

THIS IS AN UNUSUALLY TRICKY PIECE GIVEN THE BLENDED NATURE OF ACTIVIES, BUT I THINK THIS CLARIFIES IT. THANKS FOR YOUR QUESTIONS. IT'S A BETTER ARTICLE NOW AND ALLOWED THE CORRECTIONS OF SEVERAL PROBLEMS.

[btw this edit has only one space between sentences; have you gone to that style?...pardon my tardiness, if so]

Ballooning at Its Best

Longview hosts the Great Texas Balloon Race and—for the next three years—the U.S. National Hot Air Balloon Championship

Text by Randy Mallory

[call-out] As the chant goes up, “One, two, three, GLOW,” the balloons illuminate as if they were fantastical fireflies in a darkening sky.

[call-out] The weeklong spectacle of 75 or so hot air balloons floating over the Piney Woods offers extra thrills for spectators this year.

Each July, the sky above Longview turns predictably *polka-dotted* when the Great Texas Balloon Race fills the air with two dozen or more brightly colored hot air balloons. The sky turns particularly polka-dotted this July, because during part of the 34th annual event, balloon-happy Longview concurrently hosts the U.S. National Hot Air Balloon Championship. What’s more, the city hosts the Nationals again in 2013 and 2014. [\[Dates moved to Essentials for clarity.\]](#)

FOLLOWING SENTENCE MOVED UP: Organizers of the two events expect **that** the weeklong **competitions, involving** prospect of

75 or so hot air balloonists balloons floating over the Piney Woods, will attract some 40,000 visitors.

The national contest features America's top 50 balloonists, who vie (misspelled in edit) to win the national title, a prize of \$50,000, and the chance to represent the U.S. in the 2012 World Championship the following month in Michigan. These top 50 compete in numerous weekday flights for the Nationals, then join another 25 or so balloonists for the Great Texas Balloon Race events Friday through Sunday.

All flights take place early ~~Competing balloonists launch~~ each day, at 6:30 a.m. (to avoid daytime thermals). Flights for the Nationals launch from various locations around Longview and Gregg County, depending on wind direction and flight tasks [need brief explanation in parens (specific requirements of each contest)?] (such as locating a target on the ground or performing certain maneuvers in the air). Viewing of these weekday fly-bys can be a matter of luck (fans keep their eyes peeled skyward early each morning).

Then Friday afternoon through Sunday morning, Nationals pilots join Great Texas Balloon Race pilots for flights and other family-friendly activities based at the festival grounds of the East Texas Regional Airport. ~~but Friday afternoon through Sunday morning, visitors and locals can count on balloon watching and other family-oriented activities on the festival grounds at the East Texas Regional Airport.~~ [Nothing scheduled there the rest of the time, right? It's basically Friday and Saturday afternoons and nights for balloon glows, family activities and music, then Sat and Sun mornings for the ring toss...the grounds close up during middle of day and open around 4 to collect admissions...morning events are free. Can fans show up at the festival grounds and expect to see/visit with balloonists the rest of the time?] [Separate issue: The weekday fly-bys relate to the Nationals competitors, right? Exactly Since the GTBR doesn't start until the weekend.]

Great Texas Balloon Race founder and Longview dentist, Bill Bussey (himself a record-setting balloonist) invented the festival's most popular event, the "Balloon Glow," now a common crowd-pleaser at balloon festivals worldwide. ~~[THIS PART NEEDS SOME CORRECTION...MY MISTAKE] Before the~~ The Friday- and Saturday-night balloon glows begin, whimsical balloons known as "Special Shapes" inflate. Sometimes two or three times the size of a typical hot air balloon, these oddities can resemble anything from a clown's face to a bumblebee. ~~Then after sunset with the inflation of the "Special Shapes" balloons, which are sometimes two or three times the size of a typical hot air balloon and can resemble anything from a clown's face to a bumblebee. Regular~~ the regular balloons then inflate alongside the special shapes, and all remain tethered in place. Around 8:50 p.m., the chant goes up, "One, two, three, GLOW," and the simultaneous blasts of propane burners illuminate the balloons as if they were fantastical fireflies in a darkening sky.

The balloon glow remains a peak experience for balloon enthusiasts Longview residents Leska and Blake Parker, who have come to the festival since 2005 ~~[THIS WAS A TYPO...IT'S NOT 1995...MY FAULT]~~ 1995, when their son, Chance, was two years old. ~~[Blake grew up in Longview and has been going to the balloon events since they began, so I'm not worried that it matters that Leska works for chamber. If that's a problem for you, maybe we can get quotes from him about their son, etc.]~~ "The noise of the balloon glow ~~[propane burners?]~~ yep scared him at first, but then he really got into it," says Leska. "Now he looks forward to the Great Texas Balloon Race more than Christmas." Last year, the Parkers invited extended family, and four generations enjoyed the balloon glow together.

