



Oshkosh 2024: *The Week in Review*

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Picture Perfect in Every Way

By Mike Jones

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I am not a big fan of travelogues which merely recapitulate the chronology of star-studded events like the Oscars or a political convention. But this month I must make an exception. AirVenture 2024 was truly over the top. If you skipped it, you missed a once-in-a-lifetime event which might have been the highpoint of your flying experiences.

Certainly the EAA 's hard work helped make this year's show special, through their endless planning and thousands of volunteers. The airshows were, as always, at the top of their game. Even the exhibitors were pumped. I walked endless miles among the booths and tents, and while I didn't see any "OMG I gotta get that" products, everybody was trying hard to



Boeing Plaza is always the home to the biggest and best birds, including in 2024 a B-29, a C-17, and many others. Looming over all was an enormous B-52 strategic bomber. First flown in 1952, these massive machines are expected to remain in service for another thirty years. Despite their age, they remain ominous, intimidating and highly effective.

separate you from your dollars. My friend Bruce (more about him next month) probably pledged \$30K to the Church of Garmin.

My favorite outdoor tent was the handsome Tecnam stand, simply because they feature the prettiest and most efficient G.A. airplanes being produced today. My favorite booth (inside one of the four hangars) was the team from CEIS fuel senders. Cleverly, they were asking visitors to describe their personal in-flight fuel emergencies. I'm sure that will go viral when it hits Youtube.

Applause for the Weather

The EAA estimated that 600,000 visitors were expected at the show. That's an astounding mass of humanity to bake in the summer sun. Depending upon the year, I've boiled with temperatures in the high nineties, as uncomfortable and dusty as it sounds. I've slept on the floor in the concrete bath house while violent thunderstorms ripped down tents. Last year the sky was dimmed by smoke from Canadian wildfires, slashing visibility and casting a dusty pall over the exhibits. Unruly storm fronts block flyers from arriving as planned when walls of convective activity dam the airways. On the back end, forecasts of hail entice flyers to depart when the outlook turns dire. In short, the weather at



Ho-hum... Just an ordinary bunch of P-51s in the Warbird section.

Oshkosh is an important part of the show: varied, unpredictable, and often feisty.

But not in 2024. This year, the storm gods took a breather. For those of us getting our shut-eye beneath brightly-colored nylon, the chilly overnight temperatures offered great sleeping weather. Tuesday morning delivered a brief overnight rain which created a lovely lullaby on a well-founded tent. Another brief downpour the same afternoon helped suppress the dust. Other than those



Every Wednesday and Saturday evening an airshow is performed in the dark. The pilots fly in formation, firing flares from their airplanes, plus fireworks and now electric drones. Quick sanity check: who thinks hanging magnesium flares — which burn at 3,000 °F — from an aluminum airplane filled with 100LL and flying around in the night sky is a good idea?

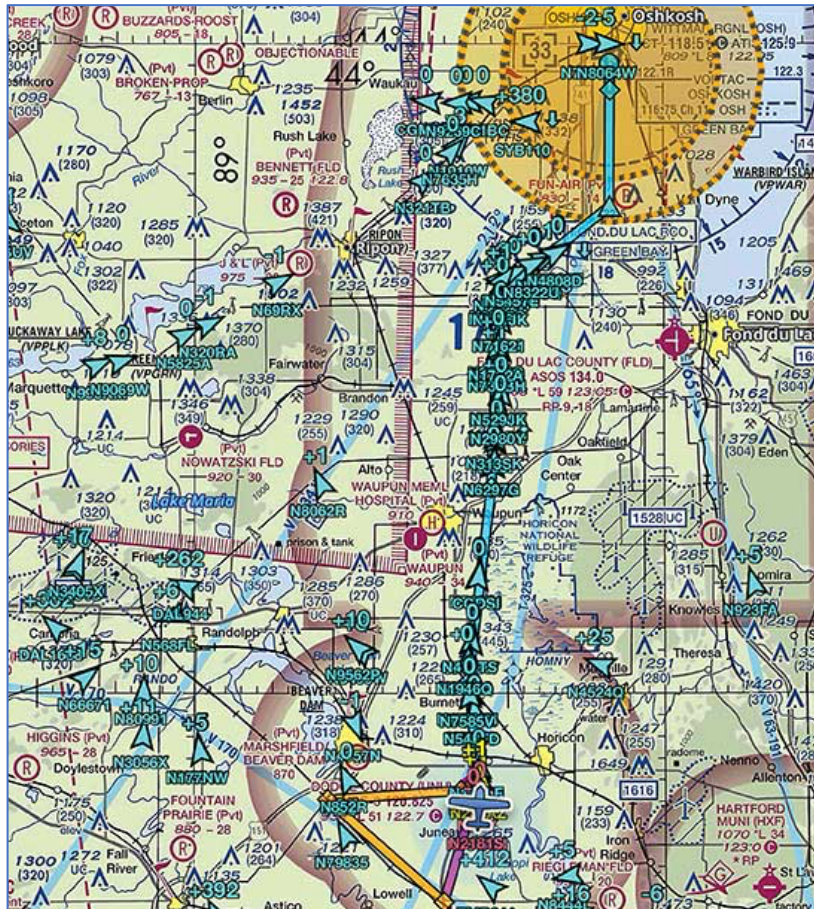
This may be the single best part of the entire AirVenture event and should not be missed.

two moments, the temperatures and the humidity were ideal, the bright sun delivered stupendous photography, and the gentle winds kept the FISK arrival interesting but safe. This year's event had weather as close to perfect as one could hope. It was simply delightful; a meteorological unicorn. It may never happen again.

