

A Concise History of Air Racing

By Don Berliner

Chapter II – The Post-World War One Era

Part 1-1919

The “War to End All Wars” was over. Thousands of pilots and airplanes flooded the very limited market. One use for them was in airplane racing, which played a major role in making people air-minded.

The Fourth Aerial Derby

The first major air race after the war was the British Aerial Derby, run on June 21 from Hendon, for two laps of the 94 ½-mile pre-war course around London. Thirteen of the 16 original entries started and nine finished. The winner was Capt. Gerald Gathgood in a converted deH.4 bomber whose lower wing had been clipped so much it became a sesquiplane. He won \$2,500 and the Gold trophy. In second was Lt. Robert Nisbet, in a little Martinsyde Buzzard, at 124.61 mph.

The Third Schneider Cup Race

Fog was the winner of this race, which was started at Bournemouth, England, on September 10th. Of four seaplanes that took off, only one completed the 10-lap, 222-mile course—Guido Janello in a Savoia S.13bis—but he missed a pylon on each lap. The race was declared “no contest”, but the Italians were allowed to organize the next one.

The Coupe Deutsch de la Muerthe “Air Race Around Paris”

The second race by this name was for a single 118-mile lap around Paris, and could be attempted any time during the year starting October 13, 1919. A pilot could make as many attempts as desired.

Fourteen attempts were made by just four pilots, all of them French. The highest speed was 166.919 mph by Bernard de Romanet in a SPAD S.20bis, followed by Sadi Lecointe’s 165.480 mph in a Nieuport 29V.

Part 2 – 1920

The Fifth Aerial Derby

This year the race was for two laps of the 100-mile course, and was a combination scratch (all-out speed) and handicap event, starting and finishing at Hendon on Sept. 20-22. Fourteen pilots entered and nine finished. Winner of the scratch race was test pilot Frank Courtney at 153.45 mph in the little Martinsyde “Semiquaver”, well ahead of Harry Hawker in the Sopwith “Rainbow”, who was disqualified for failing to cross the finish line properly. In the handicap race, first place went to H.A. Hammersley in an Avro 543 Baby.

The Fourth Schneider Cup Race

The race was held September 20-22 at Venice, Italy, for 10 laps of a 23.3-mile triangular course. When entries from Great Britain, Switzerland and France failed to arrive, the Italians launched a single seaplane—Luigi Balogna's Savoia S.12bis—as a formality. He completed the course in 2:10:35 for an average speed of 107.1 mph, which was a Schneider Race record.

The Sixth James Gordon Bennett Race

It was held September 28, for three round trips of a 62-mile straight course between Etampes and Gidy, France. There were starters from the USA, Great Britain and France. Most interesting was the Dayton-Wright RB-1, a private, custom-built American racer featuring a flush canopy, fully retractable landing gear and a wing with both leading-edge and trailing-edge flaps.

Four of the six pilots dropped out with mechanical trouble, though George Kirsch had a first lap at 178 mph. The winner, at an average of 168.732 mph, was Sadi Lecoq, in a Nieuport 29V. In second was Bernard de Romanet in a SPAD S.20bis; his average speed of 112.851 mph would have been much higher if not for a stop. Howard Reinhart's race in the RB-1 ended on lap 1 when his rudder cable broke.

When the French won the trophy for the third time in a row, they retired it and the Gordon Bennett Race series ended.

The First Pulitzer Trophy Race

Two months later, the first purely American series of pylon races began, sponsored by the Pulitzer brothers, owners of major newspapers. The first race was held at Mitchell Field, Garden City, Long Island, New York, for four laps of a 29-mile course. Thirty-eight pilots entered and took off individually,

Most pilots flew American-built Army deH.4 World War I single-engined bombers, along with Navy Vought VE-7's and SE5A's. Only a few pilots were civilians.

The winner was Capt. Corliss Moseley, flying a Verville-Packard VCP-R racer, a Cleaned-up version of the Army's VCP-1 pursuit, at 156.54 mph. In second was Harold Hartney in a standard Thomas-Morse MB-3 pursuit at 148.19 mph. Over half the 24 finishers flew deH.4's.

