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Centennial team statement says race community "devastated" by Reno crash

By Joey Bunch

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A Centennial-based air racing team released a statement today about the fatal crash Friday afternoon during the National Championship Air Races in Reno, Nev.

The McDonald Racer #37, flew in the event without incident. The team declined interviews.

"Our thoughts and prayers go out to all those affected by this accident," John Zayac, pilot of the McDonald Racer #37 team, said in the statement.

"The air race community has been devastated by the severity of this crash. Our race team is passionate about, and honored to, compete in the National Championship Air Races annually and we extend our deepest sympathies to the all of the families involved in this tragedy."

Zayac has competed in the National Championship Air Races the past 11 years and finished second in last year's T-6 Gold Class division.

A New York state native and Colorado resident since 1982, Zayac is president and CEO of IBG Business Services in Greenwood Village.

Pilot Jimmy Leeward, 74, of Ocala, Fla. and eight other people were killed when Leeward's P-51 Mustang Galloping Ghost crashed into the tarmac adjacent to a VIP seating area, about 65 feet from the show's main grandstand.

Sixty-nine people were hurt, including nine who were critically injured, authorities said.

The National Transportation Safety Board is investigating the cause of the crash. Witnesses said they saw something fall from the tail of the vintage World War II aircraft immediately before Leeward lost control.

The Christian Science Monitor and other media reported that photos indicate the part was a "trim tab," which moves the nose of an aircraft up and down.

NTSB officials confirmed Saturday that the part had been recovered, but would not identify it or elaborate on what role it played in the crash.

The National Championship Air Races and Air Show is in its 48th year, which the Colorado team characterized in its press release as the "World's Fastest Motor Sport."

The Associated Press contributed to this story.

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