

TEXAS HIGHWAYS--GREAT TEXAS BALLOON RACE--MALLORY

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The Great Texas Balloon Race Envelopes Longview With

SKY CHARIOTS OF FIRE

"Three, two, one...GLOW!" the chant goes up as night falls on the crowd gathered at Longview's Gregg County Airport. Suddenly, with the simultaneous blasts of propane burners, 40 or more hot air balloons illuminate the darkness like giant multicolored light bulbs.

In between group glows, the behemoths (each the size of a small house) luminesce on their own, holding enough hot air to stay upright but not enough to rise above the wide-eyed spectators clustered nearby.

Close up, the balloons roar like fire-breathing dragons. From a distance, they flicker like fireflies communing on a warm summer's night. The Greek god Apollo, with his mythical sky chariot of fire, would be tickled to death.

The world-famous Longview balloon glow tickles the fancy of 50-60,000 visitors annually as part of a July weekend of soaring sights and sounds known as the Great Texas Balloon Race.

In 1981, in fact, the GTBR held the first-ever balloon glow, now a common event at balloon festivals worldwide. Three years earlier, Longview dentist and avid balloonist Bill Bussey had made a deal with Mary LeTourneau, then manager of the new Longview Mall. In exchange for help starting a local balloon event, he would fly his balloon over the city to advertise the mall's opening.

With the fledgling race off the ground, another light went off in Bussey's head. Since hot air balloons rarely fly at night, he realized, few people had seen the spectacle of balloons illuminated in the dark. The tethered balloon glow became an instant success, and the Great Texas Balloon Race took off.

Not a balloon fiesta--at which balloons glow and launch for the sheer beauty and fun of it--the Great Texas builds its reputation as a competitive sporting event. True, the sight of 90 hot air balloons of many colors and shapes floating over the piney woods of East Texas turns heads. But with record-setting prize money riding on the line, world-class balloon pilots flock to Longview (by invitation only) to race.

How do you *race* a vehicle that's flying at the mercy of the wind?

While the GTBR sports three types of competitions (seven races in all, designed to test pilots' navigational skills), only one event resembles an actual race: the Controlled Navigational Trajectory Event, better known as the "Key Grab."

The Longview race offers the largest key grab prize in the U.S., a guaranteed \$50,000. (It uses a key, since many races traditionally give away cars instead of cash.) Balloonists launch at least two or three miles upwind of the airport race grounds. Surrounded by anxious onlookers, a 12-inch wooden ring bearing a key awaits them atop a 20-foot pole in the middle of the grounds. Whoever grabs the key, gets the cash.

In the race, slower pilots watch how winds effect lead pilots' balloons--from tree top level to hundreds of feet up. There's one disadvantage to this strategy: the key may be gone by the time you get there.

No one has grabbed the key to date, though some have gotten excruciatingly close. "I got within 18 inches one year," says veteran Houston pilot Sam Edwards, who has represented the U.S. in world competitions and has two daughters who pilot balloons. "It was exciting to see it come up so close, but very disappointing to see it go away."

In the other two events, speed plays no role--only accuracy counts. For each, the balloonmeister (the top race official) determines the event's goal or "task" and unveils the details at a briefing just minutes before launch time.

In the "Hare 'N Hound" competition, one balloon serves as the "hare" and takes off first. Ten minutes later, the rest of the balloons (the "hounds") launch in pursuit from the same location. After a 30- to 60-minute flight, the hare pilot lands at an undisclosed location and spreads a large target "X" on the ground inside a 500-foot- diameter scoring area. The hound pilots try to find the site and fly by close enough to toss a small gravel-filled bag (the marker) at the target. The closest marker wins the event. Others win points by getting inside the scoring area.

In the "Mass Ascension" event, all competitors launch en masse from the airport grounds...to the delight of spectators milling around or seated in lawn chairs brought from home. To fulfill the goal or "task," as set by the balloonmeister, the pilot must find the pre-designated scoring area shown on a map, perhaps eight to ten miles downwind, and score points the same as in the Hare 'N Hound race.

The balloonist with the highest overall score on all events wins the top cash prize as Great Texas Balloon Race champion.

"Fifteen years ago if you hit within the scoring circle you got notoriety. Now, if you don't get within two feet of the center, you're out of contention," confides Wil La Pointe, former Oklahoma State Ballooning Champion. "This is one of the races pilots fight to get into."

The morning race begins with a briefing under a large blue-and-white striped tent. The balloonmeister announces weather conditions (wind speed no more than eight to ten miles per hour, without gusting) and announces the event's task. Competitors, many of whom frequently race in the same events, exchange greetings as they pick up their task maps.

By 6:30 pilots and crews rush to waiting pickups and specially-outfitted vans that contain their balloon rigs. Newcomers, unfamiliar with local terrain and wind conditions, sometimes follow veteran pilots to remote launch sites. Race officials require competitors to get permission from landowners before launching or landing on their property. Some pilots give landowners "thank you" mementos like lapel pins or medallions.

Once on site, pilot and crew (usually four to six friends or family members) jump into action. The pilot may set off a small helium-filled balloon to check wind direction, while the crew spreads the balloon's envelope (typically around 70-feet-long) across the ground. Ropes tied to the chase vehicle secure the balloon's basket. Then two crew members hold open the mouth or "throat" of the balloon, while another wields a gasoline-powered fan to inflate the balloon. One or two others handle a line attached to the top or "crown" to control the swelling balloon, which typically holds approximately 70-80,000 cubic feet of air.

