

The Pylon Place - April 2014

In Flight USA

Marilyn Dash



T6s battling it out on the racecourse. (Bruce Croft/20 West)

What can be done to save the Reno Air Races? This is the question posed to me by so many air-racing fans. We know changes are being made – but – are they enough? Are these changes coming too late? What are the signs we should be looking for to see if the changes are working?

RARA has made several announcements lately – including the dismissal of Michael Houghton, the President and the paring down of the paid staff to six individuals. Recent news adds a reduction in the Board of Directors from more than 20 members to a total of seven.

Cost cutting measures are certainly one way to preserve the event, but are they enough? What is really needed is an influx of cash from a large sponsor and more publicity – beyond the individuals who have already been to the Air Races. We need new fans, new racers and new sponsors.

Publicity

Tell me why, the day after Steven Hinton won his 5th Championship he was not being interviewed on Good Morning America, Today and The Tonight Show? This young man has unprecedented achievements and no one knows his name.

I've said this many times, RARA has celebrated more than 50 years of Air Racing and when I tell someone I'm an Air Racer – they say, "Red Bull?" While I love the Red Bull Air Races, they are in their infancy compared to us.

Even amongst other pilots, they have heard of Oshkosh and Sun 'n Fun but never heard of the Reno Air Races – until the Ghost incident. We are the best-kept secret in motorsports, which is not a compliment. It's a travesty.

Many have suggested that the old RARA Board wanted to keep the event very Reno-centric because that was their playground. What is the reason national coverage was not sought and

never achieved? Why were alternate locations never developed – why has ESPN forgot who we are?

Another question asked frequently is, “why are there no pilots or racers on the Board?” I’m pretty sure we have qualified people in the retired racer ranks who would be able to give a different and probably quite useful perspective.

Will the new and improved, lighter more nimble RARA Board do a better job? Let’s hope so.

Unlimiteds



Stewart Dawson landing fan favorite - Rare Bear. (Bruce Croft/20 West)

So many fans have said they only go to see the Unlimiteds. Well, folks – that may be a problem. As I have said before in this column, the Unlimited Racers are becoming scarcer due to many issues including the incredibly high cost to run one of these racers, the enormous effort, the lack of parts, the changes in the course and the instability of the governing body.

Last year we saw the demise of the Unlimited Division (UD) and the replacement organization, the Unlimited and Warbird Racing Class, take the reins. The uncertainty of that change kept close to half of the qualified race pilots and aircraft home. Will they return? I doubt it. The Unlimited racers I’ve spoken with recently have all said they feel they are not being engaged in the conversation about the future. They also feel the issues which caused the dissolution of the original UD are still not being addressed.

One racer told me – I’ll paraphrase – the Jet Truck comes to Reno to perform and RARA gives him hotel rooms, car, fuel, food, etc. A racer comes to Reno and they ask them for a

check to pay their entry, a check for their crew badges, a check for their golf cart, a check for their parking pass...you get the picture. Who are the fans coming to see, the Jet Truck or the Air Races?

How will we know UWRC is successful? Let's count the number of Unlimited Racers attending PRS in June.

Concerts?

The latest news has a festival like atmosphere being discussed, complete with concerts and interactive activities – a true celebration of flight. Will that fill the seats? If so, GREAT!

We know the Casinos won't be happy to see evening activities at the field. They are counting on all the race fans coming back to town to gamble, eat and drink their nights away. So, will we have concerts going on during the races? Between? Instead of – what? I'm confused.

Communications

Last year I was criticized for not going to RARA to ask for their side on my comments. In fact, I did go to them and I was ignored. This year, I have also asked for input and have yet to hear anything in return.

Let me be clear, I LOVE THE AIR RACES. I have been racing since 2003, I have been going since 1999 – the first time I heard of the Air Races. Many of the people closest to me I have met through racing. I owe a great deal of who I am today to this amazing event and the people who make it so. I would be happy to work with the Board, to work with RARA to disseminate the information in a positive way and help them understand where the fans, racers and participants minds are. But, alas – my phone is mute.

Final Thoughts

For all of you who say you won't go to Reno without a large showing of Unlimiteds – I'd like to introduce you to the other classes – because the golden days of Unlimited Air Racing may be behind us. There will still be amazing participants like Bob Button, the Hintons, the Sanders Family and Rod Lewis. But there aren't a dozen more of them, waiting on the sidelines to win a bowling trophy, a check enough to pay the crew's bar tab, and bragging rights for something no one knows exists.

For you real racing fans, when you get to the end of the Unlimited pits – keep walking. There are amazing racers further down the flight line, people who put their life and soul into racing, and I bet you would like to hear their stories too. I have written about many of them over the years – I hope you fans are listening.

The Future of Air Racing may be further down on the flight line. Come say hello – after the concert, of course.