

What is an air race?

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We will celebrate 100 years of air racing in 2009 – but exactly when? In all English-language books and articles you will read that the Gordon Bennett Trophy, held in Reims, France, on August 28th, 1909 and won by Glen Curtiss, was the first air race. This is not true, there were several air races before the Reims extravaganza, but they are not very well known. They were not so big, they offered smaller prize money, they were not so well-publicised – and, in this US-centred sport they have perhaps been forgotten since they were staged in France and there weren't any American or British participants...

There were of course some false starts before the first air race. Several of the earliest races never actually happened. It seems that a fifty percent failure rate of new air races has always been normal – then as now. Some were simply organised too early, while there were not enough planes around, some were just wild ideas that never became realised. Some were borderline cases – were they races or not, and did they happen or not?

However, until we know exactly what an air race is, we can't tell which the first one was, so we need a definition. On the first page of Gary Williams' series of "Air Racing Results" books this anonymous quote appears: *"The first time two aircraft flew together, a race developed"*. Is this enough of a definition? I don't think so...

Wikipedia defines (or at least defined on December 8th, 2008...) "race" in this way:

"A race is a competition of speed, against an objective criterion, usually a clock or to a specific point. The competitors in a race try to complete a given task in the shortest amount of time. Typically this involves traversing some distance, but it can be any other task involving speed. Running a distance is the most basic form of racing, but races are often conducted in vehicles, such as boats, cars and aircraft, or with animals such as horses. A race may be run continuously from start to finish or may be made of several segments called heats or stages (stages are also known as legs). A heat is usually run over the same course at different times. A stage is a shorter section of a much longer course or a time trial."

This is probably as good a definition as you will be able to find – but perhaps we have to fine-tune the details in order to be able to tell which the first one really was. I would clarify the definition in this way:

Formalities:

- A race must have predefined rules.
- A race must have a predefined course and take place within a predefined time.
- A race must be announced in reasonable time before taking place

The course:

- The course may be a closed course or a point-to-point course.

- In the case of a point-to-point course it is sufficient to define it by the start and finish points, but the definition may be more detailed.
- The rules of the race may require the course to be covered only once or several times.
- One or more efforts may be allowed.

Speed:

- A race must be decided by speed, either by finishing order or by elapsed time. The elapsed time may be expressed in average speed.
- A race may consist of several stages and be may decided by aggregate time.
- Stops may be allowed, in which case the time for these stops may or may not be included in the elapsed time.
- The speed which decides the race should primarily be determined by the combination of the inherent speed of the aircraft and the capability of the pilot to use that speed over the course. This means that the course should be such that it can be expected that most competitors can complete it. A competition can not be considered a race if the winner is determined by the capability to complete the course at all, for example if a pioneering flight is required in order to complete the course.

Minimum number of competitors:

- A race must have two or more competitors.
- A race can not be considered to have taken place unless at least one competitor has taken an official start.

These definitions rule out competitions of the type represented by the Deutsch-Archdeacon prize (for the first to fly a closed kilometre) or the Orteig prize (for the first to cross the Atlantic), even though that kind of competitions were often referred to as "races". They also rule out improvised races, such as Billy betting that he will beat Buddy to the next airport.

On the other hand, these definitions mean that both the 1919 Schneider Trophy, where several racers started, but nobody officially completed the course, and the 1931 Schneider Trophy, where there were more competitors, but only one actually started, are counted as races that took place.

Most of the definitions above are probably uncontroversial and have no influence over the decision over the world's first air race, but the last two and possibly one or two others might create some controversy...

Anyway, these are my definitions and armed with them I will tell you about what I consider to be the world's first air race in the next issue.

... and by the way, it is probably known when, for the first time, two aircraft flew together, and a race developed! Did it happen before or after the world's first air race? I will tell you!