Hot-air balloon world championships

King of the Wind

Many things can be addictive, even piloting a hot-air balloon – at least for Per-Olof Ekeblad, the current Swedish ballooning champion and an employee of AGA AB in Sweden. From June 26th to July 3rd, he competed in his seventh World Championship in Mildura in south-eastern Australia, where this chemical engineer earned seventh place overall, his best performance to date.

Hot-air balloons approaching their target – Per-Olof Ekeblad is piloting the green-white-red balloon at the right.

It was quite by chance that Per-Olof Ekeblad became involved in ballooning more than twenty years ago. "A few of my friends at the University of Göteborg were members of the ballooning club there," remembers Ekeblad. "They invited me for a flight, and after that they couldn't get rid of me. Ballooning is simply very addictive." A short time later he began his pilot training and in October 1984 he received his license. Just two years later, in 1986, this ambitious balloon pilot participated in the Swedish Nationals for the first time and was immediately hooked on the competition. "I qualified for the World Championships for the first time in 1989 in Japan and since then I have participated in all of the World Championships." Per-Olof Ekeblad has also competed in several European Championships, finishing among the top five in each of the last three. This chemical engineer has worked at AGA since 1991. He is currently active in Lidingö (near Stockholm) in the Market Development department where he focuses on developing new gas applications for customers in the pharmaceutical industry.

Difficult wind conditions in Australia

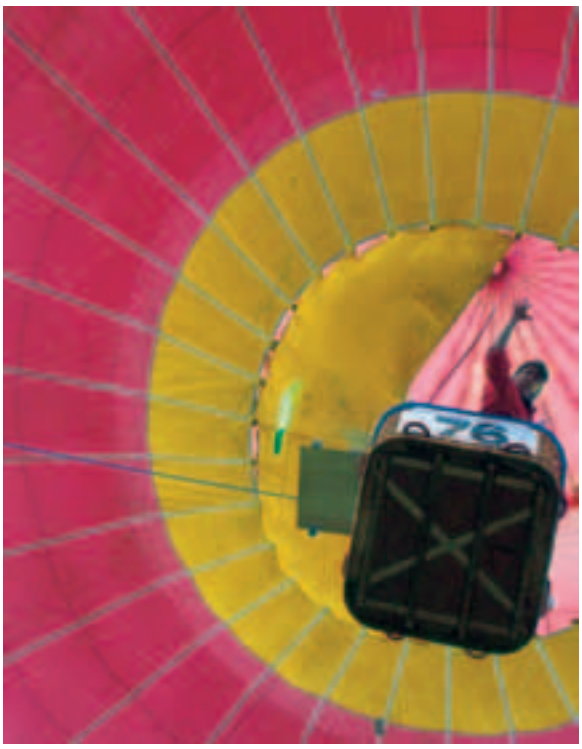
For pilots who usually fly in the northern hemisphere, flying a hot-air balloon in Australia can be somewhat tricky, since winds rotating around high and low pressure centers actually move in the opposite direction. For this reason (and to better overcome the eight-hour time difference), Per-Olof Ekeblad and his team traveled to Australia a good two weeks before the start of the competition. They were the first national team to arrive and the media attention was correspondingly high. National television reported on their preparation and team captain Ekeblad gave a long interview on a regional radio station. Several newspapers also carried stories on the Swedish team. Unfortunately, the Swedes had to deal with unfavorable weather conditions while they were trying to prepare. "Unfortunately, it was too windy to fly most of the time," explains Ekeblad. "You just can't get safely off the ground when the wind speed is greater than five meters per second (10 knots). For this reason, we could only complete four training flights – but that was still more than any of our competitors."

Precision flying is the name of the game

More than anything else, ballooning champions must be precision pilots. Although, in principle, balloons cannot be steered (they simply follow the wind) pilots must guide their craft as close as possible to a predetermined target. Once the pilot gets as close as possible to the target, he drops a marker to indicate his position. The competitor who comes closest to the target receives 1000 points; the other pilots receive fewer points in proportion to their distance from the target. In a second type of event, the pilot can choose from several different targets, selecting the one that is most appropriate for him or her while still in flight. A third event calls for the pilot to specify a target before lifting off, again coming as close as possible to that target. Finally, in a fourth variation, the pilot must reach several targets in a row. The Championships last about one week with two flights per day – assuming that the wind cooperates.

Per-Olof Ekeblad filling his balloon with hot air.

A few of the pilots have already thrown their orange-colored markers onto the target. Per-Olof Ekeblad's marker is ringed in blue.



Photos: Per-Olof Ekeblad

Per-Olof Ekeblad threw down his marker onto the final target of the competition from a height of about twenty meters. The marker landed just 1.6 meters from the target and earned him 970 points.

How do you bring a balloon to the target?

Successful pilots need extensive knowledge of meteorology and a keen sense of the wind. He must be able to tell the direction and strength of the wind at various altitudes and know how the wind conditions are changing throughout the flight. For these reasons, Per-Olof Ekeblad and his team work with their own meteorologist. "The information provided by our meteorologist gives us a good base from which to work, but to really come out on top, you must be skilled in feeling how the wind behaves," says Ekeblad. "Obviously you also have to be an experienced pilot in order to keep the balloon in the wind layers you wish to use, since these layers are often only about 20 meters thick."

Strong winds influence the World Championships

Even when the World Championships finally got started on June 26th, the wind showed no sign of letting up. So unfortunately, only four of the eleven flights could take place. And gusty winds still made life difficult for the pilots when they did get off the ground. In some cases, the best results were about 25 to 100 meters away from the target – usually the pilots come within just a few meters. "For the first three flights everything came down to chance, more or less," explains Per-Olof Ekeblad. "The wind finally died down just ahead of the final flight. We were finally able to complete a flight with all four tasks and we had good wind conditions that permitted the experienced pilots to achieve very good results." This day was a good one for Per-Olof Ekeblad, who managed to improve his standing from 16th to 7th place.

"After taking 7th place, I now know that I can win a World Championship. I made superb scores on the tasks where skill made a difference, and made decent scores on the tasks where it all came down to chance. In the end, we weren't very far behind the first place finisher, and if the wind had been a little calmer, we may even have clinched a win this time. In any case, my teammates and I learned quite a bit and we're going to make a few improvements to our equipment. Then we might even win one of the upcoming competitions; the European Championships in Hungary in May 2005 or the next World Championships in Japan in November 2006." (jo) ∎

Final results

1	Markus Pieper	Germany	10,434 points
2	Uwe Schneider	Germany	10,177 points
3	Paul Gibbs	Australia	10,005 points
4	Johnny Petrehn	United States	9,596 points
5	Masahiko Fujita	Japan	9,530 points
6	Steve Jones	United States	9,476 points
7	Per-Olof Ekeblad	Sweden	9,450 points
8	Michael Genz	Germany	9,384 points
9	Takao Mizukami	Japan	9,123 points
10	Olivier Roux de Villas	France	9,065 points

A total of 87 pilots participated in the competition.