

Press & Sun-Bulletin

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Binghamton native to compete in national air races in Reno

By Jennifer Micale • jmicale@gannett.com • September 12, 2010, 6:45 pm

At speeds approaching 250 mph, airplanes roar 50 feet from the ground, maneuvering their wings around an obstacle course of barrels on telephone poles.

Among these pilots is John Zayac, a Binghamton native who will compete in the National Championship Reno Air Races from Sept. 15 to 19 at the Reno Stead Airport in Nevada.

The 47th annual event carries on the tradition of the Cleveland Air Races, which spanned the 1920s to the 1940s. Participants in the fast-moving sport are aviators from around the world -- including fighter pilots and astronauts. But Zayac is no astronaut -- he's a 51-year-old Denver businessman who owns IBG Business Services, Inc.,

which specializes in middle market mergers, as well as a chain of car washes. The father of three comes back to the Binghamton area once a year to visit friends and family -- and to get his spiedie fix, he joked.

He's also an experienced pilot who has competed in the annual event for a decade as one of the top T-6 race pilots in the world. In 2003, he won first place in the T-6 Bronze Class. He then advanced through the Silver category and now races in the highly competitive T-6 Gold Class.

"I'm probably more the rookie pilot," he said. "There are so many military pilots and astronauts."

John, the son of Dr. Peter Zayac, started flying at the age of 16 when one of his father's patients took him into the skies. The younger Zayac, who graduated from Binghamton



John Zayac, pilot of the McDonald Racer #37 aircraft and graduate of the 1977 class of Binghamton Central High, is returning to the National Championship Air Races to compete in the 47th Annual National Championships Air Races in Reno, Nevada, to be held Wednesday through Sunday. (Photo provided)

Central High School in 1977, went on to get his pilot's license in the 1980s. He uses a Cessna to travel for business.

"I think flying in general is a convenience," he said. "Especially today -- you're able to jump on an airplane to go to meet with a client in Arizona and still be home with your family that night. It's a great benefit."

More than 10 years ago, a business client brought him to the air races. Two months afterward, Zayac bought his first T-6. He competed for the first time the following year. During the race, airplanes, which compete in heats, approach the five-mile course in a line wingtip-to-wingtip behind a pace plane. They descend from a height of 200 feet until they're 50 to 75 feet above the ground, sometimes dipping as low as 25 feet during the five-lap race.

"The wingtip gets close to the ground," Zayac said.

Is it dangerous?

It can be.

There have been a number of fatalities through the years, including three pilots who died during the 2007 show. However, the sport has become much safer, Zayac said, adding racers have to be certified and undergo training before they can participate.

He's had some close calls himself. On his way out to the race in 2000, he had to make an emergency landing on Colorado Boulevard due to engine problems. In May 2008, he was flying in the Colorado Mountains when his plane's engine suddenly stopped, forcing him to belly-in. The plane cart-wheeled and, wings ripped off, eventually came to rest in a ravine. Zayac walked away from the crash.

This year, Zayac's team hopes to break the 244 mph record for the course. In the past, he's flown around 239 mph during the race.

"Hopefully, we can set a new world record," he said.

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Zayac finishes second in air races

Binghamton native John Zayac finished second in the 2010 National Championships Air Races' T-6 Gold Class.

A Denver businessman and a 1977 graduate of Binghamton Central High School, Zayac is pilot of the McDonald Racer 37. The air races ran from Sept. 15 to 19 at Reno Stead Airport in Nevada.