

THE REALLY FAST AND FURIOUS

OUR PICTORIAL SALUTE TO THE SUPER UNLIMITEDS OF THE
NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP AIR RACES

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When Bill Stead announced the rebirth of the National Championship Air Races (NCAR) to be held at Reno, Nevada, during 1964 there was a huge amount of excitement and interest regarding the event. There would be an Unlimited category that would include the powerful warplanes of the Second World War. At this point in time, the Warbird Movement had not really started but there were many, many WWII veterans that were intensely interested in seeing the fighters from that conflict back in the air. The first NCAR was held at a dismal dirt strip called Sky Ranch, which was outside of Reno. The location was pretty terrible but the enthusiasm was extremely high — especially when the fighters began to arrive. Oh, for sure they were a rather bedraggled lot wearing a mix of civilian color schemes but the noise and spectacle of those mighty propeller-driven warriors more than made up for the rugged location. The roar of the Merlins and Pratt & Whitneys was exquisite and Jim Larsen was on hand to capture the event on film. Jim, of course, had provided valuable input for one of the first racers — Chuck Lyford's P-51D *Bardahl Special*, which would become one of the first modified Super Unlimiteds. Lockheed test pilot Darryl Greenamyer and his friends from the Skunk Works showed that aerodynamic boundaries could really be pushed with a modified Bearcat.

For two years, the NCAR was held at Sky Ranch before moving to nearby Stead Field. The ex-military airport was a splendid location with numerous paved runways, hangars, lots of ramp space, and easy access to hotels in nearby Reno. Once again, the excitement level was high and the Reno NCAR truly became a replacement for the fabled NCAR held at Cleveland, Ohio, during the post-war years. Each year, the quality of the Unlimiteds improved — and each year there were more of them parked on the ramp.

The enthusiasm for air racing spread and other events were held at a myriad of locations across the United States but most of these were just one- or two-time events and Reno became the central hub for all that was great and good in air racing. As the NCAR progressed, so did the Warbird Movement. In fact, they worked sort of hand in hand. More WWII aircraft were being put back into flying condition as interest in these great aircraft increased. At Reno, we began to see more aircraft modifications and the standard of work greatly improved.

Airframe modifications also led to engine development and leaders in that field included Dave Zeuschel, Dwight Thorn, Mike Nixon, and Jose Flores. Merlins along with Pratt & Whitney and Wright radials were always powerful engines but these individuals helped develop modifications and techniques that greatly increased horsepower. With the rise in power came an increased risk of failure and NCAR would witness some spectacular engine "deconstructions" but the gained knowledge would also lead to increased reliability in powerplants that were developing over twice their normal horsepower.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the value of the aircraft known as Warbirds began to rapidly rise. This meant that more aircraft were being sought out in foreign countries and returned to the USA for restoration to flying condition. Numerous shops across the nation opened up to bring these planes back to life and that led to an entire industry supporting their efforts. David Tallichet and Ed Jurist would score an important find when they returned

several dozen Hawker Furies from Iraq. These powerful aircraft were offered for sale and many were rapidly restored.

At Chino, Frank Sanders and his family were already flying a restored Sea Fury. Across the ramp from their hangar, they saw how Fighter Rebuilders took a Corsair and mated it to a mighty P&W R-4360 to create their own version of the then-extinct Super Corsair. The Sanders decided to mate a similar engine to a Sea Fury airframe and created *Dreadnought* — the winningest Super Unlimited in history and an aircraft that was so reliable that it became known as "the Buick."

Lyle Shelton was making air racing history with his R-3350 Bearcat that would eventually become known as *Rare Bear*. Darryl Greenamyer had already taken the absolute speed record that had been held by Germany since 1939 and this led other racers to set their sights on breaking Darryl's record. Dave Zeuschel and Ed Browning rebuilt a Mustang to hold a Rolls-Royce Griffon engine and, in the process, created a very powerful machine that was able to take Darryl's record when Steve Hinton pushed the *Red Baron* to almost 500-mph on the three-kilometer course. Lyle figured he could do the same, so after numerous modifications he set out to break the *Red Baron*'s record and did so in a most convincing manner. It is a record that still stands.

As more of the Iraq Furies became airworthy,

owners began to replace the Bristol radials with Wright R-3350s and this injected a new generation of racers into NCAR. The modified Furies and Sea Furies were fast — perhaps not as fast as the Super Unlimited Bearcats and Mustangs but they were always on the tails of those aircraft.

Then came aircraft specially built for air racing. These included the Sandberg *Tsunami* and Pond Racer. Since this special section is focusing on converted military fighters, they are outside the scope of our presentation. However, they were extremely interesting machines and we will have full articles on their histories in future issues of *Air Classics*.

The NCAR was overseen by the Reno Air Racing Association (RARA). Over the years, we watched the ups and downs of this group as leadership and direction changed. RARA made some spectacular

blunders but they also had some major victories in establishing Reno Stead as the center of the air racing universe. However, RARA was never able to achieve what air racing really needed and that was major sponsorship. There were some sponsors but not enough to expand the sport and the Reno NCAR became the only national air race to survive. Unlike auto racing, there was just not enough general interest to attract numerous sponsors and that lack of sponsorship greatly hurt the sport.

The "Golden Age" of the Super Unlimiteds took place during the late 1990s and early 2000s and during that time a colorful and powerful collection of Unlimited racing machines filled the ramp at Reno Stead each September. Then, except for a few exceptional aircraft like *Rare Bear*, *Voodoo*, *Dago Red*, *Dreadnought*, and *Strega*, it all began to decline.

The decline happened for a number of reasons. Many of the spectators deeply interested in air racing were simply "aging out" and younger people did not have any particular interest in the sight and sound of ex-WWII fighters battling around the pylons. Then came the fact that the value of these aircraft was increasing by leaps and bounds and some individuals

did not want to risk their investments in the rigors of air racing. At the same time, costs began to escalate well out of proportion to everything else. Insurance was going crazy. So was the cost of racing fuel and airframe parts. Just getting an aircraft and team to Reno had greatly escalated and prize

money actually started going down. If one wanted a full-race Merlin, the cost of creating such an engine from scratch would exceed \$400,000. The rewards for such investments did not exist. RARA could not attract the needed sponsorship to help cover the escalating costs. Support from the city of Reno dropped off and the once thriving downtown area is today a ghost town of closed businesses and abandoned casinos. With the lack of monetary return, the number of Super Unlimiteds began to decrease.

As one professional racer put it, "NCAR became a parade of stockers." In a way, that was actually a natural progression. More restored WWII aircraft were flying than ever before and spectators enjoyed the sight and sound of them going around the pylons but it was a decreasing equation. The excitement of the Super Unlimiteds was gone and as the Reno NCAR headed towards its 60th anniversary, the decline was sadly evident — both in participants and spectators.

Today, NCAR has moved to a remote airfield at Roswell, New Mexico, and the first couple of years have been painful. Once again, the management does not seem capable of attracting any form of major sponsorship nor does it know how to generate major publicity and, for the most part, the 2026 Unlimited portion of the event will be "a parade of stockers." As noted previously, that is just fine — you give the spectators what they want to see and if they are happy with seeing basically stock WWII aircraft flying around the pylons then that is wonderful.

Air Classics has been the only magazine to cover the ups and downs of air racing and has done so over the decades. What we wanted to do with this October issue is create a special section honoring the Super Unlimiteds, their owners, pilots, and crews along with their relatively brief moment of glory. It took a lot of time and effort to create the photographs seen on the following pages and we hope this section will serve as a reminder of a glorious moment in aviation history. >>>