

A Pre-Opening Review



Splash-Kosh 2019: A Pre-Show Review

By Mike Jones

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The AirVenture expo in Oshkosh, Wisconsin has opened a few hours ago. But this year will be different as four big thunderstorms have soaked the airport and the campgrounds. It's not been an easy weekend.

This past Friday I flew from North Carolina to Grand Haven, Michigan in about four hours, stopping for fuel and a biology break. From there it was a simple 60-minute dash across Lake Michigan at 5,500 feet to Milwaukee and the famous "Fisk Transition" into KOSH. The weather was weak VMC, with haze and scattered showers dotting the NEXRAD display. A sharp-edged thunderstorm had rolled through Thursday night and delayed many hopefuls. With the ADSB feed linking to my iPad, I watched all the backed-up traffic slowly converge on RIPON. Everybody generally was very well-behaved and patient as we lined up for our turn in the grinder.



Flowing on to FISK, the spotter on the ground bellowed commands like a Mecum auto auctioneer. The controllers at Oshkosh were even a bit more frenzied but extra-professional. They started with both runways but when a Cessna blew a tire on a taxiway they gracefully switched to Runway 18 to keep the flow going. I turned final with just 100 feet of altitude, made the first turn-off and was gratified to hear from the tower, “Nice job, Cessna, thanks for your help.” I hope he was talking to me.



Part of the joy of AirVenture is seeing airplanes unlike any others. This is a Howard, one of two still flying, and it was the Gulfstream of its time. Its current owner self-effacingly parked in the North Forty and camped with the rest of us.

Eventually the marshals waved, poked and prodded me into the North Forty camping area. EAA reported they were at 20% of capacity, which was low, and suggested it would be a busy weekend. Everyone remembered last year

when aircraft parking was completely filled on Sunday, forcing thousands of planes to divert to Fond du Lac, Appleton and elsewhere.

Friday also was breezy, sunny and super-hot. Tents popped up like mushrooms. Old friends hugged and new friends made their introductions. Runway 27 was a blur of landings. The ROTC cadets serving as marshals suffered the unprotected sun in their heavy, camouflaged uniforms.



There always are "incidents" at AirVenture; crosswinds cause wingtips to scrape the runway or soft soil causes the occasional prop-strike. I think this RV caught some wake turbulence because he stalled about twenty feet off the runway and flopped in hard, spinning off into the grass by my tent. We scattered as he almost spun into the fence!



An antique but enormous twin-engine Howard taxied into the camp grounds, looking like a warbird which had lost its way. After setting up my tent, I thought a shower would be refreshing. By the time I got back to my campsite I was just as hot and sweaty as before.

Then the public address system announced severe thunderstorms headed our way. It's unnerving to see 3,000 pilots glance at their cell phones and simultaneously grimace.

This was the first of three storms which blew through Friday night and Saturday afternoon. The Friday night storm raged for five hours. About 2am Saturday morning, I was standing in my tent, bracing the poles and canvas against the howling winds. Across the taxiway I saw another guy stand outside his tent for two hours, stabilizing his dome. The thunder was continuous, more like artillery than weather. The lightning was equally dramatic.

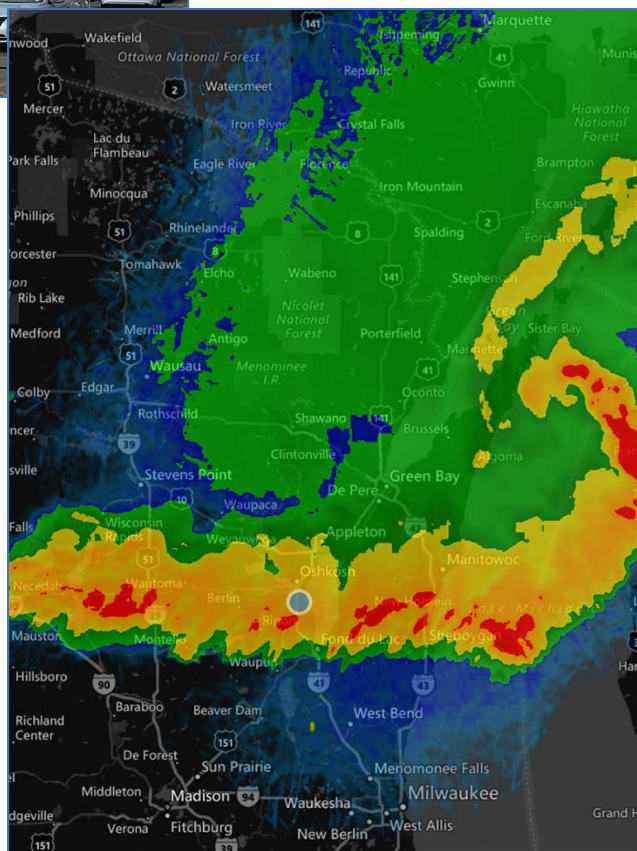


This classic shelf cloud is the leading edge of the final storm on Saturday. Despite its angry texture, planes flew right in front of it as they raced to get on the ground before it shut down the airport. I took this snapshot from the parking lot at Target, on my way to buy a new tent. I was soaked getting back to my campsite. The radar image, right, shows the size and violence of this final weather event.

