

Free Flight World Championships

by John Oldenkamp



LOST HILLS
FREE FLIGHT
MODEL AIRFIELD
ENTRANCE

At the opening ceremonies, AMA President Don Lowe proclaimed this Free Flight World Championships "the biggest and grandest international meet in history."

It certainly was big, as the parade of the 37 national teams demonstrated. And it was nothing less than grand, if one considers all the elements that combined to produce a most memorable event:

Absolutely splendid weather allowed superb near-total performance by both man and machine, and can only add to the lore and legend of the Lost Hills site, which was primped and prettied up for the Big Show like your yearbook shots of the high school prom queen.

And the organizers, often cast as the heavies in these circumstances, succeeded in earning themselves kudos as the amiable, efficient, warm fuzzies we all hoped they could be.

The SCAT (Southern California Aero Team, comprised mainly of FAI free flight types), the AMA (despite the interruption of their move to Muncie and consequent load of new faces on board), and the National Free Flight Society (NFFS) each picked up part of the load over the two-year planning thrash.

The hard work and cooperation showed to advantage. The minor difficulties that cropped up were quickly cashed in for smiles all around. That's no easy task at a contest of this magnitude, which has potential for all sorts of mischief—language barriers, poor weather, you name it—but none of the above went down. First-

class results from first-class management.

The logistics were user-friendly. Model processing was available on site in a large tent—a wise arrangement that created more rest-flight time, and eliminated extra trips to town.

Full lodging amenities were available to contestants and supporters at the Ramada Inn of Bakersfield, and a fleet of busses shuttled folks back and forth on the 40-mile commute. Press grunts and those short of time bedded down in Lost Hills (Motel 6, Economy Inn), along with several foreign teams and many of the volunteer workers.

The field had been carefully graded, chalk-striped for flying, spectating, parking, and official areas, and the whole works was doused periodically to minimize dust. Two 45-position starting lines were laid out at close angles. Each station was numbered and equipped with a generous tarp—a nice touch, considering that Lost Hills can be the biggest piece of dirt since the Dust Bowl under certain circumstances.

US host volunteers provided chairs, awnings, and chase bikes to visiting teams so the comfort zone was large and likeable. Good humor reigned, as did swapping of trinkets, sales of offshore model-component exotica, and the usual sign-language acquaintance-building. And some crazy stuff, like "my shirt for yours."



F1B World Champion Alexander Andriukov gives his AA 26 the high heave. Delayed prop release adds 20 or more feet of extra altitude—quite valuable in flyoffs, or to max in marginal air.



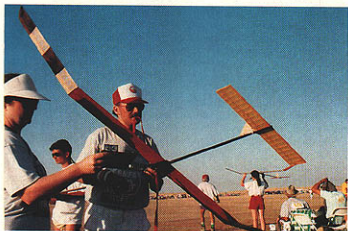
F1B medalists celebrate (L-R): Roshonok, Latvia (2nd), Andriukov, Ukraine (1st), and Tony Matthews, Canada (3rd).



The USA's Cathy and Randy Archer watch as Randy's #18 F1C clinches another World Championship. Cathy holds backup #10, flown in all of the regular rounds.



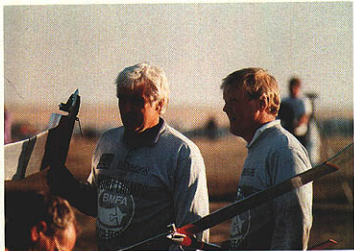
The Ukrainian Kirilenko, 15th in F1C. Clean model had gold anodized wing sheathing, said to add extra torsional rigidity due to its enhanced tempering.



F1A winner Mike Fantham (UK) used a conventional model for the initial rounds, then switched to an advanced composite bunter for the flyoffs.



Last flier up for the 10-minute flyoff round in F1B was Bernd Silz of Germany. Just-after-sunrise flight of 353 seconds was good for 11th place.



Stafford Screen and Peter Watson of the United Kingdom evaluate air conditions prior to ten-minute F1C flyoff round. Screen finished fourth, Watson second, in outstanding flying display.



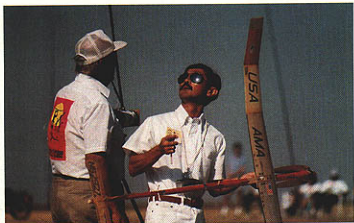
Defending F1A champion Makarov of Russia finished ninth in 1993. Carefully-built model mixes mylar and tissue covering materials.



Rare distaff entry in F1B was Austria's national champion Verena Greimel. Shoulder strain hampered her flying at Lost Hills.



F1A winners (L-R): Gruneis, Austria (2nd); Fantham, United Kingdom (1st); Horejsi, Czech Republic (3rd).



USA F1B fliers Chris Matsuno and George Xenakis work to confirm thermal presence. Matsuno was one of 26 in the F1B flyoff.



Gala opening ceremonies were held at a Wasco city park, where the 37 teams were on parade. Chinese contingent shown here.



The USA's Ed Keck (left, 8th in F1C) got help from former US team member Bob Gutal prior to ten-minute flyoff round.