Applause for the Mass Arrivals

AirVenture featured a quintet of highly-organized formation arrivals, which is the process used when a fleet of airplanes arrive at Oshkosh in formation and desire to camp as a group. These simultaneous arrivals strain the air traffic control system, because it requires dedicating runways to the mass arrivals while pushing other traffic onto the already overloaded FISK routing. The

message from the show organizers: you're welcome to try, but be punctual and be tight.



ForeFlight vividly shows the precision of the Cessna mass arrival. The blue airplane is Cessna N7591N, second to last in the formation. The triangular route allowed the formation to get to altitude and adjust spacing. After overflying Dodge County Airport, the 64 planes then flew north to Oshkosh, zigged to the right to align with Runways 36L and 36R, and landed three-abreast. The gap in the conga line behind N6297G is an intentional buffer between the slower planes in the first group and the faster planes behind. Notice the second line of aircraft southwest of Oshkosh, flying the FISK arrival.

The Cherokee and Cessna arrivals were the first, on Friday, three days before the show opened. On Saturday the speedy Mooney and Bonanza coterie arrived, and Sunday featured the parachute-laden Cirrus group. Months before the actual event, the leaders of each team negotiate their departures, speeds, times and arrivals with the FAA and the EAA. Those organizers then spend the winter and spring training every participant in both formation flying

procedures and the specific routines required for Oshkosh.

It's serious pucker-time; if something goes wrong it could be catastrophic. In most cases, the mass arrivals involve as many as three airplanes landing wingtip-to-wingtip on the same runway. It is an enormously complex, intense, and potentially dangerous aeronautical ballet. I am proud to report this year all five groups performed flawlessly.

As soon as the option was available, I signed up for the Cessna event, organized for more than twenty years by Rodney Swanson and Gil Velez (Cessnas2Oshkosh.com). Flying with me in my newly re-engined Cessna T210N was Alex Mello, a captain retired from one of the legacy majors and superb stick-and-rudder man.

The Cessna group is uniquely challenged because the variety of aircraft in the Cessna family means formation participants fly at different speeds. How does one organize a formation flight when a diminutive Cessna 150 simply can't motor as briskly as a burly, twin-engine Cessna 337? The answer: stagger the departures to create gaps in the initial formation. During the flight those gaps gradually shrink, like an accordion, as faster planes catch the slower ones. Very clever, these flying people.

Like most aero-events, Cessnas 2 Oshkosh over-books, and while around 100 applicants were accepted about 36 planes withdrew for personal, career, or technical reasons, or simply failed to make it to Dodge County in time for the briefing. In the end, 65 aircraft planned to launch

late in the afternoon. One aircraft dropped out during taxi with a maintenance



After the mass arrival, the Cessna Base Camp becomes the center of the Cessna world for a week. A large circus tent provides a home, a generator recharges devices, and hot breakfasts every morning. The initial shopping trip to Walmart took two vans, six people and \$1,100. Left to right: Julie Wolf, Ellen Skelton, Nick Thornsby, Stacey Higgins, Karen Ewart, and Mike Jones.

issue, and one aircraft had a mechanical issue while in flight but was able to continue the mission. Interestingly, 17 aircraft were new participants this year.

The mission began at Dodge County Airport (KUNU), about forty miles south of Oshkosh. Most of the aircraft arrived at Dodge County that morning — Alex and I flew from Ohio and landed about 9:30am — and the participants enjoyed a pizza lunch in the main hangar. After lunch, the tone morphed from family reunion to combat-ready. The mission was completely and exhaustively briefed. Swanson reviewed the speeds, altitudes, routes, frequencies, and what-if scenarios. Everybody then raced to their airplanes, checked their radios, and prepared for an on-time departure.



Odd headgear abounds at Oshkosh; it may be something in the water. On Tuesday, the day of the afternoon thunderstorm, Matteo Santelli and his cousin Quintin demonstrated their hands-free umbrellas. Photo, right: AirVenture consumes a huge portion of the airport's 1,392 acres, so getting around requires preplanning. Here, the Scherbers of Maple Grove, Minn. combine mobility with style. Malisa Scherber (left) is a brand-new CFI, CFII, and MEI while Madison Scherber (right) is a fashion designer in New York City. Kati Scherber (center) is mother to them both.

