

Posted: Wednesday, Jun 20, 2007 - 04:46:39 pm
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Female flyers stop in Jefferson City on cross-country competition

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In Wednesday's pale early morning light, Ashley Szasz Turk and her co-pilot, Heather Cupitt, were busily checking over their airplane, a dashing blue-and-white Garmin 1000.

As Turk buffed the airplane's nose with a rag, Cupitt double-checked various fuel and oil levels.

The two young women - 23- and 22-years-old, respectively - are one of 45 teams competing in the Air Race Classic, a transcontinental air race testing the piloting skills of women racers.

Featuring the piloting talents of 90 contestants from 28 U.S. states - not to mention New Zealand and Canada - the race officially started in Oklahoma City on Tuesday and will end in St. John, Canada, by Friday.

In the meantime, racers will touch down at 10



Pilot Katie Sparrow, of Greeley, Colo., left, and co-pilot Marie Janus, of Valparaiso, Ind., clean their Piper Warrior Tuesday after completing the third leg of the Air Race Classic at the Jefferson City Memorial Airport. (Kelley McCall/News Tribune photo)

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airports across the continent and will cruise by nine others.

Jefferson City was the fourth stop, sandwiched between Denison, Iowa, and Bowling Green, Ky. On their cross-country journey, the racers expect to cover about 2,400 miles over three to four days.

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Both Turk and Cupitt are flight instructors and recent graduates of the aviation institute, Embry-Riddle.

Turk said she had no idea how she was faring in the race. "As first-timers, we're stumbling along the way," she explained.

For Turk the race has been a learning experience. Flying into the first airport a bit of a shock, she said, because she wasn't used to flying in close proximity to so many active planes.

Experienced racers call the first-time racers "baby birds." Female pilots who have 40,000 flight hours under their belts are considered "mother birds."

Although the competition is real, the racers share a camaraderie.

"It's really neat to see other women in the field, since it's such a male-dominated profession," explained Turk. "It's nice to meet other women pilots."

Jacquie Biloff and Charlotte Lockett were two other flyers preparing for take off Wednesday morning.

The two women are flying one of the race's oldest and most notable crafts, a 1955-era Cessna 180. Known as the "Alaskan Workhorse," the plane - which features a wheel on its tail, instead of its nose - typically lands on floats or skis.

The two former bush pilots are familiar with setting the plane down on rough surfaces such as glaciers and gravel bars.

Biloff compared flying to a "real high," both figuratively and literally.

"It's very addicting," she said.

Her partner, Lockett, said competing in the race is physically demanding.

"But the adrenaline is going so much, you don't feel it," she said, noting a wave of exhaustion didn't hit her until she landed Tuesday night.

The two women on Tuesday flew for about seven hours straight, making three legs of the journey before stopping.

The rules of the race bar night-flying and also require pilots to maintain visual contact with the ground. That last rule means the weather-savvy pilots have to make the best use of their knowledge to skirt cloud formations, while still hewing as close as possible to a fast direct route.

Biloff's father was a pilot who encouraged her aspirations to fly, although he didn't teach her.

Lockett got started later in life. Learning to fly was a "wild hair," she said dismissively. Today she works for the Anchorage Flight Standards Office, helping enforce the rules and regulations that keep other flyers safe.

Each aircraft is assigned a "handicap" speed - based on age, speed, modifications, etc. - to give each pilot a fair shot at winning. The pilots are thus given the leeway to play the elements, holding out for better weather, winds, etc.

The objective of the competition is to fly the perfect cross-country trip. Teams win based on the efficiency and accuracy pilots exhibit in every aspect of the race.

It's possible the last plane across the finish line could be the winner.

Here in Jefferson City, pilot Stan Merhoff has served as the race's stop chairman.

He was pleased to play a part in the race and said the Air Classic likely was attracted to Jefferson City for economic reasons.

"We don't have any (airport) user fees or extra fuel taxes," he noted. "It's nice for Jefferson City."