Part 3 – 1921

The Sixth Aerial Derby

It was run July 16, again out of Hendon for two laps of the 100-mile course. Half the dozen entries failed to finish. Winner of both the Speed and Handicap competitions was Jimmy James, flying the prototype Gloster Mars I, powered by a 450 hp Napier Lion II engine. He averaged 163.34 mph, well ahead of Cyril Uwins, in the Bristol Type 32 Bullet, with its 400 hp Bristol Jupiter I engine, at 141.38 mph.

The Fifth Schneider Cup Race

The race was conducted August 6-7 at Venice, Italy, on a 13.3-mile course which would have to be flown for 16 laps. Almost all the entries were flying boats, though some had been well streamlined. The sole French entry—Sadi Lecointe's Nieuport-Delage 29—was damaged during pre-race trials and withdrawn. This left only Italy in the race.

Two Macchi M.7's (de Briganti and Corgnolino) and one M.19 (Arturo Zanetti) started. Zanetti dropped out on lap 12 with a broken crankshaft. Corgnolino ran out of fuel on the last lap, while leading. This left only Giovanni de Briganti, in the M.7bis, who finished at a record 117.8 mph. With this, there had been three consecutive unsatisfying and non-competitive Schneider Races. There would be a lot of pressure on the organizers of the next race.

The Coupe Deutsch de la Muerthe Race

On October 1, the next Coupe Deutsche Race was run on the Etampes-la Marmogne course for three laps and a total of 186 miles. The starters included one British, one Italian and three French pilots. Only two of the Frenchmen finished, with first place taken by Georges Kirsch in a Nieuport-Delage Sesquiplane at 172.994 mph. In second was Fernand Lasne in a Nieuport-Delage 29V biplane at 159.880 mph. The others were out by lap two.

The Second Pulitzer Trophy Race

Omaha, Nebraska, was the site for this unusually late November 3-5 race, with a much smaller field that lacked the stock deHavilland deH.4s and other standard military types. The race would be for 5 laps of the 30.7-mile course



Curtiss CR-1

The winner, by almost two minutes, was Bert Acosta, flying the first of what would become an historic line of Curtiss military racers, the CR-1. He averaged 176.75 mph. Clarence Coombs was second at 170.34 mph in the private Cox Cactus Kitten. In third was Army Capt. John Macready at 160.72 mph in a Thomas Morse MB-6.

Part 3 – 1922

The Seventh Aerial Derby

This year, it was held on August 10-12 over a new course: two laps of a 100-mile loop around London, starting at Waddon Aerodrome, Croydon, south of the city. The winner of the Speed Division, in poor weather, was Jimmy James in the Gloster Mars 1 at 177.85 mph. Second was Flt. Lt. De Haga Haig in the Bristol Bullet at 144.97 mph. The winner of the Handicap Division was Larry Carter in a Bristol M.1D.

The Sixth Schneider Cup Race

The site was Naples, Italy, and the course 13 laps, each of 17.7 miles; it was held on August 10-12. Only the British entry was to challenge the Italians, as an Italian railroad strike delayed the French entries until it was too late.

The winner was Henry Biard, flying the newly-built Supermarine Sea Lion II, in which he completed the course in 1:34:51.6 (145.721 mph), barely a minute ahead of Allesandro Passaleva, in a Savoia S.51 at 142.949 mph, finishing with a split propeller.

The First King's Cup Race

The start of what would become the world's longest-running major air race series was on September 8 from Croydon Aerodrome, south of London. It was run on a purely handicapped basis. The 810-mile race included an overnight stop in Glasgow, Scotland, and a return the next day. The winner, in 6:32:50, was Frank Barnard, chief pilot of the pioneering Instone Air Line, in one of the line's passenger-carrying deH.4's. In second was Frederick Raynham, in a little Martinsyde F.6. While the 21 competitors were working their way north and then back, an impromptu handicap race was held at Croydon "to pass the time".

The Coupe Deutsch Race

It was held September 30 at Etampes, France, for three laps around the 100-km. course. Entries included World War I ace Charles Nungesser, who withdrew. Four pilots started, but only one finished: Fernand Lasne, in a Nieuport-Delage 29V, who completed the course in 1:02:11.8 for a speed of 179.83 mph, a record for the event. The only foreign pilot to start was Jimmy James, who could not complete his first lap because his maps blew out of the cockpit.

