

TITLE DAWN AND TED GAUTHIER'S

The Sixth Flag City Balloon Fest took place August 26-29 in Findlay, Ohio under the direction of Phil and Dan Clinger (Phil's dad). Despite higher than anticipated winds during the pilot's meeting and a 45 minute hold, we were still able to get a flight off Friday night. Those who wanted to fly NABA sanction flew into the field for a Gordon Bennett task which was in the shape of an American Flag worth \$300 for First Place with a Key Grab worth \$1000. Others who opted to fun fly flew out of the field.

My dad and I found a grass strip between a few corn fields that was large enough for us to launch and we were quickly followed in by a few other balloonists. I took one of my local crew members, Jeannie Rustic, up for her first ride - much to her delight. The winds were quick at launch, but quickly died off prior to landing. My dad and I were lined up perfectly and flew down the center of the length of the long field. However, the winds shifted and we flew off to the left of the target just prior to reaching the actual scoring area which consisted of the boundaries of the mock-up flag.

Although we both threw, with me practically hitting Tom Maynard in the head with my baggie, (and of course my dad much closer), neither of our scores were inside the rectangle scoring area. Jody Leatherberry was the only pilot to score, earning top prize for the evening's fun flight, and no one was lucky enough to grab the key. We returned to the field to glow and then to enjoy the VIP pilot, crew and sponsor reception at the nearby tent for pizza, wings, cookies and other treats.

Saturday morning's flight was cancelled prior to leaving the hotel due to approaching rain and pop up showers in the area. Pilots and crew proceeded to the hotel restaurant to enjoy the complimentary breakfast. Before returning to our room to get in a little more sleep, we picked up the local newspaper which had a large, close-up center photo of my dad in the "Andy" balloon and my balloon, "Daydream," in the background from Friday evening's flight as we approached the target. Little did we know that this would be a little foreshadowing for the weekend's events.

Many pilots spent Saturday afternoon strolling through downtown Findlay, a very patriotic small town (earning the official declaration of "Flag City USA") downtown with cute shops and establishments. A must-stop location is Deitch's, a local favorite which produces homemade ice cream and chocolates. Pilots and crews were lucky enough to find a box of Deitch's chocolates in their pilot packs. Mmmmmm...yummy. After we did our yearly stroll around town, we found our way back to the field early where there are more things

to keep us occupied including birds of prey, live bands, a car show, remote control airplanes, model rockets, play areas for the kids and more. Unfortunately, Saturday evening's flight was cancelled after a hold as there were pop up showers in the area and because the winds just wouldn't calm down quick enough before sunset. However, the other half of balloonists were able to pull off a glow to provide a good crowd-pleaser while the rest of us attended the VIP reception early where we enjoyed the glow from the spectator's point of view for a change.

Sunday morning brought us the weather we wished for all weekend. The chance of rain was no longer a concern and the winds provided a lot of steering. A fly in task and multiple judge declared goal was assigned to pilots and we scurried off the field searching for the perfect launch spot. It was important to get in the air as soon as we could while the winds were still reliable and to make sure we didn't have an issue reaching the targets in time. Many pilots spent a little too long getting in the air and found this to be a problem as they didn't make it to the target prior to it closing and also struggled with the shift in wind direction. Luckily, my dad and I made it in the air quickly and were able to take advantage of the great steering that was available.

I took my long-time friend, Andrea Barnett, who had joined me for the weekend for her very first ride and my dad took up my mom who always loves the excitement of competition. It seemed as if there was plenty of right at all altitudes and a very strong left at the deck. We steered and adjusted our altitude the entire way to the field and once reaching the far south end of the very long field (with the target at the north end).

When I approached, I stayed as right as possible, almost passing the field to the south and east, when I opened up the top for an express trip to treetops. Now flying along the midst of the treetops located at the eastern edge of the field, the spectators would assume that we had missed it. However, remember the very strong left at the ground. I flew along the treetops, with the gradual steer to the left, dropped down to the deck after passing the trees....practically doing a u-turn, and working my way north to the target. The left was so strong that I was literally doing a u-turn and did small blasts to gain a small amount of altitude to adjust for a little more right/north wind. It was amazing how much left was down there.

I hear Tom Maynard giving a play-by-play and I'm nervous and excited all at the same time, hoping that I don't screw this one up. I popped up and then back down again to throw my baggie as I pass across the top of the X really close to the deck to throw my baggie.

