



Reno

UNLIMITED

GOLD WINNERS

A DIRECTORY FROM 1964 THROUGH 2023

BY JIM LARSEN

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When did the first air race take place? Basically, it was when two or more of the early flying machines staggered into the air at the same time. Speed and distance... distance and speed. That was what those early days were all about as creative individuals tinkered with their extremely primitive aircraft and engines. Even when they were first built, these creations looked odd. In an age of iron, bronze, steel, and copper, the first aircraft were built out of a mixture of wood, bamboo, wire, and cotton — certainly not outstanding representatives of the Industrial Revolution.

It did not take overly long for the first “air meets” to be held. People were fascinated to see these new-fangled flying machines and it took even less time before aviators began competing for the honors of fastest speeds flown or for the greatest distances covered.

One of the main catalysts for scientific development is, unfortunately, war. The Great War of 1914-1918 saw the spindly flying creations capable of limited abilities turn into fighting machines that could carry heavy loads while winging over battlefields at 150-mph.

The end of that conflict left the world with many new and firmly established aeronautical industries and attentions were turned to building aircraft that could carry cargo and passengers while also designing warplanes of increasingly deadly effectiveness. Aviation became a household obsession and news reports on the speed and distance pilots of the 1920s/1930s were regularly followed. These individuals were looked upon as a daring new form of human — a person that could span natural barriers in a seemingly effortless manner. The exploits of Charles

Lindbergh inspired an entire generation of American young men. With the building of tensions in the Far East and Europe came even more aviation expansion. Predictions that the next war would be fought in the air were fueled by a new generation of sleek all-metal aircraft that were heavily armed and deadly in their efficiency.

Then came the Second World War and in just a few short years, aviation advanced to the point of the speed of sound. With the end of that war, fortunately won by the Allied forces, came a great glut of surplus fighter aircraft that could be purchased for very little by individuals that wanted to go racing at the newly-reborn Cleveland National Air Races. For a few glorious years, those aircraft flew the Bendix and Thompson races, thrilling hundreds of thousands of spectators. The Korean War followed by the Cold War put air racing behind us. There were new and deadly forces at play in a world that seemed increasingly hard to understand.

Then, in 1964, Bill Stead brought about the rebirth of modern air racing. And once again, the chief aircraft involved in the transcontinental and pylon races was the surplus WWII fighter. These were the planes that had the performance and could offer spectators unprecedented sights and sounds. Air racing was off and running. The Golden Age of Air Racing took place during the 1980s/1990s as pylon speeds approached 500-mph.

The Reno National Air Races lasted 59-years and in the following pages we present a look at each Gold winner. Reno was the longest-running air race event in the history of the world. It was a unique time and one that will never be repeated. >>

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1964

Mira “The Poor Refuge” Slovak made air racing history when he took first place at the new Reno National Air Races in Grumman F8F-2 Bearcat N9885C Race 80 with a speed of 355.52-mph. Owned by race organizer Bill Stead, the stock *Miss Smirnoff* was painted bright white. (JL)



1965

After being disqualified in 1964 for not landing at the dirt Sky Ranch airfield, Lockheed test pilot Darryl Greenamyer came on strong in his highly-modified Grumman F8F-2 Bearcat N1111L Race 1, qualifying at 369.70-mph and taking the checkered flag at 375.10-mph. (JL)



1966

Vowing to set a new winning streak, Darryl Greenamyer returned with even more improvements to Bearcat Race 1 including a beautiful new white, blue, and gold paint scheme and the name *Miss Smirnoff*. Qualifying at 409.97-mph (a new Reno qualifying speed), Darryl would eat up the course and win at 396.22-mph (a new Reno speed record). (JL)