

2022 America's Challenge Celebrates Silver Anniversary

September 27, 2022

Weather permitting, at 6 PM on Saturday, October 1, a distinguished field of gas balloonists will soar aloft from Balloon Fiesta Park on flights to destinations unknown. Their objective: to fly further than their competitors and win one of the world's premier ballooning competitions. The Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta's America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons was founded in 1995, and this year celebrates its 25th year.

The pilots competing this year include the newly-crowned world distance gas ballooning champions, Wilhelm Eimers and Benni Eimers, from Germany. The father-son team -- the first ever to win the world title -- were victorious in the Coupe Aeronautique Gordon Bennett the world's oldest air race. Willi Eimers has won the Gordon Bennett five times, putting him among the greatest champions in gas ballooning history. But he has never won the America's Challenge.

Eimers will fly this year's America's Challenge with his son Sebastian, while Benni will compete as co-pilot with Swiss pilot Balthasar Wicki, an America's Challenge rookie. Also representing Germany is another first-time team, Max Michels and Andreas Michels.

Several America's Challenge veterans will be back this year. Among them is the always-exciting American/Polish entry of Andy Cayton and Krzysztof Zapart, who won in 2019 with a dramatic flight deep into the Canadian wilderness. Benoit Pelard and Benoit Peterle, the French team that finished third in 2019, hopes to improve on that result. Four-time America's Challenge champions Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke, two-time champions Mark Sullivan and Cheri White, and two-time competitors Brian Duncan and Brenda Cowlshaw round out the field.

The Balloon Fiesta's America's Challenge website, [https://balloonfiesta.com/America's Challenge](https://balloonfiesta.com/America's%20Challenge), and the YB Tracking app for Android and iPhones (free to download) will feature live satellite-based tracking of the balloons' positions and race updates throughout the competition. The web site also includes statistics, race records, and team information.

America's Challenge Launch Anticipated Saturday October 1

9/30/2022 5 PM MDT/2300 UTC

The eight America's Challenge teams are safely in Albuquerque and eagerly anticipating the 25th America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons. The launch window for the race opens at 6 PM Saturday, October 1 (0000 UTC Sunday, October 2), and race officials anticipate a launch sometime Saturday evening. The Twilight Twinkle balloon glow is also scheduled for Saturday evening, providing a double header for Balloon Fiesta guests.

At the opening briefing, meteorologist Randy Lefevre told the teams that forecast trajectories in the middle and high altitudes should take the balloons to the north and northeast, towards the Dakotas and Minnesota and possibly into Canada. Race officials are closely watching weather in the Albuquerque area for possible convective activity (thunderstorms) and showers during the afternoon hours that could delay the inflation. Lefevre believes the best combination of weather for the launch in Albuquerque and downrange in the direction the balloons should travel will occur Saturday evening. A decision on the timing of the launch is expected at a 12 PM (1800 UTC) briefing Saturday.

Also during the briefing, Bert Padelt, a member of the American team in the most recent Coupe Gordon Bennett, drew the launch order for the teams, which is always determined by random draw. It is:

1. Balthasar Wicki and Benni Eimers (Switzerland/Germany)
2. Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke (USA)
3. Andy Cayton and Krzysztof Zapart (USA/Poland)
4. Wilhelm Eimers and Sebastian Eimers (Germany)
5. Mark Sullivan and Cheri White (USA)
6. Brian Duncan and Brenda Cowlshaw (USA)
7. Benoit Pelard and Benoit Peterle, France
8. Max Michels and Andreas Michels, Germany

We will post regular updates to this site. Once the race begins, you may follow the action via live tracking on the website and via the free YB tracking app on your favorite mobile device.

America's Challenge Gas Race Postponed

10/01/2022 2:30 PM MDT / 2030 UTC

The launch of the 25th America's Challenge Gas Balloon Race, originally scheduled for the evening of October 1, is being postponed due to weather concerns. The eight competing teams got the word from Event Director Sam Parks at the noon (1800 UTC) briefing on Saturday.



All other Saturday evening events, including the Twilight Twinkle balloon glow, the Fastrax team jumps, and the spectacular aerial drone show (an all-new Balloon Fiesta event¹) are still continuing as scheduled.