The Curtiss Marine Trophy Race

This event was limited to U.S. Navy pilots flying seaplanes, and was held October 8, on the Detroit (Michigan) River, for 8 laps of a 20-mile course. Eight started, but only two finished. First was Lt. A.W. Gorton in a Naval Aircraft Factory TR-1, at 112.65 mph. Second was Lt. H.A. Elliott in a Vought VE-7H at 108.71 mph. 1st Lt Sandy Snderson might have won in his Curtiss 18-T-1, but ran out of fuel just short of the finish line.

The Third Pulitzer Trophy Race

The most impressive line-up in the history of American military air racing greeted the crowd at Selfridge Field, Mt. Clemens, Michigan, on October 14. Among the 15 starters were a dozen military racers: one Verville R-1, three Verville-Sperry R-3's, two Loening R-4's, two Thomas-Morse R-5's, two Curtiss R-6's and two Curtiss CR-2's.

The race, for five laps of a 50-km./31-mile course, was won by 1st Lt. Russell Maughan, in an R-6, who averaged 205.856 mph and broke every closed-course record up to 200 km. In second was 1st Lt. Lester Maitland, in an identical airplane, at 198.850 mph, while in third was Lt. Harold Brow in a CR-2 at 193.695 mph, and in fourth was Lt. Jg Al Williams, in a CR-2 at 187.996 mph. This race established Curtiss' reputation as a designer/builder of advanced airplanes.

Part 4 – 1923

The Second King's Cup Race

The start of the July 14 handicap race was shifted to Hendon Aerodrome, north of London, which cut the distance to 794 miles over the same course as 1922. Seventeen pilots, all flying biplanes, started. The winner was Frank Courtney, a highly successful free-lance test pilot, who averaged 149 mph for 5:25:27 in an Armstrong Whitworth Siskin II pursuit. In second was A.J. Cobham in World War I deHavilland deH.9, followed by future Schneider Race pilot Hubert Broad in a similar airplane.

The Eighth Aerial Derby

The final Derby was held August 6 at Croydon, site of London's first commercial airport, and was for 2 laps of a 100-mile course. Nine of the 12 starters finished, with the winner being Larry Carter in the Gloster I, which had been the Mars I; his speed was 192.359 mph. In second was Walter H. Longton in the Sopwith Rainbow which had wheels instead of the floats it had carried in the 1919 Schneider Race. They were the only two pilots to fly civilian airplanes.

The Royal Aero Club ended the series due to a lack of prize money and new, competitive airplanes.

The Sixth Schneider Cup Race

Flown out of Cowes, on the Isle of Wight, on September 27-28, it was for 5 laps of the 43-mile course. For the first time, a team was fully backed by a national government: the two Curtiss CR-3's comprised the U.S. Navy entry. A very successful effort, for they placed 1st (David Rittenhouse, at a race record 177.279 mph) and 2nd (Rutledge Irvine, 173.347 mph). The only pilot among the other four starters who finished was Henry Biard, in the Supermarine Sea Lion III, who averaged 157.065 mph.

The Fourth Pulitzer Trophy Race

This one was run out of Lambert Field, St. Louis, Missouri, on October 6. It was for 4 laps of a 50-km./31.1-mile course. All seven starting pilots flew military racers, and all six who finished broke the old Pulitzer Race record. The winner was Al Williams, at 243.673 mph in a Curtiss R2C-1, followed by Harold Brow in another R2C-2 at 241.779 mph. The race for third place was the most exciting, Sandy Sanderson edging Steven Calloway—both in Wright F2W-1's—by ½ second: 230.067 mph to 230.002 mph.

Part 5 – 1924

Curtiss Marine Trophy Race

It was held March 8 at Miami, Florida, for 124 miles. The winner was Lt. V.F. Grant in a Vought VE-7H at 116.17 mph.

Coupe Beaumont

An “Unlimited” race on June 23 for 6 laps of a 50 km./31-mile course, starting at Istres, France. Of three pilots prepared to start, only two flew and one finished. The winner, at 193.40 mph, was Sadi Lecointe in a Nieuport-Delage 42.

The Third King's Cup Race

This race on August 12 offered two ways to start: from Martlesham Heath for landplanes, and from Felixstowe for seaplanes. The 950 miles was flown on one day, with everyone finishing at Lee-on-Solent. Among the 10 starters were the winners of the first two races. This time, 1st place was won by Alan Cobham in his deHavilland deH.50 in 8:57:12. Second was Capt. Macmillan in a Fairey IIID seaplane, and third was Alan Butler in a deH.37.

