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Merlin Mustangs Regain Supremacy at Reno 2008

By Brad Haskin

Good morning, Mr. Nixon, Mr. Barrow. The photo you are looking at is of a Rolls Royce Merlin engine, power plant for the mighty P-51 Mustang – one time king of the air racing world, but recently fallen on hard times. The culprit? This radial...the R-3350...engine of choice for a certain F8F Bearcat, and a disturbingly increasing number of Hawker Sea Furies. Your mission, should you decide to accept it, is to build a modified Merlin to restore credibility to the Mustang in the halls of the air racing Pantheon. This will not be easy, as the radial engines have established an amazing dominance as of late. As always, should you fail; the Secretary will disavow any knowledge of your attempt. This tape will self-destruct in five seconds. Good luck, men.

The 45th annual National Championship Air Races once again took place in the desert outside of Reno, Nevada September 10-14. The weather gods smiled upon the event, as blue skies, warm temperatures, and mild winds were prevalent throughout the week. As usual, the Reno Air Races boasted a first-rate supporting airshow, featuring such acts as the USAF Thunderbirds, John Klatt, David Martin, Warren Pietsch, and a jaw-dropping performance by the F-22 Raptor. Spectators were treated to several USAF Heritage Flight performances featuring the P-38 *Glacier Girl*, and those fortunate enough to have stuck around Thursday after the show observed a flyby of three Grumman F7F Tigercats...an event that sent chills down everyone's spine. For the 10th consecutive year, the National Championship Air Races also hosted the Rolls Royce National Aviation Heritage Invitational...featuring some of the most stunning vintage restorations from around the United States.



Bill "Tiger" Destefani accomplished what many thought impossible – put a Merlin-powered Mustang back into the Gold Winner's Circle (photo by Jim Franeberger; inset by Arnold Greenwell).

But as it always has been, Reno is about racing. And the 2008 edition did nothing to disappoint the crowds that filled the stands to watch. Six classes of aircraft crowded the pits at Stead Field for a four and a half day racing program. The racing in 2008 was some of the best ever and the surprise re-emergence of the Merlin-powered Mustangs in the mighty Unlimited class made for an exhilarating week.

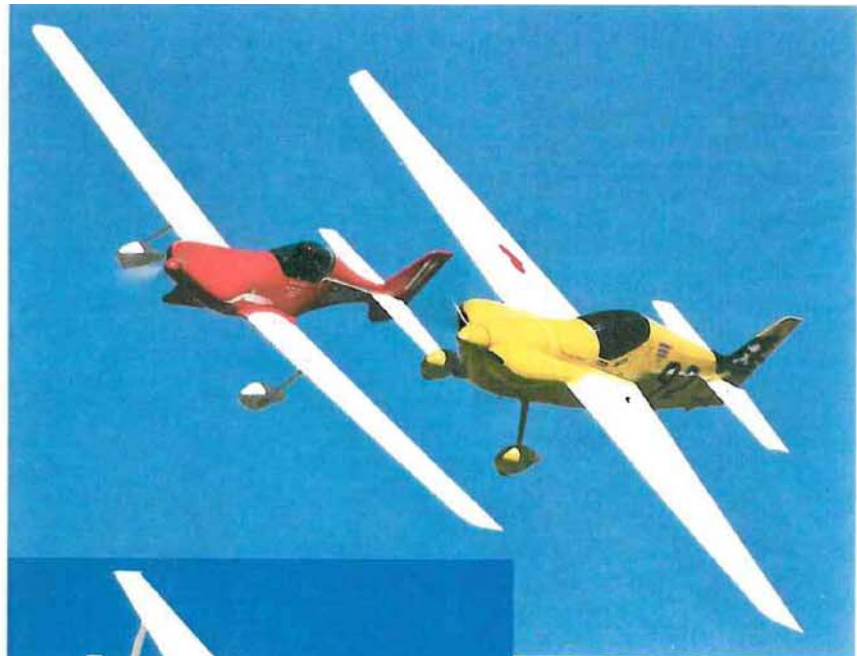
Sport Biplane and Formula One

The Sport Biplane Class had a somewhat reduced field this year, led again by the ridiculously modified Mong of Tom Aberle. *Phantom* led qualifying with a speedy lap of 249.307 mph, which easily outdistanced the closest competitor, but the rest of the field was closely matched. The Bronze race on Friday, composed mostly of fill-in entries, was taken by Earl Allen in *The Other Woman*. Sunday's Silver race saw a close contest between George Andre in *Zippitts* and Jeff Lo in *Miss Diane* (Jeff unfortunately left 2007 class winner *Miss Gianna* at home), with Andre coming out on top. The Gold final was never in doubt, with Aberle outdistancing his closest competitor, Norman Way in *Magic*, by almost 40 mph. Dennis Vest in *Drag Racer* followed close behind.