Much like baseball's World Series, Free Flight World Championships generate reams of statistics. Skipping the obvious/frivolous numbers, we can still add that the 37 competing national teams put up 927 regular three-minute max attempts. There were 136 flyoff rounds.

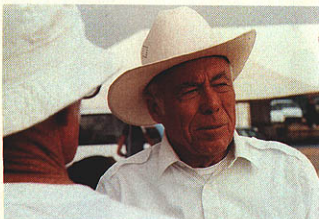
These two flight modes soaked up the efforts of a rather large timer pool: 312 were required for the various flyoffs alone. Stepping forward to sort that requirement out was the always-ebullient Steve Geraghty, who forthwith will be known as "The Pleader" for his success in getting most of the timers to the line on time and ready to roll.

Finally, the '93 FF W/C was unique in that two Individual Champions, Alexander Andriukov of the Ukraine and Randy Archer of United States, retained their crowns in FIB (Wakefield) and FIC (Power) respectively. Archer is the only flier to repeat as Power champion.

The WC format began with Monday and Tuesday set aside for arrivals, model processing and practice, with the opening ceremony, official welcome and western barbecue scheduled Tuesday evening at a nearby Wasco park/recreation center. All went off colorfully and entertainingly.

A pair of extremely precocious sub-teen Bluegrass strummers fiddled away at the catered cookout, setting a lively tone for the three days of intense and epic flying to follow (as if the energy level of the assembled crowd was not already nearing the stratosphere).

By the starting gun's red flare, the 0755 opening round of FIA (Nordic) competition got underway, with 91 pairs of legs scurrying to all compass points in search of lift. There were immediate and numerous line crossings, but everyone was incredibly polite and deft at extracting themselves from tangles.



Contest Director Bill Hertill kept everything going smoothly and diplomatically handled the usual minor glitches.

Weather conditions were better than any superlative spoken to date, as the vast Central California Valley put on a sensationally bright, mild, and almost no-drift meteorological display that was almost too good to be true, with photogenic sunrises and sunsets rivaling the Hawaiian varieties. This continued without pause for the whole week, ensuring probably the best and fairest World Champs flying ever.

Because of the ideal weather and generous thermals, it became obvious early on that all three FAI events would end in massive flyoffs. Nordic was no exception, with 37 of the 91-flier field going to the line for the five-minute round. Twenty-three survived that challenge and lined up as sunset closed in to attempt seven minutes in air that almost anyone but the most tenacious of fliers would identify as "marginal" and deteriorating to "poor."

Cruel or no, two fliers emerged with spectacular maxes, and were sent off for a head-to-head matchup the next morning at 0710. What sort of dreams did these two pilots/sportsmen have?

A scant 30 minutes past sunrise, Mike Fantham of the United Kingdom and Austrian Manfred Gruneis were at full line

height after the 15-minute launch window opened, circling in search of whatever warm air help may have been in the area.

Going in opposing directions, Gruneis was first off in a decent patch of air, but it seemed to narrow a bit into the second minute or so. Fantham searched still farther, waiting quite late, but setting up just before closure with a perfect launch of his new bum-equipped Nordic. He was obviously into a layer of buoyant stuff from the moment of unlatch, and so bested the equally skilled Austrian to claim a hard-fought gold medal, 263 seconds to Gruneis' 229.

It was a great triumph for both fliers, but probably less than a cow's breath removed from being the other way around, as close as it was. Ivan Horejsi of the Czech Republic was no slouch in third place, either, having missed by just 20 seconds in the ninth round.

Wakefield (FIB) and Power (FIC) were no less exciting. FIB occupied the middle-day of competition with nearly similar top-notch flying conditions. It was just a tad cooler as the gumbanders furiously wound out for their first round, a 210-second-max challenge. A handful of drops, the UK Champ Michael Chilton being most noteworthy, were seen.

Scattered low times hit some but missed most through Round Five, where the disasters mounted, and another 14 or so experienced the dreaded midday "broomstick" thermals so notorious at Lost Hills: The air is hot but quite still, with physical signs of lift being so obvious as to disguise downdrafts, luring many off into good-looking but duff air.

One midline swarm of perhaps eight planes were observed in a near-simultaneous launch, but only the three models turning somewhat upwind and to the left maxed,

Continued on page 39

Free Flight/Oldenkamp

Continued from page 18

while the remainder dropped badly.

Rounds Six and Seven produced mild surprises for the fliers, in the form of lack of support from what appeared to be sure-shot boomers. The USA's George Xenakis, a veritable maven of air-picking, found himself looking at dire straits with a scant 93-second flight. That pretty much put him and his teammates out of the running for the overall championship, which went to the very steady and disciplined Canadians.

For the "lucky" ones, a huge flyoff loomed, albeit somewhat delayed by a slowdown in the scorekeeping procedure.

So it was at sunset that the 26 hopefuls for the individual title had a go at the five-minute-max Round Eight. Twenty-two succeeded, but as darkness neared, it was decided to shift Round Nine to the following morning, for what surely would be a Last Man Down ten-minute-max affair at 0710. The Ukrainians, Canadians, and Chinese had full teams in the flyoffs, so that issue would be settled by the shootout as well.

