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Wrap Up Report

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Reno 2008:**A Preview of the 45th National Championship Air Races**

By Alan Smith

Yep, that's right people! We'll be celebrating 45 years of air racing this year at Reno's Stead Field just north of Reno, Nev., on Sept. 10-14.

After honoring just about everyone else in aviation over the years, the Reno Air Racing Association has rightfully decided to pat themselves on the back this year after successfully presenting the loudest, fastest motor sport in the world to millions of people for more than four decades.

This writer occasionally gets annoyed with people who refer to the National Championship Air Races as an airshow. Folks, this is about racing! Yes, the event includes an airshow presented by some of the best civilian and military pilots in the world and yes, it's interesting and well done. Just remember they perform between races!

This year will again feature six racing classes: sport biplanes, International Formula One racers, the AT-6 class, jets consisting mostly of Czech-built L-39 "Albatross" fighter trainers, the sport class, and finally the "almost anything goes" unlimited class.

The Little Guys

We'll start with the sport biplanes. This class is sometimes thought of as an "entry level" racing class, but it also has some long-term devoted enthusiasts like Norman Way, Frank Jerant and Tom Aberle. We'll mostly see Pitts Specials in this class with a few relatively exotic Mong Sport biplanes.

Next in line for the little guys are the very fast International Formula One racers. These are almost all built by their pilots. The Reno Air Racing Association (RARA) explains that Formula One aircraft are all powered by Continental O-200 engines (the same 100 hp engines used in Cessna 150s). Weights and sizes of every major engine part must be within stock limits. The cam profile and carburetion are strictly controlled. Race aircraft must have 66-square-foot of wing area, weigh at least 500 pounds empty, and have fixed landing gear and fixed-pitch propeller. The fastest Formula One aircraft can reach 250 mph on the 3.19-mile oval racecourse at Reno. When you see these hot little racers, you'll understand why we like to call the IF1 guys

and gals the "mad scientists."

Because the high desert airport has an enthusiastic afternoon wind, these two classes race fairly early in the morning. The Formula One racers with their exotic propellers often need more than one lap to come up to full speed. So, these races often provide a few surprises.

The T-6 Class

The T-6 class is one of the most popular among the fans at Reno. As the only "one-design" class at the races, all the aircraft are the AT-6 "Texan," the Navy SNJ, or the Canadian-built "Harvard." All have the same airframe and are powered by the same Pratt & Whitney R1340-AN-1 600 hp radial engine. A few modifications are permitted by the T-6 racing association and have brought the speed up from the stock 185 mph to 220-235 mph and the similarity of all the aircraft makes for very tight racing that often brings fans to their feet. As one pilot put it, it's almost NASCAR with wings.

We expect the usual suspects to be back this year, including 2007 gold win-

ner Dennis Buehn of Carson City, Nev. in his race 43, 2004 champion Al Goss Bakersfield, Calif., with his race 17, Warlock, 2005 winner Mary Dilda with her race 22 Two of Hearts from Memphis, Tenn., and 2006 champ Nick Macy with his black race 6 Six Cat from Tule Lake, Calif.

While all the T-6ers have clean races and a high level of skill, the aboriginal pilots are the true "Gang of Four" in T-6 racing for the gold. You can expect to see them above, below, and between each other's tail feathers at any time during the meet.

The Smokers

The jet class continues to live on after its invitation-only beginning in 2002. While the oil burners whizz around the course in the 400-mph range the first races, all involving L-39s were frankly, something of a ho-hum parade. In 2004, things loosened up a bit when the class was opened to any qualified pilot and aircraft. Then, last year, the class was opened further to any non-afterburner aircraft with less than 30 degrees of wing sweep including aircraft

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like the Fouga Magister, North American T-2 Buckeye, Lockheed T-33, etc. Things might get interesting in the flying blowtorch division.

Sport Class

The sport class was introduced to highlight the new generation of high-performance kit-built aircraft. Competition in the class is fierce, with the rapid introduction of race-driven engine and

airframe technology. Eligible aircraft include production model kit-built aircraft, of which five or more kits have been produced and delivered to customers by the manufacturer, powered by a reciprocating engine of 650-cubic-inches or less. All aircraft must have a current FAA issued airworthiness certificate.

Speeds are actually approaching 400 mph and the sport class is being led by Jon Sharp and his *Nemesis* NXT two-

seater. Sharp has a long and successful history at the air races. He virtually owned the Formula One class for years with his *Nemesis* Formula One racer. It looks like he's doing it again in the sport class with the NXT. Other *Nemesis* team pilots are John Parker, Kevin Eldridge, and longtime Reno veteran Darryl Greenamyer — who dominated the Unlimited class years ago with his modified F8-F Bearcat Conquest I. That airplane is now in the Smithsonian in

Washington, D.C. Perhaps, this we'll see the *Nemesis* NXT break 400-mph mark.

The Unlimiteds

This is the class the public can see: three and four ton airplanes with 4,000 hp engines and capable of 400 mph. These are the racers that color and thunder to autumn aftern

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at the desert airfield. The rules are simple, the airplane must be propeller-driven with a piston-engine and weigh at least 4,500 pounds empty. Beyond that, just about anything goes as long as the racer has an FAA airworthiness certificate.

Scratch-built aircraft are very rare in the class and most of the racers are either stock and modified P-51 Mustangs, British Hawker Sea Furies

with Pratt & Whitney 4360 radial engines, and F8F Bearcats, some with Curtis Wright 3350 turbocharged engines. Speeds do reach 500 mph on the triangular course of approximately nine miles.

You'll see a return of 2007 Gold winner John Penney in the highly modified F8F race 77 *Rare Bear*. Mike Brown should be back with his personal air force consisting of two modified Sea Furies and a twin-engine F7F

Grumman Tigercat. Brown's *Sea Fury September Fury* is very fast and led Penney during the 2007 Gold race until mechanical problems forced him to drop out. We expect Penney and Brown to resume their duel in 2008. The two P-51s to watch are *Dago Red* flown by Dan Martin, and *Strega*, piloted by veteran Bill DeStefani.

All in all, we expect fine racing in 2008, with none of the tragic incidents that took three lives in 2007. "Air rac-

ing is competitive formation flying," said T-6 *Warlock* pilot Al Goss. "If you're not aware of the hazards involved, you are in danger." In 2008, the emphasis will be on safety at every pilot meeting and we're sure that safety will be number one in the minds of all 130 competitors throughout the meet.