Meteorologist Randy Lefevre provided a detailed analysis of weather conditions that prompted the decision to delay the America's Challenge. There are concerns about monsoonal moisture and convective activity in northern New Mexico and southern Colorado that could cause thunderstorm and strong outflow wind gusts affecting early stages of flight. High winds that could affect landings are also forecast downrange in the direction the balloons would reach in the first 24-36 hours of the race. The

winds aloft are expected to shift further east over the coming days, away from the Rocky Mountain chain and into more stable flying and landing conditions.

[Sam Parks on postponement 100122-0001.mp4](#)

Weather postponements in the interest of safety are not unusual in the America's Challenge.. There are potential windows of opportunity in the coming days that could provide improved conditions for a safer race. The launch window allows for a launch as late as Wednesday evening, October 5.

Race officials plan to brief the pilots tomorrow to look at conditions for a safer launch. The briefing is scheduled to start at noon, but could be delayed until later in the day if conditions warrant.

Next America's Challenge briefing at 3 PM (2100 UTC) Sunday

October 2, 2022

The America's Challenge gas balloon race teams will meet at 3 PM (2100 UTC) on Sunday, October 2, to review weather conditions and potential launch windows for the race. Race officials and the team meteorologists are continuing to monitor weather conditions both in the Albuquerque area for launch and downrange to the north and east, the anticipated direction of travel. More to come after the briefing.

America's Challenge Weather Delays Continue

Sunday, October 2, 2022 1700 MDT (2300 UTC)

Why are these people smiling? Certainly not because of the unstable weather that continues to plague the 25th America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons.

At a 3:00 PM MDT briefing (2100 UTC), after another review of the weather, the decision was made to delay the race at least another day. The weather issues -- monsoonal moisture with potential rain, thunderstorms, and outflow wind gusts -- are still a problem during the early part of the flight track as the balloons transit the mountainous terrain northeast of Albuquerque. High surface winds generated by a low-level jet stream through the western Great Plains also are an issue and could make it difficult for pilots to land 24-36 hours into the race. In the interest of safety, Event Director Sam Parks and his team therefore decided to postpone the race again to wait for better weather.

That better weather is expected to arrive Tuesday into Wednesday, as a low pressure system that has been spinning in the northern Rockies and Great Plains finally begins to break down and move out of the way. The race's launch window remains open through Wednesday evening MDT. The next briefing is scheduled for 2 PM MDT (2000 UTC) on Monday, October 3.

Meanwhile, the teams are taking advantage of the delay relax and rest. They also posed for the traditional class picture: The pilots scheduled to compete include, back row, left to right: Mark Sullivan and Cheri White, USA; Andreas Michels and Max Michels, Germany; Brian Duncan, USA; Andy Cayton, USA; Krzysztof Zapart, Poland; Benoît Pelard and Benoît Péterlé, France. In the front row: Sebastian Eimers and Wilhelm Eimers, Germany; Benni Eimers, Germany; Balthasar Wicki, Switzerland; Brenda Cowlshaw, USA; Barbara Fricke and Peter Cuneo, USA.



The Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta events scheduled for the evening of October 2 -- the Balloon Glow, aerial drones, Team Fastrax jumps, and fireworks -- are still on schedule. The mornings have been flyable and the hot air events spectacular!

Pilots Gather for Monday Briefing

October 3, 2022



The America's Challenge teams will shortly begin filing into the briefing room at the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta headquarters near Balloon Fiesta Park for the 2 PM MDT (2000 UTC) race weather update and briefing. We'll soon learn the latest on the prospects for a launch in the next 60 hours.

Meanwhile, the teams have spent the last day resting, reviewing the latest data with their meteorologists and ground support teams, and taking in the sights of Albuquerque. Last night, most of the pilots and team members, friends, and family gathered at Peter Cuneo and Barbara Fricke's Albuquerque home for the annual

lasagna party. For an evening every year, Barbara and Peter's backyard becomes a fascinating crossroads of international gas ballooning, as some of the greatest minds in the sport unwind and share knowledge and stories. We spotted several America's Challenge alumnae who are not participating in the race this year, among them Leo Burman and Danielle Francoeur of Canada, American gas balloon builder and America's Challenge champion Bert Padelt, and Tim Baggett, Command Center tracking specialist for much of the early 2000's.

