



Oshkosh 2019: Normalcy Returns

AirVenture 2019: Normalcy Returns, Sorta

By Mike Jones

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The AirVenture expo in Oshkosh, Wisconsin bills itself as the World's Biggest Aviation Celebration. This year the show has taken some hits but over the past 72 hours it has bounced back with vigor. After all, it's really not about the airplanes — it's about the people who come and the experiences they enjoy. But before we plunge into that side of the story, here's a brief status report.

Weekend Thunderstorms

The Show officially opened on Monday morning on-schedule but badly bruised by the overnight storms. Enormous tracts of Wittman Field were either submerged or too soft to support an airplane. Parking was at a premium. The Mooney mass arrival was delayed until Sunday morning. Uncounted individual planes were diverted to outlying airports. Most unhappily for me, the Cessna mass arrival squeaked in at sunset Sunday. I missed it because I was feeding quarters in the laundromat, washing and drying rain-soaked clothes.

But EAA management, the vendors and the volunteers have really kicked their game up a notch. On Monday the 6,000 or so volunteers are manning the gates, selling the wristbands, and answering questions. The damaged exhibit displays have been dried and rebuilt. The food kiosks replaced the broken umbrellas and righted their tables and now are fully operational. Late-arriving

demonstration planes, such as those displayed by Embry-Riddle and the other flight schools, all are in place. Boeing Plaza is a showplace, with a KC-135 parked next to a new KC-46, a B-17 contrasts with a B-29, and enormous UPS Boeing 747-8F freighter towers over the crowd. The buses, trams and forums are running normal schedules. Monday afternoon the first airshow flew and there were no holes in the schedule.



Dave Thiemke and his sons, Christopher (on the wall) and Mathew are from Janesville, WI and were thrilled to walk under the famous "brown arch" entrance to the show.

Changes Caused by Weather

But walking and riding around, it's clear the show has suffered. The crowds on the flight line are noticeably less dense. In the North Forty there are large areas still closed to planes and campers because the ground is saturated. I was in the South Forty yesterday and it is sparsely populated. To my eyes, warbirds

are less prominent and less than half the vintage aircraft parking spaces are filled. There clearly are fewer exciting planes to ogle.

In my last report, I mentioned the airport was using helicopters as giant blow-dryers to speed the evaporation of standing surface water. With those efforts, plus the breeze and bright sunshine, things are improving. Most puddles and soft spots are drying. This morning I saw a giant roller being driven down the grass taxiways, smoothing the rutted surfaces. It's better, definitely.



On the other hand, the fuel provider at OSH has advised us that North Forty refueling services simply will not be available; they are unwilling to risk their heavy fuel trucks on the soft soil. I have a couple hours of avgas still in my tanks but there may be other planes which simply cannot depart until the airport dries even further or alternative fuel services are devised.

But, like I said, it's not the planes, it's the people that make Oshkosh unique in the all the world.

- ◆ In the North Forty there is a new restaurant in a tent, operated by a lady named Tracy. She told me she has rejigged the employee's schedules to have coffee ready for campers as early as 6am every day, even though she doesn't open until 7am. "I wouldn't normally do that," she said. "But when you're sleeping rough a bit of hot coffee really helps start the day." How true.



- ◆ Outside the shower huts there are lines of recharging stations. People plug in and wander away leaving their valuable electronics completely unsupervised. Nothing is touched, ever.
- ◆ I heard, second hand, about a fellow who lost his wallet and feared it stolen. It was recovered at the lost-and-found a few hours later, cash and cards still in place.

- ◆ Walking to the Forum the other day, a lady inadvertently dropped a handful of paper napkins. A moment later, a passing pedestrian picked them up and disposed of them, keeping the grounds tidy.



- ◆ There are kids here, hundreds and hundreds of kids. Such a joy to see their excitement in the planes and the adventure of camping.
- ◆ I chatted with a guy who had flown to the show in his Mooney, a nice-enough tale but nothing exceptional — until he mentioned he had started his flight in the UK.
- ◆ The manager of the campground store was explaining to me why she loves AirVenture. “We work other shows,” she explained, “and we have to keep a guard in the store all night. But with you pilots, it’s perfect. Nothing is ever stolen and everybody says thank-you.”

- ◆ The sunset STOL take-off and landing competition was an eye-popping demonstration of flying techniques, but even more fun was the exuberance of the youthful crowd which cheered them on.



The halls were busy and buyers abundant. Here, Cessna pilot Al Fenedick stopped at the Mountain High Oxygen stand to purchase a portable O2 system from David Marquardt.

- ◆ Speaking of sunsets, it relaxing to sit in the campground along Runway 27, listening to the Tower controllers and watching the arriving planes. But it becomes a special moment of community when, like the story of the “loaves and fishes”, everybody shares their wine, scotch, beer and snacks. It makes sunsets even more magical.
- ◆ In the end, AirVenture becomes part of your essence. My buddy Jim, a retired Delta captain, has been coming with his brother to AirVenture for

twenty years and always camps in exactly the same spot. “Can’t miss it,” he says simply.

- ◆ Similarly, one of the airplane judges for the homebuilt category was showing me around. “I know what I’m doing every year in the last two weeks of July,” he said. “I don’t know what I do with the rest of the year, but AirVenture is my heart.”

The thunderstorms over the weekend — four sequential storms, from Thursday through Saturday night — could have been a thundering blow that devastated this event. At a purely “for-profit” event, like a rock concert, it could have killed it. Instead, the collective Oshkosh family has come together more than I ever expected. This will be AirVentures’ finest hour.



About the Author

Dr. Mike Jones is an entrepreneur who uses his business expertise to help G.A. airports across the country improve their governance and operations, speeding them on their way to more revenues, grants, and community support. He also helps protect them from avaricious developers and reverse the damage caused by ineffectual politicians. He's been writing for this magazine for nearly a decade, flown 800 Young Eagle missions, and put 4,000 hours in his logbook. He's always accessible at PilotMike2012@gmail.com.