When the balloon takes shape at nearly full inflation, the pilot carefully blasts hot air into the envelope using a basket-mounted liquid propane burner that produces some 20 million BTU's per hour of heat. Once the air inside the balloon heats above the temperature of the outside air, the balloon stands upright. The whole process can take less than 15 minutes.

Hustling to the chase vehicle, the launch crew becomes the recovery crew as the pilot--compass and race map in hand--floats away on the breeze. Until final landing, the crew maintains constant radio contact with the pilot, who sometimes carries along a first-time passenger just for fun.

Flying in a hot air balloon often surprises first-time passengers. There's no sensation of wind blowing in your face because you're part of the wind. The balloon seems motionless above a world that's slowly passing by.

Longview balloonist John Wallis puts it this way: "You could be in a 100-mile-an-hour wind and not feel it. You can drop a piece of paper, and it would fall to the bottom of the basket. There's nothing else like it."

Balloons fly in only three directions, explains Wallis: up, down, and with the wind. Those parameters, however, allow skilled pilots to steer by catching different air currents at different altitudes.

To go up, the pilot blasts more hot air into the balloon, increasing buoyancy. By pulling on ropes that release hot air near the top of the envelope (thus cooling the balloon), the pilot gradually descends. By watching the altimeter, rate-of-climb indicator, and gauges of temperatures inside and outside the envelope, experienced pilots can maneuver for miles to within feet of the race target.

"Is the red balloon in front of me over the target yet?" radios one pilot to his chase vehicle.

"He's too far south," comes the reply.

"Where'd you get that left wind," another pilot radios to a friendly pilot up ahead.

Closing in on the target, some pilots creep along tree tops, making small talk and waving to surprised bystanders gawking from front yards and road sides below.

Race events only take place early in the morning and late in the afternoon. Midday thermals (turbulent air updrafts caused when sunlight heats the ground) make safe ballooning impossible. So between races, GTBR visitors take in attractions such as helicopter rides, an antique car show, balloon-related arts and crafts displays, specialty foods, kids activities, sky divers, and tethered balloon demonstrations. After each evening race, big-name entertainers take to the stage.

Perhaps the most whimsical Great Texas event remains the Special Shapes Rodeo. From a piggy bank to a peanut man, from a propane bottle to a champagne bottle, from a pack of cigarettes to a can of cola...these specialty corporate balloons vie

for prize money just like the sporting balloons. But their fantastic forms illicit extra-wide spectator smiles, while also promoting their products.

With the soaring success of its balloon race, Longview has become balloon happy all year long. Its Christmas and Fourth of July parades now feature trailer-fulls of balloonists in their baskets blasting away at burners. At many major outdoor gatherings around town, local pilots wow the crowds with colorful fly-bys. Well-known Longview ballooning brothers, Bill and Bruce Bussey, offer balloon rides June to October from their downtown Balloon Adventures, USA balloon-port. (For more on the balloon rides and the Busseys, see story, page ____.) One bed and breakfast, the Fisher Farm B&B, even offers hot air balloon "fly-in" service.

The city's ballooning bonanza also has attracted a hot air balloon manufacturer, Thunder & Colt US, to the Gregg County airport. The maker's craftspeople hand-stitch yards of rip-stop nylon into balloon envelopes and hand-weave imported Southeast Asian rattan into wicker baskets.

As a means of transport and sport, hot air ballooning has come full circle, explains Thunder & Colt's Peter Vizzard.

The Montgolfier brothers of France launched the first hot air balloon in 1783, he explains, by filling a 74-foot paper balloon with smoke. To the delight of France's king and queen (as well as American statesman Benjamin Franklin), the first passengers--a duck, a rooster, and a sheep--rose 1,500 feet and flew eight miles. That same year came a manned flight by two other Frenchmen, Pilatre de Rozier and the Marquis d'Arlandes.

Later, hydrogen gas-filled balloons gained popularity and became the only form of manned flight until the invention of the airplane.

In the 1960s new nylon fabrics and propane burners gave birth to modern hot air ballooning, which boomed in the Eighties as more powerful burners appeared.

Today, a typical hot air balloon costs \$15-20,000. Hourly operating expenses equal those of a small airplane, Vizzard says, adding that approximately half of the world's 12,000 licensed balloon pilots live in the U.S. Because of its mild climate, Texas and the Southwest remain strongholds in the sport.

As much as competition, however, camaraderie keeps high-flying aeronauts enthralled with their sport.

"It's a great family activity because it takes several people to do it," says pilot Wayne Bond of Albuquerque, New Mexico, home of the nation's largest balloon event. "It gets you back to the basics of life. It draws people together. It's hard to get mad floating around in a hot air balloon."

Even in the heat of competition at Longview's respected race, pilots welcome first-time passengers with a traditional champagne ceremony. Safely on the ground at the end of the flight, greenhorn fliers get on their knees (hands behind their backs), bend over, and sip champagne from a paper cup. As the celebrants try to maneuver more bubbly down their throats than on their shirts, pilot and crew recite The Balloonist's Prayer:

"The winds have welcomed you with softness.
The sun has blessed you with his warm hands.
You have flown so high and so well,
That God has joined you in laughter,
And set you gently back again
Into the loving arms of Mother Earth."

Whether you fly the Great Texas Balloon Race or merely muse at its magnificent sky chariots of fire, to those sentiments most anyone could send up a rousing "Amen."