We'll update you on prospects for the launch as soon as we can after the briefing. Once the race starts, you can follow the balloons' positions and more via the YB tracking app on the Balloon Fiesta website, www.balloonfiesta.com/americanchallenge or by downloading the free app to your favorite mobile device and subscribing to the 2022 America's Challenge (also free).

Weather Window Opening for America's Challenge?

October 3, 2022 2:40 PM MDT (2040 UTC)

The first shafts of light are finally beginning to shine into the weather picture for the 25th America's Challenge gas balloon race, with potential for a launch over the next two days. But the forecast models vary widely, and the race meteorologists and staff are sorting through a complicated weather picture and several launch scenarios.

Pilots have been asked to report for a second briefing at 8:00 PM tonight (0200 UTC 4 October) for a further evaluation of the weather conditions. This briefing could be delayed or cancelled, depending on how things develop over the next few hours. Stay tuned!

Groundhog Day at the America's Challenge?

October 3, 2022 7:30 PM (0130 UTC 10/4/2022)

Unpredictable, unstable weather continues to plague the America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons. A briefing scheduled for 8 PM MDT (10/4 at 0130 UTC) has been postponed until 2 PM (2000) tomorrow, as race officials and meteorologists continue to look for a weather window that will allow for a safe and competitive race.

Earlier today, it looked like the weather stars might align to allow for an overnight launch, sometime around 3 AM MDT (0900 UTC). But there are once again storms in central and northern New Mexico, both in the Albuquerque vicinity and eastward, with the potential to develop outflow winds that could disrupt the inflation. There is also a lack of agreement among various weather forecast models. One pilot joked to his crew that the round of delays and briefings feels like "the Twilight Zone, or Ground Hog Day."

The race officials and pilots remain hopeful that a weather window will open in the next couple of days to allow for a safe launch and flight. Under the race rules, the teams can launch as late as Wednesday evening.

Another Day, Another Briefing, Another Delay

Tuesday, October 4 2:40 PM MDT (2040 UTC)

It's getting to be a familiar routine – the eight America's Challenge teams, along with officials, crew, and weather guys, file into the briefing room, meteorologist Randy Lefevre shows his weather slides (with lots of green indicating rain in the middle where New Mexico is), and event director Sam Parks announces another postponement in hopes of better weather.

At the Tuesday 2 PM MDT (2000 UTC) briefing, it was no different. The America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons has been postponed again in hopes a weather window might slip open in the next 36 hours. The next briefing is at 12 noon Wednesday October 5, (1800 UTC), at which time officials will determine whether there is any chance of launching the race before the Wednesday midnight deadline

An unusually persistent wet weather pattern has taken hold in the Albuquerque area, with a stationary front draped across the state and a cutoff low in southeastern Arizona that is pumping in moisture. For a while yesterday, it looked like there might be an opportunity to launch the race overnight Monday-Tuesday. However, that window slammed shut – Balloon Fiesta Park got a half-inch of rain in the very early hours on Tuesday.

The morning hot air events at the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta have fared better. The balloons have flown three of the four mornings so far. However, hot air balloons inflate and fly within a relatively short time period of one to two hours, and over a much smaller geographic area.

No Start for 25th America's Challenge

Wednesday, October 5, 2022 12:30 MDT (1830 UTC)

Days of persistent rain, instability, and shifting weather patterns mean the 2022 America's Challenge distance race for gas balloons will not start this year.

At Wednesday's weather briefing – a quick one, since the weather pattern hasn't significantly changed in the past couple of days -- meteorologist Randy Lefevre told the teams that there was no hope the weather would improve enough to allow for a safe launch before the race window closes at midnight. A low pressure system spinning almost directly over Albuquerque will continue to bring rain into the area. While delays related to weather are not unusual for America's Challenge races, this year's weather pattern has been especially stubborn and persistent. Command Center Director Ruth Lind dubbed the race the "America's Weather Challenge."

Balloonists are used to not being able to fly due to bad weather, but are always disappointed when this happens. Event Director Sam Parks especially acknowledged the sadness felt by European competitors who had traveled so far to participate.



There was a lot of laughter during the briefing, and fond farewells afterward, as competitors and race officials thanked those who had worked so hard to plan and coordinate the race.

Weather cancellations of the America's Challenge are rare, but not unprecedented. The race also did not start in 2015 due to persistent bad weather, and in 2009 the race was called off after the balloons were inflated as high winds moved in and the balloons could not be launched safely.