

David vs. Goliath:



***An Adventure of
Two Airshows***

David vs. Goliath: An Adventure of Two Airshows

By Mike Jones

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Florida is an aviator's dream. The terrain is flat, the weather fine, and airports abound. There are a host of springtime airshows scattered across the state. This year I went to both the biggest of those airshows and the smallest. Side-by-side, they are interesting contrasts and it's a tough call to say which is more fun.

Sun-n-Fun vs. Seaplane-Palooza

Sun-n-Fun (SNF) is a massive gaggle of aviation; it's a D-Day invasion without the bullets. SNF started in 1975 with only 2,000 people but since then the show has grown like Topsy. Today it features more about 200,000 attendees, thousands of planes, 500 exhibitors, 3,000 volunteers, a museum, a year-round public high school and even a radio station. The whole event operates with a full-time staff of just 27 people. To implement this hoopla just with a gaggle of volunteers is a remarkable accomplishment.

In contrast, Seaplane-Palooza (SPP) in Tavares, Florida is a tiny event just for people and floatplanes. The two-day event drew 74 planes, two helicopters, about twenty vendors, plus innumerable boaters from all around Lake Dora who tethered their toys onto the grassy shoreline. 500 out-of-towners gawked at the planes. The City of Tavares, which bills itself as America's Seaplane City,

owns the seaplane base and the gift shop. The airshow is strongly supported by Jones Brothers Seaplanes which operates from Tavares.

Travel & Organization

A visit to Sun-n-Fun is a little like picking up “Game of Thrones” without having watched the earlier seasons: you can do it, but your head will explode in confusion. In the same manner, I think the management of SNF assumes they don’t really have to explain stuff because everybody has already been there before. For a first-time visitor it’s all very confusing.



Sun-n-Fun isn't only aerobatics and afterburners; there are large sections of the show set aside for seaplanes, ultra-lights, light sports, ballooning and parachutes.

For example, go to <https://www.flysnf.org> and try to find a map of the show. If you can do it in less than five minutes you're a smarter than me. Secret tip: The “Maps and Directions” button is an advertisement, not a map.

Lacking any topological guidance, I arrived at the show on Monday and struggled to find the campgrounds. A few temporary highway signs on Interstate 4 would be reassuring, while the signs on local roads are few in number and hard to read. The main entrance to SNF is casually marked. Ultimately, I just followed the clouds of dust stirred up from the giant RVs trundling, like elephants, nose to tail, into the campgrounds.

In contrast, Seaplane-a-Pazoola could not be easier. Google, iMaps or Waze all took me right to Tavares and handsome legible signs finished the job. I was

amazed the seaplane base is right downtown; it is very welcoming. The airshow was going full-throttle when I arrived but parking was abundant. Everything is free; no tickets or wrist-bands. It's like a hootenanny, with wings. I wanted to buy something tie-dyed.

Hospitality

At SNF, tent camping is essential. The campgrounds at SNF were well-laid out. Before selecting your site check the porta-johns, the shower buildings and hot food. You want to be near all three but not too close. It was about half a mile hike to the displays and airshow area.

My dining favorite was the brightly-lit Scotty Suz Café (photo, right) which featured tasty, reasonably priced meals eighteen hours a day. I also was able to flirt with the delightful Ms. Suz because burly Scotty was trapped behind the grill, beyond arm's reach. Live dangerously, but not stupid — that's my mantra.

In contrast, at SPP I "pitched" my tent at the Holiday Inn. Hot water, a strong roof, and a good night's sleep made me feel I had the



Camping at Sun-n-Fun is a blast, and one of the best aspects are the great little bistros that pop up across the entire festival. Here's my favorite spot, Scotty Suz Café, just as it opened early in the morning. The Café served different specials every night of the show so monotony was never a problem.



In contrast, the Jones Brothers Seaplane team threw a massive party for all Seaplane-Pazoola pilots and their buddies on the penthouse of a local resort overlooking Lake Dora; somehow they decided I qualified. As the music played and the sun set, we all enjoyed a low country seafood boil.

right stuff. There are a dozen or so downtown restaurants to cater to thirsty visitors.

Another “plus” for the Lilliputian event was that the Jones Brothers Seaplanes sponsored a cookout for all pilots and crew atop one of the downtown resort hotels. Do that at SNF and there’ll be 20,000 people on your doorstep. The food was outstanding, the sunset spectacular and the beach music had everybody swaying long after this old pilot had gone to bed.