The National Air Races

There is considerable difference of opinion about the beginnings of the American National Air Races, with some insisting the 1924 races at Dayton were the first, while others saying the true beginning was the 1929 races at Cleveland, where civilians first played a major role. The reader should make up his or her own mind.

The Fifth Pulitzer Trophy Race

The air races at Wilbur Wright Field, outside Dayton, Ohio, were highlighted by the Pulitzer. Run for 4 laps of a 50-km./31-mile course on October 4, it drew a much reduced field from the previous year. Three of the four starters flew military racers: two Curtiss R-6/s and one Verville-Sperry R-3, along with an Army Curtiss PW-8A. The winner, in the R-3, was Harry Mills, covering the course in 34:25.93 to average 216.55 mph. Wendell Brookley was second in an R-6, at 214.41 mph, only 21 seconds behind.

Sportsmanship prevailed, as the Schneider Cup Race, scheduled for October 27 at Bay Shore Park, Baltimore, Maryland, was postponed a year because all but the American entries were wrecked or withdrawn. Had it been held, the USA would have easily won its third straight race, and retired the trophy.

Part 7 – 1925

The Fourth King's Cup Race

This was the longest race yet, 1,608 miles in two 804-mile heats to be run on consecutive days—July 2 and 3—from Croydon Aerodrome. Only three of the 15 entrants finished the second day's leg due to wide-spread fog. First in the handicap event was 1922 winner Frank Barnard, flying an Armstrong Whitworth Siskin V at 141.7 mph. In second was H.W.G. Jones in a Siskin VI at 142 mph, and third was H. Hemming in a deHavilland deH.37 at 120 mph.

The Sixth Pulitzer Trophy Race

As part of what later became known as the National Air Races (October 8-13 at Mitchell Field, Long Island, New York), the sixth and last Pulitzer Race was conducted on October 12. It was flown for 4 laps of a 50-km./31-mile course. The winner, at a Pulitzer record 248.975 mph, was Cyrus Bettis in a Curtiss R3C-1. Not far behind him was Al Williams, in an identical racer, at 241.695 mph.

The Coupe Beaumont Race

Only two pilots entered this race, which was run October 18 at Istres, France, for 6 laps of a 50-km./31-mile course. The winner and only finisher was Sadi Lecoq in a Nieuport-Delage 42, at 194.156 mph. The only other starter was G. Ferigoule in a Salmson-Bechereau monoplane, who experienced radiator problems. Due to the poor turn-out, the series was ended.

The Eighth Schneider Cup Race

This race was held October 26 at Bay Shore Park, Baltimore, Maryland, and originally attracted four entries from the USA, four from Great Britain, four from Italy and one (a Curtiss D-12-powered Dornier) from Germany. It was for 7 laps around the 5-km./31-mile course.



Jimmy Doolittle and the R3C-2

Out of just five starters, three finished, with the winner being Jimmy Doolittle in the Curtiss R3C-2, in which he averaged a race record 232.573 mph, thanks to the most advanced streamlining yet seen. Hubert Broad was second in a Gloster III-A at 199.170 mph. Third was Giovanni de Briganti in a Macchi M.33 at 168.444 mph. It was the last time the Schneider was contested by seaplanes from as many as three countries.

Part 8 – 1926

The Curtiss Marine Trophy Race

On May 14, the final race in this series was run on the Potomac River at Haines Point, Washington, DC. It was for 73 ½ miles. Of nine entries, the winner was Thomas P. Jeter in a Curtiss F6C-3, at 130.94 mph.

The Fifth King's Cup Race

The race consisted of four different laps, all starting and finishing at Hendon, flown on two successive days, for a total distance of 1,464 miles. On the first day, 14 started, seven finished and started the second day, and five completed the race. The winner of the handicap event was Hubert Broad in his deHavilland 60 Gypsy Moth at 90.4 mph, second was E.R.C. Scholefield in a Vickers Vixen II at 142 mph, and third was H.W.G. Jones in a Martinsyde A.D.C. 1 at 152 mph.

The National Air Races

There was no headline event for this year's event, held September 4-13 at Model Farms Field, outside Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The military again dominated, and this time the races would be restricted to standard production types. The Mitchell Trophy Race was for Curtiss P-1 Hawk pursuits, and was won by Lt. L.G. Eliot at 160 mph. The Kansas City Rotary Club Trophy Race was won by Navy Lt. George Cuddihy in a new Boeing FB-3 pursuit at 181 mph.

