eastern Kansas arcing towards Missouri.

As we move towards midday of the second day of the race, the big question lurks: which teams have ballast remaining to fly through a third night, and which will have to land as darkness approaches? The ability to fly through a third night often determines the winners. You can follow the race via live tracking at [www.balloonfiesta.com](http://www.balloonfiesta.com) or through the 2014 Balloon Fiesta app.

Oct 8, 2014

## **Five Still Flying!**

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**Update Wednesday, October 8, 2 PMMDT (2000Z)**

**The Command Center team continues to follow the progress of the five teams still aloft in the 19<sup>th</sup> America's Challenge race for gas balloons. They've been closely monitoring weather conditions and talking to chase crews and air traffic controllers, but at this point the race is proceeding routinely.**

We use the term “command center” a lot, and it is an actual physical facility tucked away in a corner of Balloon Fiesta Park. The “controllers” who work in the Command Center are there to provide any assistance requested by pilots and crews. They alert air traffic control when balloons are in their area and work with them on facilitating the teams’ passage through special use airspace and any major metropolitan areas the balloons might overfly. Pilots call with requests for weather and airspace information, or just to chat. Crews might need routing information as they drive across the country or to relay questions or information from their teams. Once the balloons land, the controllers provide crews with directions to their balloon and, if pilots need assistance, work with local law enforcement and other agencies to provide the help they need (for example, last year’s winners needed a couple of guys with chainsaws to get their balloon out of a tree). One thing the controllers won’t do – provide any information that may have been divulged to them regarding the teams’ strategies!

The controllers – there are eight of them, five men and three women – work in pairs for six hour shifts. They’re on duty from the time balloons come to Balloon Fiesta Park to inflate until the last balloon has landed, the crew has arrived and packed them up, and all the teams are safely on their way back to Albuquerque. Ruth Lind, an accomplished gas and hot air balloon pilot and former competitor in the America’s Challenge, is the Command Center’s current director. Tim Baggett has for many years provided the Command Center’s computer support and is responsible for the live tracking interface that lets all of us vicariously fly along with the teams as they cross the country.

Meanwhile, in the Great American Midwest, the race goes on. The next big decision points for the pilots are likely to be near sunset, as they determine whether they have sufficient ballast (expendable weight) to allow for safe maneuvering and permit them to fly through the night. This is a crucial time, since the teams that can continue through this “third night” usually win the race.

As the evening approaches, we’d remind you that under the rules competitors have up to four hours to report their landings to the Command Center. (The late, great Richard Abruzzo was notorious for waiting three hours and 59 minutes to call in!) We do not report teams as landed until we have an official report from the team, so this is why it sometimes takes awhile before the Command Center changes a team’s status to “landed” even though it seems obvious to onlookers watching the live tracking that the balloon hasn’t moved. There can be reasons besides a landing that account for the lack of motion, for example, lack of a signal from the tracking device aboard the balloon.

So stay tuned! You can see all of the action via live tracking at [www.balloonfiesta.com](http://www.balloonfiesta.com) or through the 2014 Balloon Fiesta app.

Oct 8, 2014

## **Two-Time Winners Land in Kansas**

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**Update Wednesday, October 8, 4:45 PMMDT (2245Z)**

**As we approach sunset on Day 2 of the America's Challenge, a second team has made a safe landing just north of Grainfield, Kansas, near Interstate 75 east of Oakley.**

Mark Sullivan and Cheri White, Team 4, are the second competing team to land. They flew 436 miles (702 km) and were in the air for 39 hours. Sullivan and White have won the race twice previously, in 2008 and 2012. Their exit from the race leaves just one American team still flying, the defending champions, Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke (Team 5).

Cuneo and Fricke have also now lost the lead in the race and there's a heck of a contest at the front of the pack. Anulfo Gonzalez and Angel Aguirre of Spain (Team 7), and the Polish team of Krzysztof Zapart and Mateusz Rękas, (Team 6) are have now traveled about 850 miles (1,358 km) and are flying fairly close together southwest of St. Louis, MO. The German team, Heinz and Marion Lausch, are also still aloft, but are a couple hundred miles behind the leaders.

We'll keep you posted over the next few hours as the teams make the decision whether to land or fly through the night. Live tracking at [www.balloonfiesta.com](http://www.balloonfiesta.com), or through the 2014 Balloon Fiesta app, never sleeps!

Oct 8, 2014

## **America's Challenge Update: Last American Team Lands**

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**Update Wednesday, October 8, 7:05 PMMDT (0105Z)**

**The America's Challenge Command Center has just heard from Team 5, Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke, that they landed safely about 6 PM this evening west of Searcy, Arkansas, after a flight of 825 miles (1,328 km).**

Cuneo and Fricke were the defending champions and have previously won the race three times, in 2001, 2010, and last year. Their landing means that the only competitors are still in the air are the three international teams, from Germany, Poland, and Spain.



