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WHAT IS A BALLOON COMPETITION?

The World Air Games brings the best hot air ballooning competitors in the world together to ride the winds to determine a champion.

Hot air balloons, modern successors of the balloon flown by the Montgolfier Brothers in 1783, do not have any means of propulsion. Their pilots must therefore exercise particular skills to analyze weather and especially wind conditions, observe natural features, and make best use of burning propane gas to control their altitude. Competitions consist of precision tasks, where pilots use the winds at different altitudes to navigate towards set goals and targets. Launches are particularly spectacular, with balloons painting amazing and colourful pictures in the sky as the winds carry them away.

Weather permitting during the competition the pilots and crews will fly two times a day over the several days of the competition.

WHAT DO YOU HAVE TO DO TO WIN?

Starting at a pre-flight briefing, the Event Director, after receiving weather information, sets out competition tasks which the pilots must complete to score points. The pilots use the winds at different altitudes to navigate towards the set goals and targets which may be kilometres away from where they launch. Descending to very closely to the ground they throw their markers (small weighted bags) to obtain the best possible score. At the targets the action can be intense as the balloons seem to line up to drop their markers which at time are only centimetres from the centre.

Pilots are awarded points for good performance; for instance, dropping a weighted marker bag as close to the centre of a target as possible or for distance flown as recorded by the GPS logger. A single flight usually involves several tasks so pilots need a winning strategy to maximise points at each target. This could involve flying high or maybe hugging the contours of the land, all the time watching other competitors' movement for wind information. The individual scores are added together to produce the overall FAI World Air Games Champion.

HOW IS IT SCORED?

For tasks involving targets and markers, there is a team of judges and stewards who measure distances from dropped markers to the centre of the target, using tapes or survey equipment. Flying performances are also analysed using the data from the flight recorder. The results are then sent to the scoring team for verification and final calculation, including awarding penalties for any rule infringements. The best performance in each task is awarded 1000 points; others are then calculated relatively, so that second place may get 990, third may be 943 and so on.

TELL ME MORE!

Balloons need light wind conditions for initial inflation and safe landings; consequently, competitions often take place in the early morning or late afternoon when the winds are most gentle. There are several types of balloons at the FAI World Air Games, the pilot's choice depending largely on the crew's nationality and availability in their home country.

A competition sized balloon is usually between 1800 and 2200 cu metres. Special shaped balloons, such as houses or cartoon characters are not allowed to compete as they are considerably less maneuverable. Ballooning is a spectacular and exciting sport for spectators and at the same time challenging for pilots, testing their skill and judgement.

« *Fierce competition in spectacular colour* »