

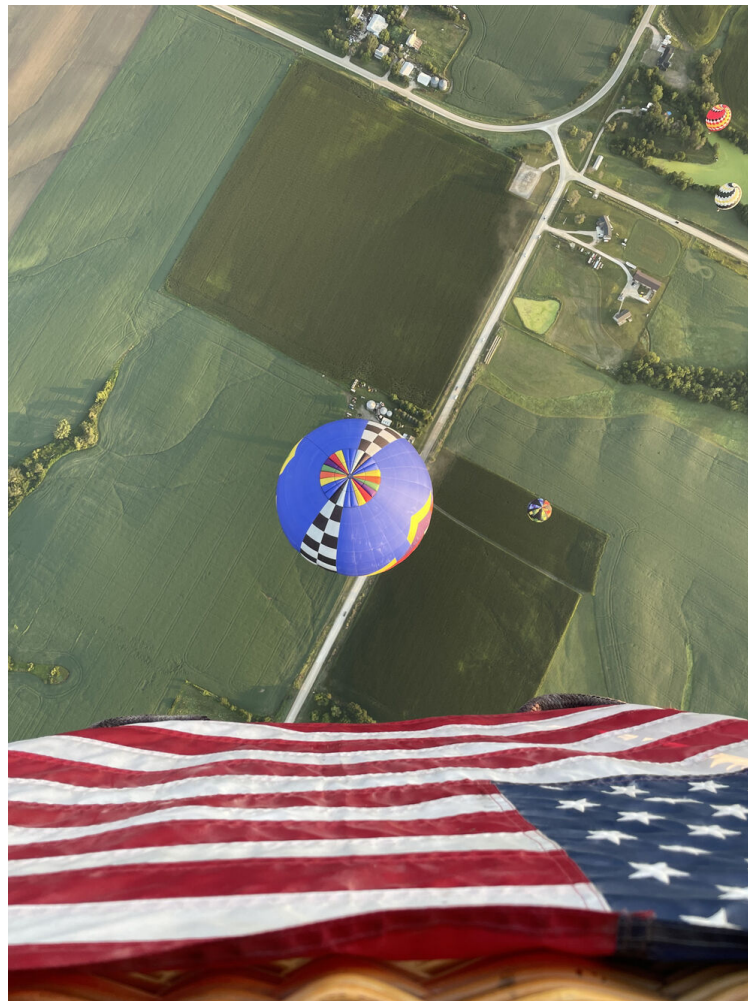
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TOP STORY

Pilots sharpen skills at event before arriving in Panhandle

By LAUREN BRANT & JEFF VAN PATTEN Star-Herald

Aug 9, 2021



A view of the top of Nick Donner's hot air balloon flying over fields in Indianola, Iowa. John Petrehn and Donner competed at the National Balloon Classic the week before nationals.

John Petrehn/Courtesy photo

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he pilots in the U.S. Hot Air Balloon Championship have not yet taken due to weather delays, but the pilots are ready to go. Several of this year's teams competed just last week in the 2021 National Balloon Classic in Indianola, Iowa.

Saturday, Aug. 7 was the final day of competition for the National Balloon Classic, but after the weather conditions canceled the final flight, the pilots and their crews packed up their baskets and envelopes before driving nearly nine hours along I-80 to Scottsbluff.

The National Balloon Classic had nine days of competition with tasks scheduled in the mornings and evenings, weather permitting. However, a sport that is so reliant on weather, limited the pilots' number of flights early in Iowa. The first evening flight of the classic and the last morning flight were canceled due to weather.

Despite the weather, the pilots were able to complete tasks to 17 targets.

Nick Donner, a U.S. National pilot, is coming into the competition off a first place finish at the National Balloon Classic and a summer of flying.

"Last week, we intended to do that event in Indianola because it was immediately preceding this event," Donner said. "A lot of times at Indianola and certainly here (Scottsbluff), the winds can be strong. ... We wanted to put ourselves in a situation to have as similar conditions as possible when we flew."

While the balloon classic is considered an old school event, since pilots fly to hard targets on the ground and do not complete logger tasks, Donner said it helped him get into the right mindset and practice his skills flying to targets.