A new name would be added to the list of the Formula One victors, as no previous winners were entered in the class. Last year's winning aircraft, *Endeavor*, was back, but with new pilot Steve Senegal as the top qualifier at 251.028 mph. The heat races were sprightly, with lots of close competition – especially in the Gold heats between Senegal, Doug Bodine in *Yellow Peril*, and Gary Davis in *Scarlett Screamer*. Adrian Cooper's *Miss t'Witchie* easily took the Bronze Final, while long time competitor Carl Swenson took the Silver Final in his white, red, and blue *Cassutt Annie*. In the Championship heat, it was Senegal in *Endeavor* out front of the field and Davis and Bodine in a photo-finish for second.

The Jets, Sport Class, and T-6

The Jet Class field was somewhat down from 2007, most notably missing the T-33 and T-2 that were so impressive last year. Despite the absences, the speeds of the remaining racers were well into the 500 mph realm. Because only eight aircraft qualified, the same jets ran in multiple heats daily. Curt Brown dominated competition in Joe Gano's re-engined black and gold L-29 *Viper*. Aerobatic champion and Red Bull Air Race competitor Mike Mangold followed in a similarly modified L-29 *Euro Burner*, while the L-39's of Joe Gano, Phil Fogg, and Rick Vandam fought for position a



Above: Steve Senegal in "Endeavor" is ready to pass Doug Bodine in "Yellow Peril" for the lead in the Formula One Class (photo by Jim Froneberger). Left: Tom Aberle won the Sport Biplane Class in "Phantom" (photo by Jim Froneberger).

Below: Jon Sharp literally ran away from everyone in "Nemesis" for the Super Sport Gold (photo by Arnold Greenwell).



good 20 to 30 mph slower than the more powerful racers of Brown and Mangold.

Perhaps the most impressive showing of 2008 came from Jon Sharp in the Sport Class. Since its inception 10 years ago, this class has made huge jumps in speed and technology, garnering the interest of engine manufacturers and pilots alike. A rule change this year allowed for larger displacement engines in a "Super Sport" class for faster aircraft like the NXTs, Thunder Mustangs, and modified Lancairs. Sharp's NXT, *Nemesis*, responded with a 1000 hp engine and a qualifica-



tion lap of over 409 mph! And that, my friends, would have been fast enough for 11th spot in the *Unlimited* class! Anthony Crawford in his Questair Venture *Chicks Delight* took the Silver race, while Lee Behel's Lancair Legacy *Breathless* took the Sport Gold. All eyes, however, were on the Super Sport final. Sharp and *Nemesis* did not disappoint, turning in a winning performance for the third year in a row at just over 392 mph. Mike Dacey in his Questair Venture and Lynn Farnsworth's *Miss Karen II* trailed some distance behind.

The usual suspects showed up to compete in the snarling T-6 Class, with one competitor from the distant past turning a lot of heads. Nick Macy's jet black *Six Cat* easily took the top qualifying position at 243.083 mph, but all eyes were on Ken Dwelle's *Tinkertoy* – the 1989

Above: Ken Dwelle in the gray "Tinkertoy" prepares to pass Al Goss in "Warlock" to take the lead in Sunday's T-6 Gold race. Middle left: Astronaut Curt Brown dominated the Jet Class competition in Joe Gano's L-29 "Viper". Bottom left: Some tight Sport Class racing (photos by Jim Froneberger).

and 1990 class champion in the hands of Ken's father, Tom – who over the winter had suddenly found a little Dwelle "magic" with a speed increase of some 15 mph. John Krawczyk in *Abracadabra* took the Bronze after a close race with Adiranus Clairmont. John Lohmar handily won the Silver in *Radial Velocity*. But the most impressive run came in Sunday's Gold Final. Pole Sitter Nick Macy had to pull out on the second lap after losing a propeller counterweight, handing the lead to Al Goss in *Warlock*. From the fourth position on the outside, Dwelle in *Tinkertoy* motored past Goss and literally ran away with a brand new speed record of 244.5 mph. John Zayac finished third in *McDonald Racer* almost 10 mph behind.

The Unlimiteds

The main draw for the fans, however, is always the Unlimited Class. Though several contenders (most notably *Furias*, *Riff Raff*, and *Precious Metal*) failed to show, and others (*Dreadnought* and *Argonaut*) suffered mechanical problems throughout the week, it was the strongest Unlimited field in almost 20 years.

As many who follow the sport know, the radial-powered Sea Furries and Bearcats have exerted their dominance over the last several years, leaving many to wonder if the days of the racing Mustang and powerful Merlin engines were long-gone. In 2008, the Rolls Royce camps made a strong statement on their thoughts on that matter.

Greg and Ryan Costco purchased the highly modified P-51 *Dago Red* shortly before Reno, and retained pilot Dan Martin and engine builder Mike Barrow to race the aircraft. Barrow had spent many years burning the midnight oil and suffering through several expensive failures trying to develop an Allison-rod racing Merlin that would hold together. The team had extensively tested over the winter and spring, including some hard running at the Pylon Racing Seminar (PRS) over the summer. The hard work paid off in spades. Martin put *Dago Red* back atop the qualifying ladder with an impressive speed of 474.143