Throughout the evening, there's been a heck of a horse race going on over Missouri between Team 6 (Zapart/Rekas, from Poland) and Team 7 (Gonzalez/Aguirre, from Spain). They've literally been neck and neck at times but the Spanish team has now pulled out a slight lead.

The other team still in the air, Heinz-Otto Lausch and Marion Lausch (Team 2, from Germany), have been following a whole different strategy through most of the race. They have just crossed into Nebraska north of Manhattan, KS. Lausch and Lausch are at this writing still in fifth place, but if they keep flying they will begin to overhaul the teams that have already landed and move up in the standings.

The Command Center and our tracking software are trucking onward through the night – you can follow the teams' progress via live tracking at [www.balloonfiesta.com](http://www.balloonfiesta.com), or through the 2014 Balloon Fiesta app.

Oct 8, 2014

## **America's Challenge Update: And Then There Were Two**

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**Tue 10/8/14 10:45 PM MDT (0445Z)**

**Only two teams remain aloft in the America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons, flying through the night in the quest to travel further than their fellow competitors and claim the title in one of the world's most prestigious races.**

The Command Center has just received word that the flying doctors and spouses from Germany, Heinz-Otto and Marion Lausch, have executed a safe nighttime landing about 35 miles (56 km) southwest of Omaha, Nebraska. The team's crew indicated they landed because of concerns about weather in the area. The team flew 679 miles (1,093 km) in 45 hours aloft in just their first race in the United States. It's been a successful gas balloon season for Dr. and Dr. Lausch (dentist and gynecologist) – they were on the podium with a third-place finish at last month's Coupe Gordon Bennett in Europe.

The Lauschs' landing leaves just two teams aloft, and they've been flying very close together for much of the day. The Spanish team of Anulfo Gonzalez and Angel Aguirre (Team 7) has broken the 1,000 mile (1,600 km) mark and are headed eastward into Kentucky not far from Madisonville. The team of Kryzstof Zapart and Mateusz Rekas (Team 6), the first pilots from Poland to compete in an America's Challenge, has traveled more than 900 miles (1,450 km) so far in only their second gas balloon race ever.

Usually – but not always, as the Lauschs' nighttime landing demonstrates -- pilots will tend to fly through the night and land when it is light enough to see. So it seems likely that the two

teams still aloft will fly until daybreak at least. The Command Center is keeping a close eye on them and you can too, at [www.balloonfiesta.com](http://www.balloonfiesta.com) or via the 2014 Balloon Fiesta free app.

Oct 8, 2014

## **America's Challenge Update: Polish Team Lands, Spanish Entry Last in the Air**

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**Update: Wednesday, October 8, 11:30 PM MDT (0530Z)**

**The America's Challenge Race Command Center has just received word that Krysztof Zapart and Mateusz Rekas of Poland (Team 6) have executed a safe night landing near Perryville, MO, about 60 miles (96 km) south-southeast of St. Louis and not far from the Mississippi River. They traveled 941 miles (1,514 km) in 46 hours aloft, and are the apparent second place finishers in the race.**

This gas ballooning season has marked an impressive competitive debut for Zapart and Rekas. The America's Challenge is only their second long-distance gas balloon race. Last month, they finished fifth in the Coupe Gordon Bennett, flying from France to Italy.

This leaves just one team still flying, Anulfo Gonzales and Angel Aguirre from Spain. They've already broken the 1,000 mile (1,600 km) mark and are likely to be the unofficial winners. You can cheer them on as you watch live tracking at [www.balloonfiesta.com](http://www.balloonfiesta.com) or via the Balloon Fiesta app.

Oct 9, 2014

## **America's Challenge Update: All Over But the Shouting?**

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**Update Thursday, October 9, 5:15 AM MDT (1115Z)**

**There's a phrase in America: "It's all over but the shouting." Well, at the America's Challenge, it's never all over until the last team is safely on the ground, the crew has reached and packed the balloon, and the teams are all on the way back to Albuquerque.**

Nonetheless, the one team still flying, the Spanish team of Anulfo Gonzalez and Angel Aguirre (Team 7), has a commanding lead in the race and are likely to be the unofficial winners. At this writing they are headed eastward across Kentucky south and east of Louisville, and are approaching the 1,200-mile (1,930 km) mark and have been aloft for more than 50 hours.

The second-place team, Krzysztof Zapart and Mateusz Rekas of Poland (Team 6), landed at about 11:15 MDT (0515) last night in Missouri after flying 941 miles (1,514 km). It looks like the third-place team will be the defending champions, Albuquerque's Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke (Team 5), who landed in Arkansas yesterday evening after an 825 mile (1,328 km) flight.

We'll provide a final update after Team 7 lands, and in the meantime you can follow their trek across Kentucky at [www.balloonfiesta.com](http://www.balloonfiesta.com) or via the Balloon Fiesta app.

