

Red Bull Air Race World Series "The new motorsports"

We follow Arizona pilot
Kirby Chambliss
to San Diego

Story and photos
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www.AutoMatters.net
or as noted

Red Bull Air Race World Series 2006
Champion Kirby Chambliss of Arizona
performs a knife maneuver through
the Quadro Air Gate during qualifying
runs, skimming over San Diego Bay in
front of the crowds at Embarcadero
Marina Park. Photo: Jan Wagner.

The Red Bull Air Race World Series made its inaugural visit to San Diego in 2007, thrilling a live audience of 50,000 race fans as the planes raced their way through the timed obstacle course marked by huge, inflated Red Bull pylons. This year's World Series makes stops at 10 cities in nine countries around the world. The Series returned to San Diego this May, with more than 120,000 spectators present to enjoy the spectacle taking place mostly in the air over San Diego Bay.

Proudly representing the USA—along with Mike Mangold and Michael Goulian—was 2006 season champion and Arizona resident Kirby Chambliss. Kirby lives on the Flying Crown Ranch, near Tucson. It is no coincidence that his aircraft hanger is part of his house. Just feet from his back door, he built a runway.

Always a popular destination for visitors from Arizona (and vice versa), San Diego served up picture-perfect Chamber of Commerce-caliber weather on Friday and Saturday. That made for some great photo opportunities, as well as some quality beach time for spectators on the Coronado side of the bay.

A free sea and air parade, part of Fleet Week San Diego 2008, took place on Saturday morning, to pay tribute to San Diego's military. Surrounded by modern era aircraft carriers, there was a mock sea battle, complete with smoking cannon fire, between the Californian (which is based on an 1847 revenue cutter) and the HMS Surprise (a replica of the HMS Rose, a British frigate which participated in the American War for Independence).

The fly-bys of military and civilian aircraft were fascinating. They included everything from jet fighters to a sea-plane, a helicopter performing amazing feats of upside-down flight, and demonstrations of challenging rescues from the water, using military and Coast Guard helicopters.

The Red Bull Air Race World Series elevates air racing, and indeed motor-

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Pilots tackle the race course, over San Diego Bay, in front of aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan.

The pilots in front of the control tower at the Red Bull Air Race airport at North Island Naval Base, Coronado, during Friday's Media Pit Lane Walk.

Sunsets, US Navy fly-by, Gaslamp Quarter, full sail and wildlife enhance a San Diego weekend.

The Red Bull Grumman Albatross seaplane.

Clipping a pylon, 2007 (near Coronado Bridge).

Photos: Jan Wagner.

sports, to a whole new level. Taking place in the air as it does, it adds a spectacular new dimension to traditional motorsports, which have usually been limited to land or water. So, exactly what is the Red Bull Air Race World Series?

Just as in other forms of motorsports, a race consists of competitors following a designated race course while trying to beat the other competitors in their class. There are rules and regulations, which include provision for penalties for deviating from the course.

The course

There is a start line and a finish line. Typically the course is about three miles in length. It is marked out by 65 foot tall, inflated pylon pairs known as Air Gates. Since there is a definite vertical component to this competition, each pylon is marked with stripes to indicate where the planes must pass between them. Not only must the pilots pass through the gates in specified places, but they must also do so in a certain way. They must do level (horizontal) flying when passing through the start Air Gate and Air Gates marked in blue, "knife (vertical) flying" through Air Gates marked in red, slalom flying (knife, level or, presumably, anywhere in between) through the Chicane (single pylons marked in red) and knife flying through the Quadro, which consists of four pylons marked in red and grouped in a square. The finish can be flown in a horizontal or vertical attitude. Presumably celebratory rolls, climbs to high altitude and dives back towards the water are optional. They are certainly crowd pleasers, based on their enthusiastic response.

In order to avoid catastrophic accidents, costly repairs, injuries and lengthy delays in the racing action, the pylons are engineered to safely come apart upon impact. They are easily and quickly repairable, and the event does continue with very little delay, after the highly skilled repair crews rush out to the platforms in speedboats, replace the damaged sections and then reinflate the pylons. Just in case, emergency personnel also stand by on personal watercraft.

The fundamentals

At the risk of oversimplifying the competition, here is a brief explanation of the race format. Each event weekend includes *training sessions*, *qualifying day* and *race day*. For safety, only one pilot is on the course at any given time.

Each pilot must participate in two mandatory training sessions. The time of their final training session counts.

Qualifying day includes time trials, of which there are once again two mandatory flights. Each pilot's best time counts. Those who qualify in first through eighth place move on to what are called the Super Eights, where the eight quickest pilots compete for places in the Semi Finals.

Those pilots who qualified in eighth through twelfth place move on to what is referred to as Point One. The winner here gets one World Series point.

By the end of each event, points will be awarded for first through ninth place, with each improvement in position yielding one additional point. The first place pilot is awarded the maximum, which is nine points.

Race Day begins with the semi-finals, where the four quickest pilots from the Super Eights do battle with each other. The two runners-up pilots then compete in the 3rd Place Fly-off, which is a knockout competition to determine who will be awarded third place and its seven World Series points.

It all builds up to the Final, where the top two pilots lay it all on the line to see who will come in first and win the Red Bull Air Race, along with its nine World Championship points.

Maximum G-forces

So what is it like to be in one of these planes, travelling at speeds approaching 230 mph, negotiating sharp, high G-force turns and constantly changing from horizontal to vertical flight? Perhaps this comment from 27-year-old wakeboard champion Parks Bonifay, who went on a demonstration flight, will help to provide an answer to that question. (Bear in mind that Parks "has spent [his] lifetime flipping through the air behind speed boats.")