The sun rose over widespread damage. The campground was a mess. Tents had blown across taxi-ways. Flyers of both genders had moved into the dry, sturdy but uncomfortable men's shower room for safety.

Many even slept on the floors while the storm beat their tents into confetti.

Amusingly, under Saturday's bright clear skies, the airport opened on-time at 8am. In the tranquil after-glow, tree frogs were chirping. The Cherokee mass-fly-in arrived exactly



on time to great fan-fare. Vendors began setting up their displays and a couple of restaurants opened for business. It felt almost normal.

But it wasn't. Water was everywhere. The EAA "Blue Barn" was flooded. Handsome planes were parked in giant ponds. Muddy Camp Scholler was



In between storms, while I was cleaning up the damage to my camping gear, I heard a bagpiper in the distance. I was entranced with this incongruous discovery. It was Tony Wall, from Billings, Montana, who flew his Cessna to the show. You can watch his performance at: <https://youtu.be/zWSXehuf-F4>

closed to new arrivals and hundreds of RVs parked at a closed shopping center just outside the fence. Wading through puddles without slipping or splashing became an artform.

Despite the mud and puddles, the flying continued unabated. Jets, warbirds and dozens of

other planes continued to make their noisy arrivals. One homebuilt RV landed hard and spun off the runway, spinning into the mud and nearly coming through the fence into my tent. The Oshkosh safety team responded perfectly and had him up and out within an hour.

But by early afternoon the radar and our eyeballs showed more storms coming. While the Friday afternoon storm delivered the most rain the early Saturday afternoon storm clearly had the strongest winds. My tent was rated to 35 mph and it was destroyed. Tents were uprooted and blew across the field. I found an unidentified tent peg, caked with mud, mysteriously resting on the elevator of my plane. Saturday night I slept in my Centurion; not the most comfortable night but at least I stayed dry.

Sunday morning the dumpsters were full of crushed tents. Shoes were abandoned as everybody switched to flip-flops. People moved surviving tents



out of the puddles and into the middle of taxiways. Dozens marched to the Target store which did a thriving business replacing lost camping gear (there were just four tents left on the shelves when I bought my

replacement). For campers, Sunday was a day of washing laundry, drying bedding, cleaning gear, and developing a plan for the rest of the week. AirVenture shutdown all their arrivals; there simply were no safe, dry places to taxi or park more aircraft. The scheduled mass arrivals of Cessna, Bonanza, Mooneys and others were indefinitely delayed.



EAA estimates we received six inches of rain in about eighteen hours. Everything was soaked. Above, left: One of my favorite places at AirVenture is the convivial team at the EAA Blue Barn, home of the Young Eagles and many other worthy programs. On Sunday, you needed your water wings to get to there.

The show will recover: after all, it's AirVenture. But it will neither be quick nor convenient. As I write this, all the "SloshKosh" campgrounds are rutted and muddy and impassable to normal aircraft. The airport opened late Sunday afternoon and the "mass arrivals" of Mooneys, Cessnas, Bonanzas squeaked in

before the airport closed at sunset. The airport used Robinson helicopters to hover over the wettest taxiways, to speed drying. The good news: the forecast for the rest of the week is bright, dry skies and moderate temperatures.

If you're flying to SloshKosh, it's going to be fine and it will be a great experience. Today (Monday) is probably going to be a challenge, with dozens of warbirds, four major mass arrivals and maybe 1,000 delayed G.A. arrivals, on top of everybody who originally had planned to arrive on Monday anyway. Bring extra fuel and your own water-proof flip-flops — Target's out of them, too.



Desperate times require desperate answers. Here, a Robinson helicopter floats up and down the grass taxiways in an effort to speed the drying of the turf.

About the Author

Mike Jones is a 4,000 hour commercial-rated pilot who has more than 50 aircraft types in his logbook. His pride and joy is a Cessna T210, which has carried him to every corner of the U.S. and Canada for more than twenty years. He's always accessible at PilotMike2012@gmail.com.