Two Americans were still in the running: Fred Pearce and Chris Matsuno. The odds favored no one in particular, but the Canadians, who were flying "locked in" non-auto-surface airplanes, made a fine match for the likes of the Ukrainians, Russians, and others who had full-house equipment.

Competing in those very early morning flyoffs cannot be all that easy, once one cranks in the effects of usually colder air, numb fingers, and nerves stretched out like violin strings. The Wakefield final round was no exception.

A rash of busted motors sounded soon after the flare dropped, as did a couple of less-than-perfect launches that led to all-the-way-down stalls. For those who employed the required perfection, however, the game played out against a brilliant post-sunrise sky, made orange by distant forest-fire smoke mixing into the jet contrails crisscrossing Lost Hills.

Continued on page 58

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Continued from page 39

Bernd Silz of Germany appeared to be the last to launch—the rest having gone up in small batches, based, we suspect, on whatever their intuition ordered. The air along the line seemed to be quite even, cool, and dead calm. The venue was also remarkably silent.

Even after Andriukov's stunning 535-second flight to cash the gold, few if any outbursts were heard—once again a signal that the WC is serious, all-out competition, and let it all hang out later...*much* later!

Afterward, the FIB medalists gathered for handshakes and brief presentations, with the crowd buzzing over the tremendous times turned in: First to third were Andriukov of the Ukraine (who happily repeated his '91 WC win), his boyhood chum, Viktor Roshonok of Latvia, and Canada's Tony Matthews (second at '91 WC) with 535, 459, and 434 seconds. Unheard-of marks!

The Wakefield do held up the start of the day's main attraction: the eagerly-awaited Power matches. Two World Champions were in the field: Verbitski (Ukraine) and Randy Archer (USA), as well as very strong team entries from China, Russia, Italy and the UK, all pre-meat favorites among the 23-nation entry. Eighty-five individuals took aim at the FIC prize.

Given the incredible performance of the modern full-auto, bunting, and programmed Power model (said to be around 8 to 8½ minutes in "neutral" air, whatever that is), the normal seven-round flight program should have been a maxout "gimme" for nearly everyone, but such was not the case.

Failed mechanicals, marginal air-picks, and lost or damaged airplanes led to a 69.5% decimation of the field, beginning in the first round, where 24 missed the obligatory four-minute max. Each round had its share of drama, with clutches of the trembling FICs going up, sometimes twenty at a time—an impressive sight. A nasty-looking but relatively harmless grass

fire halted flying at midday for an hour or more while the local fire department tended to the downwind blaze that covered perhaps fifteen acres or less.

This delay eliminated any possibility of same-day flyoff rounds, so the decision was made to stage a Saturday-morning 10-minute round, followed by a 12-minute round if required. It was hoped that everything would be decided before thermal conditions forced an all-day prolongation and visual problem for the timers. An 0710 start was set.

Timers and competitors answered the 0630 on-field call, assembling planes and support gear in semidarkness, warming up the motorcycles, and cleaning the binoculars.

"Thunder in the sky" might describe what followed, as nearly all 26 qualifiers went up at once, after waiting out the front end of the 15-minute launch window. This was followed by what seemed to be an interminable wait, and much silence as everyone strained to keep the FIC specks in view.

Minor excitement erupted as it became clear that at least *two* had done the ten-minute max: Archer (the reigning World Champion, on the brink of repeating) and the UK's hope, Peter Watson. Conditions were still relatively calm and cool-to-chilly, so 12-minute-max round was given the OK.

As in the thrilling final Nordic round, matters were head-to-head, and everyone gathered to witness this highly charged affair (albeit at a safe distance, at the urging of Ken Oliver's security folks).

Both competing flier/sportsmen appeared to be unflappable, despite the commotion around them and the gravity of the situation. Silence again came over the group briefly while Watson started and launched through an excellent pattern with high, smooth transition. Archer waited for a minute or so, then followed with his utterly perfect power pattern, bunt, and glide. His Russian Thermo .15 engine sounded perceptively stronger than Watson's. The wait was on!

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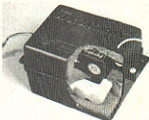


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In slightly different segments of the field, Watson's plane rode to a landing at 408 seconds, while Archer's air patch held more energy, maintaining his model for 567 seconds—simply an awesome performance.

For the technically minded, Archer's winning #18 was built shortly after his '91 WC triumph, was crashed hard, and then was rebuilt in early 1993. After retesting, it proved to be quite reliable, and was further groomed as a flyoff model.

As noted, it has a Russian Thermic .15 up front, gold anodized tempered aluminum covering (a gift in 1991 from FIB champ Andriukov), slightly longer dimensions and moments, and slightly different airfoils from his tried-and-true #10, which was flown in the "regular" rounds.

By any assessment, the WC was a howling success that featured really outstanding flying on a relatively level playing surface, and under conditions that will rank for a long time as the very best and fairest. Good management, goodwill, good times, and good opportunities to share in the likes, dislikes, ways and techniques of others from far away more than augmented this brilliant international free flight festival. As they say, it was one for the books. →

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