Entertainment

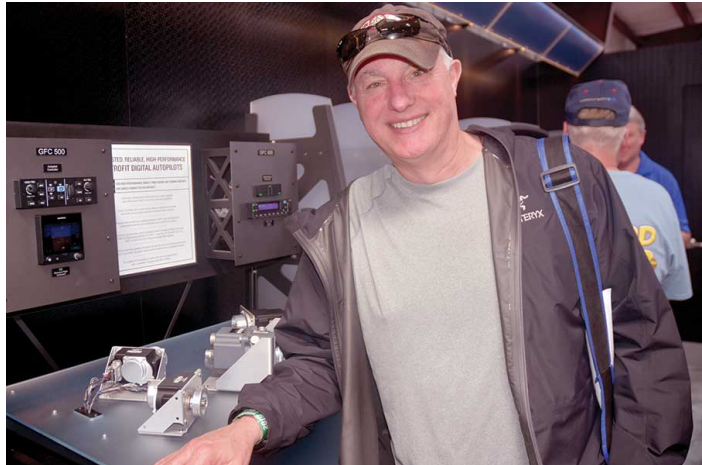
You cannot argue with the professionalism of the airshow performances at Sun-n-Fun, Oshkosh, Seafair, Reno and Chino; those flyers offer amazing entertainment. There are modern jets, warbirds, vintage aircraft, biplanes, ultralights, custom jobs and helicopters. The Blue Angels are the peak of the peak; the Aeroshell team scares me to death and Red Bull racers made me cover my eyes. I watched a lonely F-16 perform an amazing one-man show. But watching these airshows, day after day... it’s like too much candy on Halloween.

Seaplanes are fun to watch and noisy to fly but the flying at SPP is more deliberate and careful. It’s like a NASCAR race — everybody’s waiting for the crash. The precision landing contest was spell-binding as the tiniest gust of wind could cause a pilot to stay airborne a moment too long. “Aerial bingo” was an unexpected crowd-pleasing fund raiser and watermelon bombing made everybody laugh. Who ever saw a pilot in an open cockpit airplane stand up with the stick between his knees, and throw a watermelon over the front of his airplane (cover photo of this articles)? He may not be a Blue Angel, but that’s some pretty snazzy aviating.

Vendors

One incontrovertible advantage of SNF are the exhibitors. The sole weak spot was the abysmal Cessna display staffed by guys who clearly wanted to be

someplace else, like at the Cirrus booth. But the enormous new avionics options were a big draw. ADSB is a crucial topic and many vendors offered options to compare. I wandered through hundreds of booths — the Stemme sailplane was stunning — but I focused on Garmin and the new GTX 500 autopilot. It will be great to say good-bye to my old ARC 400B.



John Thompson, of Chattam, Ontario, came to Florida to check out the latest gadgets from Garmin. John flies a Cessna 337 and is considering the Garmin 500 autopilot but it is not yet STC-approved for his bird. Soon, we both hope.

The vendors at SPP were less numerous but the conversations more thoughtful. SeaRey floatplanes has a large display and Wipaire featured their straight and amphibious floats. The Civil Air Patrol had a booth and Jones Brothers Seaplanes were selling rides from their tent. Significantly, Cessna — the maker of the most popular floatplanes of all time — was embarrassingly absent.

Geoff Nicholson is president of Progressive Aerodyne which is based right in Tavares. He unselfconsciously spent half an hour with me and explained that SeaRey started as a home-built but migrated into a certified light-sport with basically the same rugged design. Nicholson feels strongly SeaRey's success has stemmed from "a rock-solid product which has evolved over the years." Nicholson also feels it is the most capable amphibian available on the market today because of its tailwheel configuration. I tried to follow-up with Nicholson at SNF, but the crowds were too deep. Try getting a half-hour of any executive's time at SNF; that ain't happening.

Education

On the first evening at SNF, I joined a barbeque dinner at the Lakeland Aero Club hangar, which is a flying club affiliated with the Lakeland Aerospace High School (the ACE school). About 150 kids have been through the Club's program and seven graduates already have made it to the airlines.



Photo, left: The Lakeland Aero Club is the flying club associated with the public high school located on the Sun-n-Fun grounds. The club teaches flying and essential maintenance and repair skills. Here Parker Anthony, Sean Stoltz, Morgan Denton and Kenny Gerace stand in front of a club-owned Cessna they helped restore and now fly. Photo, right: The seminars at Sun-n-Fun are well-organized, usually informative and often entertaining. Here aviation writer and pod-caster Max Trescott explains the dangers of night flying and ways to minimize the risks.

I chatted with Aron Yichye, a student in the club. Amazingly, his parents moved their entire household from New Jersey to Lakeland just so Aron could attend the aviation high school. The dapper and understated Harley Richards also was at the Aero Club. He's a local dentist who flies and has a side-gig as the Chairman of the Board for Sun-n-Fun. We had a lively conversation; that's serendipity.

One of the best aspects of SNF are the formal seminars. These are great opportunities to meet experts and discuss serious issues in a well-structured environment.

I know a few pilots who call themselves "Earthrounders." These are the plucky souls who have flown their GA airplanes around the globe. I was very intrigued to hear Carol Ann Garratt speak about her flying adventures — three

times around the world. My main take-away: the risks can be minimized but the costs cannot. It is mucho expensive. My Mrs. is never going to go for it.