"It got us prepared as much as we could for this week," he said. "Getting 13 targets for morning tasks and four targets for evening tasks last week — 17 total — was really what I needed to get in the right mindset for competition ballooning."

U.S. National pilot Jeremy Rubin, who finished second, said his favorite task was the judge declared goal (JDG) where the pilots had to drop a baggie onto a target placed on a road.

“It’s challenging and kind of cool to have to get your baggie on a road,” he said.

“Having that and then coming here for the Nationals is a lot.”

The final results of the 2021 National Balloon Classic featured several U.S. Nationals pilots finishing in the top ten.

1. Nick Donner, flying A.B.O. from Louisville, Kentucky
2. Jeremy Rubin, flying Trilogy from Ankeny, Iowa
3. Chase Donner, flying TBD from Marietta, Georgia
4. Joe Zvada, flying Above Us Only Sky from McAllen, Texas
5. Joe Heartsill, flying Texas Racer from San Angelo, Texas
6. Harold Cliver, flying Bubbaloona from Lewisville, Texas
7. Christopher Cliver, flying Happy Hour from Lewisville, Texas
8. Brad Craig, flying Cheetah from Carlisle, Iowa
9. John Petrehn, flying Kodachrome from Missouri City, Texas
10. Branden Bloom, flying Royal Racer from Indianola, Iowa

Harold Cliver and Christopher Cliver are the only pilots who are not competing at the U.S. Nationals.

Following the Aug. 7 awards ceremony, Rubin said they drove from Indianola to Scottsbluff and arrived around 9 p.m. He was able to participate in the Sunday practice flight.

“The National Balloon Classic helped me from flying, getting in tune with the equipment to the mindset when it comes to tasks and the positioning in the standings,” Rubin said. “The Sunday practice flight was more about making sure all of the tech

we're going to use this week is working and the sensor was talking to my app and my laptop.”

The U.S. National Championship will require the pilots to complete digital tasks. The national pilots also have to be more consistent during the tasks, since the field of pilots in lessened to 45 pilots.

“You really want to keep the same consistency throughout an event, but you might want to get greedy where you can,” Rubin said.

Still, the pressure from the competition does not set in until later in the week for Rubin.

“To me, I'm just out flying,” he said. “Whatever your aspiration was coming into an event, none of it matters until the last flight and the last scores are posted. When we get to Thursday, Friday (and) Saturday, that's when I'll start to feel really excited about how things are going or really anxious where I am in the standings relative to where I want to be.”

Rubin's best finish at a national competition is second, so he has one spot he wants, although he will still have fun.

Donner, who is a five-time national champion, recalled how the pilots did not have an opportunity to fly until the first evening at the 2019 event, so he is hopeful to get into the air.

“You just want to get through the first flight sometimes, especially if the first flight is an evening flight to get the competition going,” he said. “It's nice to finally get into the air.”

The Monday morning and evening flights were canceled due to unfavorable weather conditions, Balloonmeister Paul Petrehn said.

“The winds were very unsafe for flight,” Petrehn said of Monday morning’s planned flight. “We thought there was a window of opportunity with winds below our thresholds up until 8 o’clock. The moment we left the pilot briefing to go reconvene out at the Mitchell Airfield, the winds were already in excess of the FAA (Federal Aviation Administration) wavier limits for flight.”

The winds combined with smoky skies from all of the wildfires made it unsafe for flight, Petrehn said.

He added how ballooning is dependent on weather conditions, so they keep a close eye on that before determining whether or not the pilots can take to the sky.

“It’s all part of our training,” he said. “We’re FAA-licensed pilots just like any fixed wing pilot. We have more of a micro-meterology. We’re looking at a much, much smaller area than somebody going cross country in a plane. One hundred percent we are weather dependent, and Mother Nature must cooperate for us to have some safe flights.”

The evening weather was worse with storms surrounding the area, but organizers hold out hope that they can take to the sky on Tuesday morning.

“Tomorrow morning, I think the weather (forecast) looks good. So maybe we’ll try to see if we can tack on another task or two. It wasn’t flyable (Monday night). It was raining and windy out there. The weather was very unstable. This was an easy decision to take care of some important details.

The 45 balloon pilots are set to take to the air for planned flights through Saturday morning.