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John Zayac, founder of IBG Business Services, has competed in 10 National Championship Air races in Reno, Nev.

Zayac's need for speed goes airborne

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Two emergency landings, numerous blown engines and about \$300,000 invested in his "hobby" haven't dampened John Zayac's enthusiasm for air racing.

"I've had a lot of practice saying 'Mayday,'" said Zayac, 50, founder of IBG Business Services Inc. in Greenwood Village. But more to the point, "You meet fascinating people; it's very humbling. Pilots from World War II, generals, space-shuttle pilots."

Zayac competed in his 10th National Championship Air races in September; the annual extravaganza held at Reno Stead Field in Reno, Nev., attracts between 250,000 and 300,000 attendees each year. It features five days of racing in six classes. Zayac competes in the T-6 class, and now flies "Race 37" or the "McDonald" racer, named for Phil McDonald of Scottsdale, Ariz., who sold Zayac the 1944 vintage plane.

He's moved up in a decade, from the bronze to gold class. Still, his winnings pale in comparison to expenses. "It's not a for-profit sport," Zayac said, noting that he won around \$10,000 in 2008 after placing third in the gold division, with an average speed of 237 miles per hour. The course record is 243 mph.

The United States used that plane as a trainer in the Korean and Vietnam wars. Its cramped quarters belie the fact that a machine gun used to sit behind the second seat, and bombs were stored underneath the wings.

Zayac races under difficult conditions, with up to nine planes flying low on 5-mile courses, maneuvering around 40-foot pylons. There are strict rules; for example, competitors must yield to planes on the inside, and may not cut off other pilots. It's a thrilling, dangerous sport — and has its share of fatalities.

For the 2010 Reno races, Zayac's plan is clear: "Our goal is to win the national

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championship next year and set a course record."

Zayac founded IBG in 1982. The company provides valuation analysis, planning, marketing and transaction structuring services for midmarket-business sellers. He has helped sell almost 700 companies with a combined worth of \$2 billion.

Sponsors help underwrite the plane's high expenses — for example, Zayac said his T-6 has gone through six engines. His backers include IBG, Denver Avionics, SNC Corp., Heads by Drew, Tac Air, Canon Insurance Co., and Craig & Todd Aviation.

What do they get out of it? "We're cov-

ered by about eight different TV networks during the [Reno] races, get interviewed before fans at the races and are picked up by 112 magazines in 13 countries, read by 2.5 million people," Zayac said.

As for IBG, "I believe we have a number of clients that have retained us because they heard about us through air racing," he said. "We enjoy it, enjoy acknowledging all the folks who have served in the Air Force, and get kids involved to stimulate their interest in aviation. I'm big on the younger generation learning about aviation."

He's given numerous rides to Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts in the T-6, and contributes rides to charities' silent auctions.

His first emergency landing came in 1999, his first year of racing — the same year one plane blew four engines. Right after taking off from Centennial Airport, a part failed, shutting down the plane at 13,000 feet. He radioed a "Mayday" and hoped to land on E-470. But he had to choose Colorado Boulevard instead — after ducking telephone wires and radio towers, and flying underneath a traffic light signal. He landed safely.

"You get out of the airplane, your knees are shaking," Zayac said. "There were news crews overhead; it was a slow Saturday."

His other incident was a crash landing near Wolcott, in Eagle County, in May 2008. He learned later that the fuel pump had separated, killing the engine. He was flying too low to bail out with his parachute, so he sought a safe landing area for

a controlled crash landing.

"Everything was going great for the first 10 seconds; I slowed from 100 mph to 20 mph, but then I hit an irrigation ditch," Zayac said. That tore off his engine and wings, and he was knocked unconscious. "When I came to, I was hanging upside down in my harness, with fuel dripping all over me. I finally was coherent enough to bust out my emergency canopy and get out."

Mike Houghton is president and CEO of the Reno Air Racing Association, which held its 46th annual racing show in September. He praised Zayac's term as president of the T-6 class.

"He did a great job of pulling the class together," Houghton said. "He was running it like a business. It requires someone to come in and take charge of a lot of big egos. John did a great job of coming in and reorganizing the race class, setting up the standards and professional [ways] of the organization in the manner it needed to be directed."

Egos? "Every pilot I've met thinks they're the best pilot in the world," Houghton said. "When you get a group of them together, it becomes a *real* challenge. The ones here truly are the best pilots in the world. But sometimes self-opinion gets in the way of the best decisions for the group. John has a good communication style that cuts through the personal BS and cuts to the best interest of the organization."

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