Mansfield

Big finish for racers in Mansfield

BY MATT ROCHELEAU FOR THE SUN CHRONICLE Monday, June 30, 2008 2:38 AM EDT

Lorrie Biech, left, of Beverly Hills, Calif, and Mary Helen Dunnam, of Corpus Cristi, Texas, chat on the wing of their plane after landing. (Staff photo by Mike George)

MANSFIELD - Flying in just above the treetops at more than 200 mph, 66 women pilots crossed the finish line at the 32nd annual Air Race Classic that ended Friday at Mansfield Municipal Airport.

Members of the 33 teams were energetic, even after a four-day, 2,400-mile journey that began Tuesday in Bozeman, Mont.

"I had the time of my life. This was the most exciting, most fun thing I've ever done," said Laura Berry of Arkansas, who competed for Team 28 in her first cross-country race.

Her teammate, Camelia Smith, has been flying since 1971. The former air taxi pilot and flight attendant described her second Air Race Classic as, "eventful," and "a huge learning experience."

Berry has been flying for four years and was co-pilot of the 235 horsepower Cessna 182RG. She kept an eye on the winds, weather and altitude, and relayed information between ground crews via radio. "You definitely don't get bored," said Berry, who updated her Internet blog (www.airraceclassic28.com) of the cross-country adventure at each of the course's seven stops in Montana, South Dakota, Iowa, Illinois, Kentucky, Pennsylvania and New York.

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Smith calls Hindsville, Ark., her home. With a population of 75, she had a reason for learning to fly.

"I just wanted to go somewhere," she said. Now, "I feel it's an addiction."

The two, like other pilots, did not know how they placed, since the results are more complex than being first to finish. The final standings will be announced at Sunday night's banquet in the Mansfield Holiday Inn.

The top 10 pairs receive $15,000.

Team 20, or the "Dream Team," as Barbara Strachan and Mary Wunder like to be called, arrived in Mansfield just after noon. After 64 years of combined flying experience, the duo competed in their first race.

"It was a dream come true. That's why we are the Dream Team," said Strachan of Florida. "It was just something I always wanted to do. I've always been fascinated with the sky."

"We are just in awe that we did it," Wunder of Pennsylvania said, minutes after landing, where participants were greeted just off the runway by family, friends and local residents.

Almost all the aviators agreed the effects of rising fuel costs were an issue this year.

"It's going to affect whether or not I fly next year," Smith said. She said fuel prices caused some pilots not to fly this year.

"We begged for lots of money," said Eileen Piasecki-Couch, of Team 24, along with Gloria Smith-Zawaski, both of Orange County, N.Y.

Like most teams, they used sponsorships to help cover their costs.

The race ended in Massachusetts for just the second time in event history. With more than 2,000 spectators and media coverage, the event is expected to generate from $350,000 to $1 million in economic stimulus for the local economy, according to the race's official Web site.

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