

BALLOONS

OVER THE PINES

Two high-flying competi-
tions bring America's top
balloonists to Longview and
brighten East Texas skies



The balloon glow remains a popular activity at the Great Texas Balloon Race in Longview. GTBR founder Bill Bussey pioneered the tradition, now a colorful custom at balloon festivals worldwide. © CINDY PETREHN PHOTOGRAPHY

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Text by **RANDY MALLORY**

EACH JULY, THE SKY ABOVE LONGVIEW

turns predictably polka-dotted when the Great Texas Balloon Race (GTBR) fills the air with 40 or more brightly colored hot air balloons. The sky turns particularly polka-dotted this July, because during part of the 34th annual event, balloon-happy Longview concurrently hosts the U.S. National Hot Air Balloon Championship. What's more, the city will host the Nationals again in 2013 and 2014. Organizers of the two events expect that the weeklong competitions, involving some 75 hot air balloonists floating over the Piney Woods, will attract some 40,000 visitors.

The national contest features America's top 50 balloonists, who vie to win the national title, prizes totalling \$50,000, and the chance to represent the U.S. in the 2014 World Championship in Brazil. These top 50 compete in numerous weekday flights for the Nationals, then join another 25 or so balloonists for the GTBR events Friday through Sunday.

All flights take place early each day (6:30 a.m.) to avoid daytime thermals. Flights for the Nationals launch from various locations around Longview and elsewhere in Gregg County, depending on wind direction and flight tasks (such as locating a target on the ground or performing certain maneuvers in the air). Viewing these weekday fly-bys is a matter of luck; fans keep their eyes peeled skyward early each morning.

Then, Friday afternoon through Sunday morning, Nationals pilots join GTBR pilots for flights and other family-friendly activities based at the GTBR festival grounds at the East Texas Regional Airport. GTBR founder and Longview dentist Bill Bussey (himself a record-setting balloonist) invented the festival's most popular event, the "Balloon Glow," now a common crowd-pleaser at balloon festivals worldwide.

The Friday- and Saturday-night balloon glows at the GTBR begin with the inflation of whimsical balloons known as "special shapes." Sometimes two or three times the size of a typical hot air balloon, these oddities can resemble anything from a clown's face to a bumblebee. Then, after sunset, the regular balloons inflate alongside the special shapes, and all remain tethered in place. Around 8:50 p.m., the chant goes up, "One, two, three, GLOW," and the simultaneous blasts of propane burners illuminate the balloons as if they were fantastical fireflies in a darkening sky.

The balloon glow remains a peak experience for balloon enthusiasts and Longview residents Blake and Leska

IN 2012, AND AGAIN in 2013 and 2014, Longview will host the U.S. National Hot Air Balloon Championship concurrently with the Great Texas Balloon Race.



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ABOVE PHOTO © CINDY PETREHN PHOTOGRAPHY

ABOVE: With his hot air balloon, Sundance, already about two-thirds full, balloonist Rick James of Judson blasts the propane burners to fully inflate the envelope. RIGHT: Sundance flies overhead during the Great Texas Balloon Race.

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The Sundance crew makes the ring toss look easy, but positioning the balloon this close to the pole requires a series of skillful maneuvers.

Parker, who have come to the festival since 2005, when their oldest son, Chance, was two years old. "The noise of the propane burners scared him at first, but then he really got into it," says Blake. "Now he looks forward to the Great Texas Balloon Race more than Christmas." Last year, the Parkers, invited extended family, and four generations enjoyed the balloon glow together.

"It's incredible to walk around among these giant, glowing balloons for a close-up view and even chat with the pilots," adds Blake. "Before the balloon glow, we munch on funnel cakes, play some kids' games, and check out the craft booths. It's a great family outing."

Indeed, a country-fair atmosphere prevails across the festival grounds. Youngsters jump in inflatable bounce houses, and families hop on midway rides, visit arts-and-crafts booths, and sample foods and drinks. Aviation buffs can inspect several special aircraft on display, and, after nightfall, visitors converge near the open-air stage for concerts by top country-western artists. (JB and the Moonshine Band headlines on Friday, and Grammy-winner Ronnie Milsap performs on Saturday.)

