

PUBLISHED: 06-18-07 2:00 AM EST

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Purdue women to compete for cross-country flight title

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It's not every day that Purdue University students get to fly across more than half the country, racing against some of the top women aviators in the United States and Canada.

But Katie Sparrow and Marie Janus will be doing just that this week, flying for the Purdue team in this year's Air Race Classic. The annual plane race for women starts Tuesday in Oklahoma City and winds up Friday in St. John, New Brunswick, Canada.

Sparrow, a junior in the flight program, is pilot this year. She was on the team that took third place overall and first for college teams last year. Janus, also a junior in the flight program, has worked the ground crew in the past and will be co-pilot this year.

Their plane, a Piper Warrior, is actually one of the slowest in the race, averaging a speed of about 106 knots. Other planes will go as fast as 190 knots.

But that doesn't mean Sparrow and Janus will be left in the dust.

The Air Race Classic handicaps teams based on their planes. The faster the team can go over their plane's average speed, the better their score. They could actually be the last to finish the race and win the title.

"We try to constantly be faster than that by getting good tailwinds and using good piloting skills," Sparrow said.

The team can do as many legs of the nine-leg course as it wants at a time, as long as it is flying during the day and in good weather conditions. The trick, Sparrow said, is picking the best weather when possible and making sure they don't wait so long for that weather that there isn't time to finish the whole race.

Their plane is also very light, which can work for them or against them.

"A tailwind pushes a lighter plane farther," Sparrow said. "It's the opposite, unfortunately, with a headwind."

One of the keys to judging the weather is the ground crew, which monitors weather and wind from West Lafayette. That crew is responsible for telling Sparrow and Janus when they should fly and how high.



(By Dave Umberger/Purdue News Service)

Captain Katie Sparrow (right) and co-pilot Marie Janus prepare for departure at the Purdue Airport in West Lafayette.

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"We hope for good winds," said Pascal Nguyen, a ground crew member and a senior in the flight program. "It's basically interpreting the weather and kind of giving flight suggestions."

Besides the pride in finishing well, Janus said the Air Race Classic can be a great networking opportunity for young women pilots.

"These women have been doing it for years," Janus said. "They just have this expertise and it's a great opportunity for us to learn."

This year's race features 49 teams from the United States and Canada.