I throw, the crowd and scoring officials cheer for

me, I smile and Andrea and I high five as she exclaims "That was Awesome!" The next target is ahead to the far right and I hear chatter on the radio that everyone is losing all the right that was there before. I take the "elevator" up to 5,000 feet where a few of us struggle for any right that is left in order to have any kind of chance of making the next target. On the way up I'm grabbing for my map to identify my next target and literally shaking from the excitement. It seems I always make a bad move or lose the wind and it was so exciting to be able to do it right. I find a bit of south wind that I need at 3300 feet and do a terminal velocity decent down just prior to reaching the road hoping for a miracle of the strong south wind that I need somewhere along the way, but none was to be found.

No one made the second target and by this time as the first target had closed, the strong right wind had been lost and it had come time for everyone to find their final landing spot. I landed at a frisbee golf park along with Rick Cusik and Phil Clinger. Two spectators who followed us to our launch site and helped us set up had followed our chase vehicle throughout the entire flight and were there to help us pack up. They were very excited about ballooning and expressed interest in becoming volunteer crew next year. We took pictures together, exchanged information and went on our way.

My dad landed at a house where a seven year old boy ran up to the balloon and was so excited to see it up close and to meet the pilot of his favorite balloon. My parents learned that the boy's name was "Andy" and that he had been watching and following the "Andy" balloon all four years that it has been at the event, meaning he had been keeping track of it since he was three! They put him in the basket and took all sorts of pictures which really made his day. Just another great story of why it is so fun to be involved in ballooning!

We returned to the hotel to see the final standings posted on the door. Ted Gauthier - First Place with 1000 points! Dawn Gauthier - Second Place with 955 points! A very interesting trend followed. Jim Cusik - flying competition for his first season after getting his license last summer, earned Third Place beating his dad, Rick Cusik in Fourth Place!

We checked out of the hotel and proceeded to Urbanski's, the banquet facility where the awards are held. As always, it was a first class event, with a great breakfast, discussion and awards. Personally, it was extremely exciting and special to me to earn second place at a NABA event behind no one better than my dad. It was so special to finish one-two with him since he's provided and taught me all I know when it comes to ballooning. Every pilot knows the feeling of working so hard to get to a target and it just not working out. How often do we say, "woulda, coulda, shoulda?" It was a great way to close-out my competition season

before focusing on my upcoming wedding in September and then departing on my honeymoon.

If you haven't been to the Flag City Balloon Fest in Findlay, Ohio, I strongly urge you to consider attending next year. It truly is one of the very best events in the area. It is fun and they really take care of their pilots. Findlay is only about a 2.5 hour drive south on I-75 from the Detroit area. We stay in a great hotel that is walking distance to Main Street downtown and only minutes from the field. They provide nice pilot packs, host great receptions for us each day so it is hardly necessary to buy any food for yourself or crew throughout the entire weekend (I think all I did over the weekend was eat), the awards banquet is held in a very nice facility with good food and service, the field offers unique activities to entertain us that we really enjoy, and good prize money (first place was \$1000, second place was \$750 and all balloons that glow are paid \$100).

Tom Maynard is the announcer which is always enjoyable considering his knowledge of the sport and relationship with the pilots. In addition, it is a NABA sanctioned event, with good competition and a dedicated committee and set of sponsors.

Equally important, they have an excellent pool of local crew. My dad and I absolutely fell in love with the local crew that was provided to us when we first attended four years ago and they've stuck with us ever since with incredible enthusiasm. We've picked up a few extra crew people along the way as there are always extra hands willing to help and they are all excellent! You couldn't hand pick better people and it seems many other pilots have had the same experience. Everyone who has helped us out has been an absolute joy.

In conclusion, I know that we often wonder what other events in the area we could attend. Often we don't explore them because we aren't sure if we should step out of our comfort zone, if it is worth the trip or because we don't know what the event is like. There are many pilots you will recognize besides those I've already mentioned who attend each year such as Wayne Warren, Roger Beebe, Jim Birk, Janet Lutkus, and more. And, each year we make new friends. Think about it, and I assure you, you will not be disappointed in Findlay. Visit <http://www.flagcityballoonfest.com> for more information

Dawn (Gauthier) McKenzie