Oct 9, 2014

## **Spanish Team Are Unofficial Winners of America's Challenge**

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**Update Thursday, October 9, 9:00 AM MDT (1500Z)**

**The Command Center reports that the final team aloft in the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta's 19<sup>th</sup> America's Challenge distance race for gas balloon has made a picture-perfect stand-up landing south-southwest of Lebanon, Kentucky.**

Anulfo Gonzalez and Angel Aguirre from Spain (Team 7) are the unofficial winners of the race, having flown 1,188 miles (1,912 km) in 53 hours, 27 minutes. This is their second flight in the America's Challenge. In 2011, they came to Albuquerque to fly in their very first gas balloon race. They were fifth that year, and subsequently have placed as high as fourth in the world's other great balloon distance race, the Coupe Aéronautique Gordon Bennett.

The first team from Poland to compete in the event are the apparent second-place finishers. Krzysztof Zapart and Mateusz Rekas (Team 6), in only their second international gas balloon race, flew 941 miles (1,541 km) and landed near Perryville, MO, which interestingly enough is fellow competitor Barbara Fricke's home town. Fricke and Peter Cuneo (Team 5), the defending champions and three-time winners, flew the third-greatest distance (825 miles/1,328 km) and had what they describe as a great landing west of Searcy, AK. A friendly landowner even used his forklift to help them lift their equipment onto the chase truck.

Dr. Heinz-Otto Lausch and Dr. Marion Lausch from Germany (Team 2) are in fourth place; they landed overnight southwest of Omaha, NE after flying 679 miles (1,093 km). Team 1, Phil Bryant and Andy Cayton, and Team 4, Mark Sullivan and Cheri White, round out the field.

The results are unofficial until the scoring process is completed. This includes a debriefing with all of the teams and an analysis of their downloaded tracker data. The results become final once this process is completed and any penalties imposed for violations of the event rules are assessed.

The unofficial results are:

1. Team 7, Anulfo Gonzalez and Angel Aguirre, Spain: 1,188 miles (1,912 km), 53:27 hours, landed south-southwest of Lebanon, KY
2. Team 6, Krzysztof Zapart and Mateusz Rekas, Poland: 941 miles (1,541 km), 46:23 hours, landed near Perryville, MO
3. Team 5, Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke, USA: 825 miles (1,328 km), 40:17 hours, landed west of Searcy, AK
4. Team 2, Dr. Heinz-Otto Lausch and Dr. Marion Lausch, Germany: 679 miles (1,093 km), 45:14 hours, landed east of Lincoln, NB
5. Team 1, Phil Bryant and Andy Cayton, USA: 644 miles (1,036 km), 31:56 hours, landed NNE of Tulsa, OK
6. Team 4, Mark Sullivan and Cheri White, USA: 433 miles (697 km), 39:03 hours, landed north of Grandfield, KS

The seventh team, Bert Padelt and Mike Emich of the US, were flying a smaller balloon as non-competitors. They inflated with the competing America's Challenge teams and made a short local flight in Albuquerque.

Oct 11, 2014

## **America's Challenge Results Final**

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**Update Saturday, October 11, 10:30 PM MDT (0430Z)**

**Pilots, crews, and officials for the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta's 19<sup>th</sup> America's Challenge gathered tonight to celebrate a safe and successful race and to congratulate Anulfo Gonzalez and Angel Aguirre of Spain on their victory.**

The official results, following debriefing of the pilots and analysis of the race data, confirmed Gonzalez and Aguirre's distance as 1,189 miles (1,914 km). Their 53 ½ hour flight took them from Albuquerque's Balloon Fiesta Park to Campbellsville, KY, which is west of Finley, KY and south-southwest of Lebanon, KY.

Second place went to the first Polish team to ever compete in the America's Challenge, Krzysztof Zapart and Mateusz Rekas. Albuquerque's Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke were third.

**The final results are:**

1. Team 7, Anulfo Gonzalez and Angel Aguirre, Spain: 1,189 miles (1,914.5 km), 53:27 hours, landed near Campbellsville, KY
2. Team 6, Krzysztof Zapart and Mateusz Rekas, Poland: 941 miles (1,515.4 km), 46:23 hours, landed near Perryville, MO

3. Team 5, Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke, USA: 825 miles (1,328.9 km), 40:17 hours, landed near Joy, AK
4. Team 2, Dr. Heinz-Otto Lausch and Dr. Marion Lausch, Germany: 679 miles (1,093.96 km), 45:14 hours, landed east of Lincoln, NB
5. Team 1, Phil Bryant and Andy Cayton, USA: 645 miles (1,038.38 km), 31:56 hours, landed near Adair, OK
6. Team 4, Mark Sullivan and Cheri White, USA: 436 miles (701.79 km), 39:03 hours, landed north of Grandfield, KS

The seventh team, Bert Padelt and Mike Emich of the US, were flying a smaller balloon as non-competitors. They inflated with the competing America's Challenge teams and made a short local flight in Albuquerque.