"You can't mentally comprehend what he's doing, because it's happening so fast," says Bonifay. "People are not used to being upside down and flipped around like that. It's kind of what I do too but I don't go from 1,000 feet to 10 feet off the ground so fast. I'm used to going upside down for a second or two. It's so much faster, your body's just not physically used to going up, your stomach going up, going down, handling all the Gs, and the horizon line just doing flips over and over." Are these pilots athletes in the truest sense of the word? You bet.

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OUR SAN DIEGO TRIP_1

We drove to San Diego in a new Audi S5 354-hp coupe, leaving midafternoon, grabbing a bite in El Centro and arriving in the evening. Lodging was at the Hotel Solamar, a Kimpton Hotel, in downtown San Diego, near the Gaslamp Quarter, PETCO Park, the convention center and the waterfront. The Solamar accurately describes itself as a hip luxury hotel: highly stylish but unpretentious. Rooms are beautifully furnished and very comfortable. The widest array of dining and clubbing options are all within blocks, and the Tijuana Trolley is just two blocks away. We were guests of Red Bull, but online rates range approximately \$289-589 per night, from king beds to corner rooms to master suites. AAA members save additionally. Valet parking is provided, though we chose to park in a city structure just two blocks away, being control freaks with an irregular schedule.

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On the return trip, we took advantage of the Audi's GPS to explore small roads and towns large and small along the Mexican border. Twelve hours behind the wheel was not remotely enough to get familiar with all the Audi's electronics and features, but it was a smooth and easy drive. ■



Photos courtesy Hotel Solamar, a Kimpton Hotel



Kirby Chambliss (USA, foreground), Nicolas Ivanoff (FRA) and Nigel Lamb (GBR) take a reconnaissance flight in formation, over the desert near Abu Dhabi. Photo courtesy Red Bull Air Race.

Upper far left: Lamb sees his shadow over San Diego Bay. Lower far left: Red Bull Air Race hostess with High Flyers pass. Photos: Red Bull Air Race.

Left: The charming Red Bull Air Race hostesses greet us at a rooftop part at the Solamar Hotel on Friday evening. Photo: Joe Sage.

Below left: Race course control tower at Embarcadero Marina Park. (There is another tower at the airfield). This is one of six larger structures in the event, along with hangars and media facilities. They say the control tower is *not* the hardest to set up. (That would be their cantilevered Platform A.) In all, the event has 270 tons of gear that needs to be shipped from point to point. This requires either two 767 cargo jets or one 747. The race series always ends up in Australia, where the gear is serviced and stored until next time. The Red Bull Air Race control crew uses a lot of the same equipment as F1 auto racing, including radio communications, video and internet. They utilize 42 cameras, all high-definition, about 30 of which are wireless. They are a pioneer in HD pencil cams. The Red Bull Air Race attracts 159,000,000 viewers in the US alone. Photo: Joe Sage.

Facing page: Kirby Chambliss in a knife maneuver. Photo courtesy Red Bull Air Race.

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Kirby Chambliss. Prior to the race, Chambliss had told us, "Paul Bonhomme probably has the fastest plane, and Mike Mangold the second fastest. Mine is probably third fastest. BUT... I will try to make it up in technique. Anyone can make a mistake or hit a cone." Photo courtesy Red Bull Air Race.

Chambliss greets eager fans and autograph hounds at Embarcadero Marina Park. Photo: Jan Wagner.

Crowds and control tower. Photo: Red Bull Air Race.

The crowd follows the action. Photo: Jan Wagner.

Mike Mangold, Paul Bonhomme and Kirby Chambliss on the podium. Photo: Jan Wagner.

Victory parade, sponsored by Audi, with Mangold, Bonhomme and Chambliss. Photo: Red Bull Air Race.

Kirby Chambliss with his first place trophy in Detroit, four weeks later. Photo: Red Bull Air Race.

Race day San Diego

On race day the San Diego Red Bull Air Race came down to a battle among three pilots: Kirby Chambliss (USA), Mike Mangold (USA) and Paul Bonhomme (GBR).

Competition was very close, but in the end Paul Bonhomme took the victory over second place Mike Mangold, with a race winning time of 1:18.01 to Mangold's time of 1:19.24. The USA did very well, scoring second (Mike Mangold), third (Kirby Chambliss) and fifth (Michael Goulian) places.

Kirby Chambliss

Kirby has been hooked on flying since he was a young boy. He first soloed at age 20. In 1988, at age 29, he became the youngest captain at Southwest Airlines. His list of accomplishments in the air is impressive: five US National Aerobatic championships, two Red Bull wins in 2004, and the Red Bull Air Race World Series championship in 2006, an accomplishment that he'd very much like to repeat in 2008.

A third place podium finish in San Diego this year was not quite good enough for Kirby. He's been quoted as saying "To me, second place is nothing but the first loser," so it most certainly pleased him to place first in the following stage of the Red Bull Air Race World Series, in Detroit, where he narrowly beat out San Diego's race winner Paul Bonhomme.

Followup coverage

If you would like to see more than these still photos show, and of course to find out who wins the overall Series, the Fox Sports Network is scheduled to air each race on Sunday evenings starting in July. The San Diego race will air on July 20 and again on September 28. Check your local listings. Also check out the Red Bull Air Race World Series online at www.redbullairrace.com. ■



The fastest way
for a type "A"

to mosey on down

the alphabet.

PDAs, to-do lists, and day planners have no place here. You, on the other hand, are free to book your vacation at www.sandiego.org.

