

ONTARGET

BY PAT CANNON

Commit to Compete

As an introduction to this series of articles on competition, I wish to say that I recognize that the competitive side of ballooning is just one of several avenues that a new pilot might take after their initial introduction to the sport. While I love the feeling of the tension and excitement of the National Championships, it just isn't for everyone. It takes quite a commitment and lots of stamina. In short, it is a lot of work, but the personal satisfaction that you can receive when winning a task or an event can only be described as euphoric, at least in my opinion.

This series of articles will contain six parts. I haven't titled them, and I thought that we would just let it flow and see where it goes, but I promise to make it as complete as possible. I will cover all aspects of the decision that I made to compete, how I evaluate myself, my equipment and my crew. We will talk about how to choose your equipment and how to organize your basket. One section will be on map work, with the do's and don'ts of marking your competition maps. Reading the pibal and working with the information will be included, and I hope to get you to start thinking in three dimensions. Lastly, I don't know if there are any real secrets, but I promise to tell it all from my perspective. In the end, I would like to give you as much information as I possibly can, so that if and when you decide to try competition for fun, or you make the long term commitment to go for the National or World title, you will at least have a checklist to refer to along the way.

When I first started ballooning, I really didn't think much about where I was going in the sport. What I did know was that I was flying my first balloon, a Cameron Viva 56 and that it was just not suited to taking more than one passenger aloft at a time. In addition, I had done quite a bit of competition sky diving (now you're saying "why am I listening to this nut?"), and the thrill of competition had bitten me long before my first balloon ride. It so happened that I was flying a helicopter in those days and had been hired to fly chase for an early documentary on one of Denny 'Captain Fogg' Floden's Michigan balloon classics. After the first day's shooting, I had the chance to accompany the film crew to

the target of next morning's race. I literally stood at the end of the leg of the X while competitors did competition landings for their points. I remember standing there while one pilot swept in at about ten knots and literally stabbed the middle of the target and dragged the whole thing with him across the landing field. Well, that did it. Over the next couple of years, I began to talk with competitive pilot and their crews, to kind of get a handle on what was required. Back then, a lot of pilots didn't really want to talk much about their tools and techniques, so it was like pulling teeth. More about that later. I knew about the National Championships and was a member of the BFA, so I began paying the competition task fees and earning points toward a national ranking. The first three years I considered to be practice years, but I qualified to go to the Nationals all three years. However, like so many of my ballooning friends, I had to pass because of work consideration. That frustration led me to some decisions that would affect my ability to compete and the commitment I would have to make to do it right.

Therein lies the subject matter for this first month's article. Making the commitment. I really believe that no matter how much or how little you compete, if you want to do it right, there will be some level of commitment required. That commitment is not only yours to make, but that of your crew chief and your primary crew. If you think that you can do it alone, you have just made the first and probably the most important mistake a competitor can make. Just look around you at the winners of the Nationals. Just to name a few, Joe Heartsill, Phil Glebe, Bruce Comstock, Al Nels, Alan Blount, Bubba Cliver. All with full time crew chiefs, in some cases their wives, who share that same commitment to compete and to win. These crews are well trained, reliable and work as a team with little or no individual supervision. It takes time to develop such a team, and it takes a commitment to win. In my case, my wife, Carol, has always been my crew chief. She has been with me at every competitive event since I started flying balloons. She is just as



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enthusiastic and works just as hard to win as I do. Without her, I would not have won a championship. Period. I think that if you asked any of the National Champs, they will tell you essentially the same thing.

What does the word 'commitment' mean as it pertains to competitive ballooning? It means very much the same as it does for any career, sport or relationship. First, there is the monetary commitment. The purchase of an adequate competition balloon is a major expenditure, especially if you purchase one of the new generation competition rigs. Then there is a chase vehicle and/or trailer, high volume flow inflator fan, compasses, inclinometer, wind reader, GPS's (yes, at least two), helium tank, laptop computer, pibal reader software, map cases and a thousand colored pens, colored tapes, etc, etc. Then, after your first major competition, when you couldn't see your crew at the target, you buy halogen beams, flare guns, smoke grenades, flashing strobe lights, fluorescent paint, measuring tapes, shotgun (for shooting baggies out of trees), hip waders (don't ask), and plenty of flashlights.

The time commitment comes next. It takes a considerable amount of time to hone your skills and then to prepare for some of the larger events. In the weekend type events, you need to allocate the time to take a compass bearing on a road on the map to check magnetic North accuracy (more on this another time). You need to get the lay of the land and the orientation of the balloon field. For the larger events, where observers are used, targets might be left to you to chose. For the Nationals, you should allocate at least five days to set up your maps, choose and mark your targets, practice fly the area and 'read the rules'. All of this means time away from other fun activities on the weekends and probably the use of your vacation time to attend full week events. Time is a very large commitment.

Next comes the emotional

commitment. No, you are not marrying your balloon, but you are going to go steady with it, and you are going to marry yourself to an attitude. I attribute some of my success to the so called 'game face' that takes place during the Nationals. I am no different than a prize fighter in the ring or a NASCAR driver in Daytona. I am totally focused on the elements and what is about to take place.

Competition can be tough on the ego. It can frazzle your nerves and leave you feeling like you have been run down by a runaway train. Your attitude prepares you for this. When you are emotionally prepared, you are focused on what it will take to do well and to win. You have prepared yourself mentally for competition and have put aside other pressures, such as work. It may sound easy, but just think about the transition that a major league football player makes in the locker room just before entering the Super Bowl. I call it the 'killer instinct' and a few of you have heard me talk about it. Don't get me wrong, I don't mean that you would do anything to win. I mean that you have mentally entered the competition zone and have cleared the mental decks of outside distractions. One of my personal favorites is to keep my head clear by not having anything alcoholic to drink during the Nationals. I sleep at least six hours every night, and I take at least a three hour nap between the morning and evening tasks. To stay focused, you have to stay alert and sharp. You can't do that without rest. About the most risqué thing that I've done during the Nationals is to go see a movie if we have an afternoon cancellation of the task.

Next to last is the physical commitment. A weekend competition event in Houston, Texas in August can take a lot out of you. In fact, if you are not in good shape, it can hurt you. Believe it or not, exercising and cardiovascular stuff works and it keeps both your body and mind on the edge. It helps you comply with the requirements of the mental commitment as

well.

Lastly, and most importantly, is that you instill that same commitment in your crew. Without their participation with you at almost the same level of the 'zone', you are dead in the water. We can call this the family commitment. You become as one and you will almost be able to read one another's minds. Once you are out of the briefing, things can get intense and if your crew is not hitting on all cylinders, you are going nowhere.

As I mentioned in the beginning, if all you wish to do is light competition on the weekends and it's just for grins, then making the proper commitment, both mentally and physically, can be moved from a primary to a secondary priority. It's still there though, and the level to which you take it will have an affect on how you compete and how well you do. If you have chosen to go all the way, if you see that brass ring and want it, then you first focus on commitments. Evaluate where you are and where you need to be and set a course that gets you there. That is the first step toward being a successful competitor.

Next time, we will talk about your equipment: How to choose it and how to organize it. See you at the target.