Two of the best presentations I saw were by Ron Humphrey and Tim Owen, both from Continental Motors. Ron spoke on the controversy of rich-or-lean-of-peak engine operations. Basically, he asserted that LOP is an answer in search of a question. I'm a rich-of-peak guy and have long thought that a cool engine is a happy engine. Later in the day, Tim described the worries of "maintenance-induced" engine failures. Fascinating insights from real experts.

Meanwhile, over at SPP, there were no formal seminars but there was lots of listening and learning. I spent a very cordial hour with the thoughtful Rob Galloway, owner of Jones Brothers Seaplanes. We spoke about seaplanes, the usefulness of the SES rating, and the techniques his pilots use to be good neighbors. Despite the fact this weekend was his busiest weekend of the year, he was quite comfortable chatting with an unannounced visitor for as long as I wanted. He didn't even use a powerpoint.

Camaraderie and Hangar Flying

At all airshows, large and small, you meet great people with the common interest of flying. Four snapshots, from of hundreds of choices:

- One hot afternoon, as an airshow droned on overhead, I retreated to a shady bar. My bar-stool neighbor was a fellow named Dave Aikens (photo, right). He flew 727s for FedEx for 30 years but GA is his passion. Dave shared a few high density altitude scares in his C-180 over the Grand Canyon and Telluride.



· Four members of the Aero Club from Osorno, Chile shared spectacular photos of their adventures over the Andes. Their club, about 500 miles south of Santiago, has nine airplanes including Cessnas, Pipers, Champions, and a sail plane. The club flies to Tierra Del Fuego and Brazil and Argentina. These guys are the real deal.



These four Cessna pilots came to Sun-n-Fun all the way from Osorno, Chile. They shared some great stories and photos of flying over the Andes. From left to right: Victoriano Reinarez, Ricardo Schuck, Rudy Waldspurger and Alfred Weil.

· I stumbled upon Willy and Gerlinde Goossen admiring a handsome Cessna 195. They live in Filadelfia, Paraguay and this was their second sojourn to SNF. Flying is an essential part of their lives: they own a ranch about 170 nm north of Philadelphia and they make the trip in a Sling 4 light-sport. They like Cessnas; they started with a C-182. They report flying “is very free and easy” in Paraguay and many ranchers keep airplanes. Sounds like general aviation is alive and well in Latin America.

At SPP, I spent an hour with the SPP air traffic controller. Tim “Spike” Pike is a full-time, certified FAA air traffic controller but at SPP he’s the calm advisory voice on Unicom. In a previous life I worked as an air traffic controller so I was intrigued to chat with Spike and watch his style. Comfortable with low-and-slow seaplanes, he coached flyers with warnings about traffic both above



Willy and Gerlinde Goossen came all the way from Paraguay to visit Sun-n-Fun. They fly often in Paraguay because their ranch is 170 nm from their home.

and on the water. He also did a great job in the watermelon-bombing contest, keeping the competition moving along safely.

Working with Spike was Matt Elia, who has a day job as the assistant airport manager at Barnstable, MA. He came 1,300 miles to be the master of ceremonies at Seaplane-Palooza — take that, all you SNF volunteers! Matt has



Photo, left: 'Spike' Pike is a FAA controller from Florida who volunteers at Seaplane-a-Palooza. He takes safety very seriously as he briefs 45 or so flyers about the procedures to be used during the watermelon bombing contest and the precision landing contest. Photo, right: Matt Elia is an airport manager from Barnstable, MA who travelled 1,300 miles each way to volunteer as the Master of Ceremonies at Seaplane-Palooza. Behind him, Spike Pike handles the Unicom chatter while volunteer judge John Rumble makes notes about the precision landings.

the perfect radio voice; he was on the PA system all morning and never paused his gentle, fluent commentary as he explained what we were about to see.

The Scorecard

So how do these shows compare? Well, some might say that airshows are like sex: even the worst I ever had was still fabulous. But there's more to this story than noise and wings.

At Sun-n-Fun, the airshows and aerobatics are simply tops; you can't get any better. The show is moderately expensive but the "glamping" is fun and the facilities acceptable. The forums are great and the vendor displays are excellent. Better signage and perhaps a more focused group of vendors might be useful improvements. And, it's huge.

Admission to the Seaplane-Palooza was free, parking was plentiful and the food was great. There were fewer airplanes and there's no denying the flying was amateur-careful, not the adrenaline-spilling aerobatics which make your heart stop. Oddly, at SPP it was harder to chat with visitors because there were not as many people and not as many places to interact. On the other hand, the price was right and the sponsors all got their money's worth with long, careful opportunities to present their products.

All in all, I think I'm becoming a bigger fan of smaller shows. David whips Goliath, again.

About the Author



Dr. Mike Jones is a commercial-rated G.A. pilot who mostly flies a Cessna T210. His “day job” is helping small airports become more successful and thereby generate more support for the airport from the community it serves. You can always reach Jonesy at PilotMike2012@gmail.com.