The Ring Toss, one of the more popular balloon competitions, takes place on Saturday and Sunday mornings. It involves both Nationals and GTBR pilots competing for \$5,000 in prize money. They launch at least two miles from the airport, then float to the festival grounds, where they try to place or toss a 12-inch, fiberglass ring onto a 20-foot pole. The feat still amazes Sam and Pat Vaughn of Longview, even after two decades of attending the GTBR. As inveterate RV-ers, they park their RV in the motor-home area and enjoy watching the

For a roundup of balloon festivals across Texas, see texashighways.com/webextra.



Billowing hot air balloons await lift-off during early-morning competition at the Great Texas Balloon Race.

to cheer the pilots as they fly by.

During the early competitions, there were years when no one won the purse. "These days, pilots have so much skill and so many GPS and other navigational devices that you can count on someone winning the ring toss every year," explains balloonist Bill Bussey.

Those ballooning skills are put to the ultimate test as Nationals pilots make practice flights on Monday, and then spend the rest of the week competing in early-morning flights. Balloonists in both Nationals and GTBR flights earn points by demonstrating how accurately they complete simple and complex tasks, which can number 25 or more for the week. In a simple task, for example, right before launch the balloonmeister gives pilots the GPS coordinates for a target located miles away. Each pilot determines a launch site (such as an open field) based on wind direction, then flies over the target, which can be as simple as a 50-foot paper or plastic

competition with friends. Hundreds of other visitors sit in lawn chairs encircling the pole

"X" spiked to the ground. Then, the pilot must drop a lightweight, stuffed bag the size of a cell phone as close to the center as possible. Other tasks are more complex, like floating through an imaginary window in the sky, with the maneuver recorded for scoring purposes on each pilot's GPS device.

As the skill level of top pilots rises, so does the ballooning reputation of Longview, which was named by the State Legislature the "Official Balloon Capital of Texas" in 1985. Bill Bussey puts it this way: "This is a colorful, popular event, but it has gained world-class status because it's a serious competition."

Adds current world-champion balloonist (and Longview-race regular) John Petrehn of Kansas: "The Great Texas Balloon Race is one of the most successful and competitive balloon events in the U.S. It's the next best thing to the national championship, and Longview even has the Nationals for the next three years. That's ballooning at its best." **TH**

Tyler-based writer-photographer **RANDY MALLORY** had the pleasure of taking a balloon ride over Longview and the Piney Woods with master balloonist Bill Bussey.

TH ESSENTIALS

Great Ballooning

LONGVIEW's 34th annual **Great Texas Balloon Race** festival and competition is July 27-29, 2012, on the GTBR festival grounds at the East Texas Regional Airport, 269 Terminal Circle. This year (and again in 2013 and 2014), Longview also hosts the **U.S. National Hot Air Balloon Championship** (July 24-29, 2012).

Longview is 39 miles east of Tyler and 23 miles west of Marshall. To reach the festival grounds from Interstate 20, go south on FM 149, turn left, and head east on FM 349 to the West Parking Entrance. For a detailed map, see www.greattexasballoonrace.com.

Nationals events take place weekday mornings, beginning on Tuesday; watch for fly-bys during early-morning competitions over the Longview area. GTBR events—all of which are open to Nationals pilots—begin on Friday afternoon. GPS coordinates and target locations will be posted on the GTBR website below.

Besides balloon competitions, the festivities include balloon glows, live musical entertainment, a bounce house, midway rides, arts and crafts, and carnival-type foods and drinks. For schedules and admission fees, call the Longview Convention and Visitors Bureau, 903/753-3281; www.greattexasballoonrace.com.

IN THE RING-TOSS competition, balloonists float over the festival grounds, where they try to place or toss a 12-inch, fiberglass ring onto a 20-foot pole.