"It's incredible to walk around among these giant, glowing balloons for a close-up view and even chat with the pilots," adds Leska. "Before the balloon glow, we munch on funnel cakes, do some kid games ~~[But Chance is now 18 or 19 years old; still doing kid~~

games? Do they have other children?] [They also have a 3-year-old daughter and one-year-old son], and check out the craft booths. It's a great family outing."

Indeed, a country-fair atmosphere prevails across the festival grounds. Youngsters jump on inflatable bounce houses, and families hop on midway rides, peruse arts-and-crafts booths, and sample fair-type foods and drinks. Aviation buffs inspect several special aircraft on display, and, after nightfall, visitors converge on the open-air stage [where is the stage in relation to the entrance or overall festival grounds?] [It's all confined to one corner of the airport, so it's all in close proximity] for concerts by top country-western artists. (JB and the Moonshine Band headlines on Friday, and Grammy-winner Ronnie Milsap on Saturday.)

~~Another~~ [why "another"? This is the first competition mentioned][there will have been several days of nationals by then]

One of the more popular ~~favorite~~ balloon competitions ~~is the Saturday and Sunday morning~~ takes place on Saturday and Sunday mornings. The "Ring Toss" ~~in which~~ involves both Nationals and Great Texas Balloon Race pilots ~~compete~~ competing for \$5,000 in prize money. [I gather this is a GTBR event. Yep Do the GTBR and Nationals pilots compete in the same event, or different ones? yep Only one \$5,000 purse? Yep Completely separate from the \$50,000 prize for Nationals competitors?yep] They launch at least two miles from the airport, then float to the festival grounds, where they try to place or toss a 12-inch wooden ring onto a 20-foot pole. The feat still amazes Sam and Pat Vaughn of Longview, even after two decades of attending the Great Texas Balloon Race. They still pull alongside fellow RV-ers on the grounds' motor-home area. [Why do they bring an RV since they live in Longview?] [they're RV'ers...that's what they do...that way they join others in their club] Hundreds of other visitors sit in lawn chairs encircling the pole to cheer the pilots as they fly by.

[When the competition began, there were years in which no one won the purse.?] **yep...before current navigational improvements]**

“These days, pilots have so much skill and so many GPS and other navigational devices that you can count on someone winning the ring toss every year,” explains balloonist Bill Bussey.

Those ballooning skills are put to the ultimate test as pilots make practice flights on Monday, and then spend the rest of the week competing in early-morning flights **[contests?] by saying ‘competing’ it seems clear that it’s part of the contest]** Balloonists in both Nationals and Great Texas Balloon Race flights earn points by demonstrating how accurately they complete simple and complex tasks, which can number 25 or more for the week. **[meaning 25 or more tasks?] yep [Do only the Nationals pilots make the practice flights on Monday? Yes, Mon-Thur are nationals only. When you talk about balloonists in both Nationals and GTBR flights earning points, this is in different contests, right?] yep**

In a simple task, for example, right before launch the balloonmeister gives pilots the GPS coordinates for a target located miles away. Each pilot finds **[determines?] ok** a launch site (such as an open field) based on wind direction, then flies over the target **[selected by the organizers, right?] yep, by the balloonmeister, as noted**, which can be as straightforward as a 50-foot paper or plastic “X” spiked to the ground. Then, he or she must drop a lightweight, stuffed bag the size of a cell phone as close to the center as possible. Other tasks are more complex, like floating through an imaginary window in the sky, with the maneuver recorded for scoring on each pilot’s GPS device. **[Does the GPS record what altitude as well as the long. and lat. at which the maneuver was recorded?] you got it**

As the skill level of top pilots rises, so does the ballooning reputation of Longview, which was named **by the State Legislature** the “Official Balloon Capital of Texas” in 1985. **[This was a long time ago; has the honor gone to another city by now?] no, legislative**

designations are permanent, though other cities, such as Plano, have their own separate designations...it's a bit of a game.

Bill Bussey puts it this way: “This is a colorful, popular event, but [it has?] ok gained a world-class status because [it's?] ok a serious competition.”

Adds current world-champion balloonist (and Longview-race regular) John Petrehn of Kansas: “The Great Texas Balloon Race is one of the most successful and competitive balloon events in the U.S. It's the next best thing to the national championship, and Longview even has the Nationals for the next three years. That's ballooning at its best.”

[need bio for RM]

Great Ballooning

Longview's 33rd annual **Great Texas Balloon Race** festival and competition is July 27-29, 2012, at the East Texas Regional Airport, 269 Terminal Circle. This year (and again in 2013 and 2014), Longview also hosts the **U.S. National Hot Air Balloon Championship** (July 24-29, 2012). For schedules and prices [admission fees?], yep call the Longview Convention and Visitors Bureau, 903/753-3281; www.greattexasballoonrace.com.