In the end, 64 aircraft arrived at Oshkosh as planned. The lead aircraft launched at 4:01pm local time and landed in Oshkosh at 4:37pm. The final aircraft landed at 4:50pm, which means the entire gaggle tied up runways 36L and 36R for exactly 14 minutes, an average of one plane every 11 seconds. In our case, Alex calmly flew left-seat while I kept my eyes on my wingmen, watching the formation weave its path to Oshkosh. I am told the other groups

did equally well, putting hundreds of airplanes on the field safely, quickly, and with panache.

At the Cessna Base Camp, we were honored to be greeted in person by Jack Pelton, head of EAA, which reflects the importance of these type-clubs and the mass arrivals to the spirit of AirVenture. Two thumbs up!

Applause for Payton Sotman

If anybody needs more excitement at Airventure 2024, just ask young Payton Sotman. I met her riding a tram past the Warbirds on Monday morning, and she had a story to tell.

Her parents are Jocelyn and Ryan Sotman, and the family lives near St. Louis ("On the Illinois side," Jocelyn noted precisely) with Payton, sons John and James, and their youngest toddler, Nora. On Saturday, they drove six hours to Airventure and camped with their uncle, who had arrived separately. The kids were particularly eager to watch the airshows, visit the Pioneer Museum, and inspect the airplanes on the flightline. But within a few hours their carefully-crafted plans began to come off the rails.

"It was Sunday morning," Ryan explained. "Payton had a little bit of a bellyache when we were at breakfast." With four children, somebody always has something, so the adults initially didn't pay too much attention. The family loaded their blue canvas wagon and walked to the flightline. It was there when they noticed Payton was not enjoying the day.

"She just wanted to lay around. She didn't want to watch anything," Jocelyn recalled. "We went back to the campsite for lunch and started realizing something might not be right."

As they discussed Payton's malaise, Jocelyn tapped Payton's tummy. "She really jumped," Ryan said, and they began to worry. "We started doing some Googling. We called some aunts. We began to think it might be appendicitis."

They left the campground and drove to the hospital at Oshkosh. The emergency room staff ordered some blood tests and everyone became concerned when those results indicated “really high” white blood cells counts, Ryan recalled. A subsequent CAT scan showed Payton clearly had an inflamed appendix.

“We didn’t know you could see [soft tissues] in a scan, but they can these days,” Jocelyn said. “It was just at a very early stage. We caught it very early, which was good.”

But the odyssey was not over. The Oshkosh hospital did not have a pediatric surgeon available, so Payton and her family were transferred to the hospital in Neenah, Wisconsin, where a team was on stand-by. They accommodated Payton easily and the surgery was successful completed late in the evening.



The Sotman family, from near St. Louis, had a scare on Sunday when Payton (center) needed emergency major surgery while camping at AirVenture 2024. She recovered so quickly that the entire family was back at the show within just twelve hours. Also pictured: Ryan and Jocelyn Sotman; their youngest toddler, Nora, in Ryan’s arms; brothers James (left) and John (right).

“The doctors and everybody were super kind,” Payton said, unphased by the entire experience. “I’ve been in a hospital before but I’ve never had a surgery. I was kind of nervous at first, but then I went right to sleep.”

Both Jocelyn and Ryan were amazed at the outcome. “Afterwards, they came out to us and said, hey, she had the surgery, she’s good,” Jocelyn recalled.

“They said to for her to go home, get some rest. So we did.” The family wearily made it back to their campsite about midnight Sunday.

“I felt pretty relieved, actually, when the doctor said the surgery went well,” Jocelyn said. “I was happy Payton was able to come home. To our campsite, actually.”

To my ears, this was amazing: major surgery in the evening, and back enjoying the airshow twelve hours later. As we stepped off the tram, Payton said she was tired but not uncomfortable.

“I kind of feel my belly, I can barely feel it, because of the medicine they gave me,” she said without drama. “I woke up this morning and got some more medicine. It’s better than yesterday,” she concluded with a smile.

“She’s been spoiled today. We’ve got this wagon for the little kids, but she’s been in it the entire day,” her dad said. “Now she’s bouncing back, so the little ones are going to ride and she can walk a bit.”

Oh, that’s some tough love!

Applause for Everybody

All in all, the stars, the weather, and the economy all were aligned for AirVenture 2024. The exhibits were busy and presumably profitable. The EAA was organized and professional, and the volunteers remain simply amazing. The airshows, particularly the night shows, were stunning. The campgrounds were clean and tidy. Even the Blue Angels and the Thunderbirds both showed up briefly, unwilling to abandon the floor to their competition. It would be hard to imagine a better event. If you can, put it on your calendar for 2025.

About the Author



Dr. Mike Jones is a consultant who helps G.A. airports across the country improve their governance, which in turns helps them find more revenues, grants, and community support. He presented suggestions on saving troubled airports at a forum at AirVenture this year. He's flown 800 Young Eagle missions and put 4,000 hours in his logbook. He's always accessible at

PilotMike2012@gmail.com.

He's always accessible at PilotMike2012@gmail.com.