The Ninth Schneider Cup Race

The race was held November 12-13 at Hampton Roads, Virginia, for 7 laps of a 50-km./31-mile course. Italy and the USA had three-man teams equipped with, respectively, Macchi and Curtiss floatplanes. The easy winner was Mario de Bernardi in a new Macchi M.39 powered by a 700 hp Fiat V-12, who averaged a race record 246.496 mph. In second was Christian Schilt in a Curtiss R3C-2 with a 500 hp Curtiss V-12, who averaged 231.364 mph. In third was Adriano Bacula in an M.39, at 218.006 mph. The Italians were inspired by American streamlining, and had a lot more horsepower.

Part 9 – 1927

The Sixth King's Cup Race

The race was first planned for Bournemouth, then shifted to Nottingham because of local resistance. One-third of the entries pulled out in protest to a new handicapping system. The final group flew three separate courses, for a total of 540 miles on July 30.

It was the first King's Cup Race in which women were entered. The winner was W.L. Hope in a deH. Gypsy Moth at 92.8 mph, second was W.J. McDonough in a Westland Widgeon III at 102.8 mph, and third was E.R.C. Scholefield in a Vickers Vixen III at 141.6 mph.

The Dole Race

On August 16, a cross-country race was held between Oakland, California, and Honolulu, Hawaii, approximately 2,400 miles. It was one of the most poorly thought out schemes in air racing history. Several airplanes crashed during tests or on their way to Oakland. Three others were lost at sea during the race. Only two made it to the finish line. Eight pilots, crew members and passengers were lost.

The winner was Art Goebel in the Travelair 5000 "Woolaroc", completing the trip in 26:19:33. In second was Martin Jensen in the Breese monoplane "Aloha", in 28:16.

The National Air Races

Air racing was held in Spokane, Washington, from September 19 to 25, with most events being for military pilots and airplanes. In the Spokane Spokesman-Review Trophy Race—10 laps around a 12-mile course—E.C. Batten in a Curtiss XP-6A Hawk beat A.J. Lion in an XP-6 by 201.239 mph to 189.608 mph. The "pre-Bendix" New York-to-Spokane Air Derby was won in a Laird Commercial by future-great Charles "Speed" Holman.

The 10th Schneider Cup Race

The Schneider was run off the Lido Beach, Venice, Italy, on September 26, following a rain delay. The course was 7 laps, each of 50 km./31 mi. The sole American entry—Al Williams, in his Packard-powered Kirkham-Williams—was cancelled due to insufficient testing. The first of the sleek Supermarines, designed by future Spitfire designer Reginald Mitchell, were in the spot light.

And in the winner's circle, as Sidney Webster won at a record 281.656 mph, with Oswald Worsley second at 272.91 mph. The three Macchi M.52's dropped out with fuel or engine problems, while the Gloster IVB, flown by S.M. Kinkead, got as far as lap 6 before spinner unbalance forced it out.

Officials then decided that future races would be held every two years, due to the increasing technical and financial demands being placed on sponsors.

Part 10 – 1928

The Seventh King's Cup Race

The race began at Hendon on July 21, with the first day's flying ending at Glasgow, Scotland; on the second day, the pilots flew back south to Brooklands, for a total of 1,097 miles. Of 36 starters, 23 completed the race, with the winner being W.L. Hope in a Gypsy Moth for the second straight year. Second went to Cyril Uwins in a Bristol 101, and third to Miss Winifred Spooner in another Gypsy Moth.

The National Air Races

Mines Field (later Los Angeles International Airport), September 8-16, was the scene of the major American meet of the year. The future shape of the National Air Races was beginning to appear.

Another step in the direction of the Bendix Transcontinental Derby was the Non-Stop New York to Los Angeles Derby. While none of the 11 starters finished, Dole Race winner Art Goebel got as far as Prescott, Arizona, in his Lockheed Vega. The Transcontinental Race was divided into classes, and stops were permitted. A total of 40 pilots competed, with the top prize of \$7,000 going to John Livingston, another future star.

In the "pre-Thompson Trophy Race" Civilian Unlimited Free-for-All, Robert Cantwell won in a Vega, finishing barely five seconds ahead of Art Goebel. Roscoe Turner placed 8th and last.

The popular success of the National Air Races had been established. What was needed was a permanent home, where it could grow and develop.

Concise History of Air Racing,