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Winds help push Purdue's race team

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June 23, 2007

This year, Marie Janus was the co-pilot on Purdue's Air Race Classic Team and she did all she could to learn strategies and the nuances of the race.

But the weather didn't allow much of that.

Janus will be the pilot in next year's race. But this year, favorable winds forced her and this year's pilot, Katie Sparrow, to do multiple legs of the race at a time, stopping briefly for fuel before getting back in the air.

The four-day race ended Friday.

"It was very fast," said Janus, a junior in Purdue's flight program. "I don't know if I had enough time to take things in like I'd liked to."

Janus and Sparrow finished the final four of nine legs Thursday in their Piper Warrior plane. They raced against 48 other teams of women from all over the United States and Canada.

Just because they finished early doesn't mean they'll win the race.

Teams are given a handicap number based on how fast their plane can fly. The faster they actually go over that handicap, based on good tail winds and flying skills, the better their score.

Winners will be announced Sunday at a banquet in St. John, New Brunswick, Canada, where the race finished this year. Sparrow, also a junior in the flight program, was co-pilot on the team that finished third last year.

Sparrow said there weren't a lot of head winds this year, which the team tries to avoid, but not a lot of tail wind either. She said there was more cross wind than anything.

"It was probably somewhere in the middle," Sparrow said. "They don't actually help you, but they don't hurt you."

Josh Stroka, a senior in the flight program, was ground crew coordinator and said the team planned the weather well, staying ahead of storms in New York and catching some good wind the last day.

He said teams that waited until Friday to finish the race were met with some head winds and storms they had to fly around, hurting their scores.

"The winds were more favorable to fly the rest of the legs Thursday," Stroka said. "We were lucky enough to get out of that area before the severe weather."

Sparrow said the hardest part of the race this year was a lot of turbulence. She said her arms grew tired quickly, having to hold the plane steady and on course.

She described it as "kind of like wrestling an alligator."