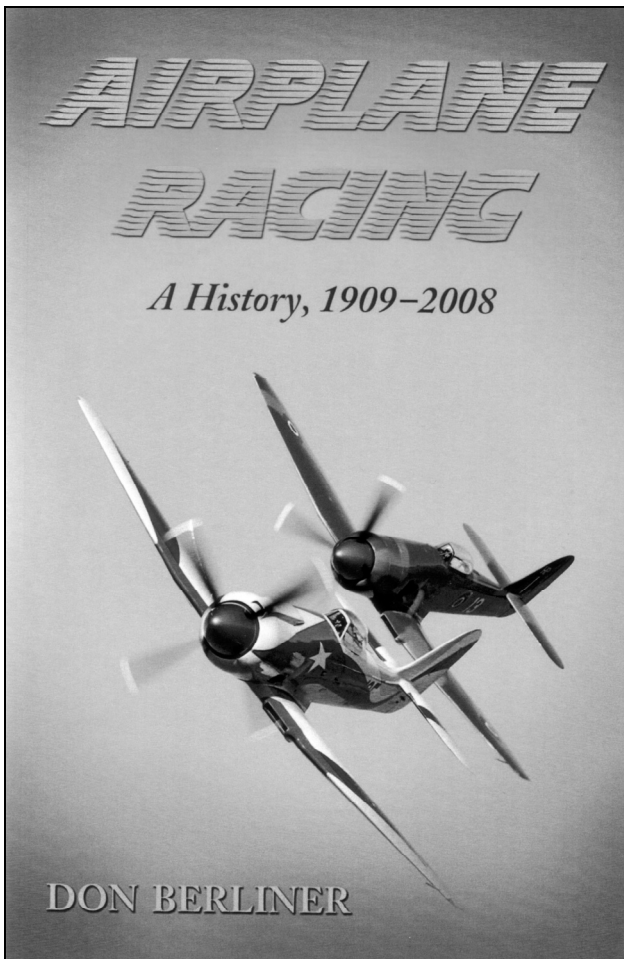


"Airplane Racing – A History, 1909-2008" – Book review

Anders Bruun



Don Berliner "Airplane Racing – A History, 1909-2008" (McFarland & Company, 2010, ISBN 978-0-7864-4300-0), 15 x 23 cm (6 x 9 inches) paperback, 250 pages, around 90 monochrome photos. Price from the publisher: US\$ 35.00.

Don Berliner hardly needs any presentation for us air racing fans – he has been around air racing since the early post-war years and written several books and hundreds of articles about air racing. He is also editor of "Golden Pylons", the newsletter of the Society of Air Racing Historians. He is thus very well placed to write the history of our favourite sport.

No book of a mere 250 pages can completely represent all the different aspects of the complex history of air racing, but Don has succeeded very well within the chosen format. The book is not intended as a "complete" history for air racing buffs, and is therefore not weighted down by lists of airplanes, airplane data, pilots or race results. It is also not very concerned with technical stuff.

It is separated into 28 chapters, each covering a time period or a specific series of races. The coverage of the

racers of the pre-WW1 era, of which particularly the 1909-1911 period can be considered the first "Golden Age" of air racing, is a bit thin. Apart from the obvious Gordon Bennett and Schneider races the book covers European cross-country races and British handicap races, but doesn't mention the several dozens of other race meetings that were held in different countries during those years.

As usual, the book states that the 1909 Reims race was the first air race, which it wasn't, and that it remained a solitary event, while it in fact inspired many similar events, both in France, for example in Lyon, Rouen and Bordeaux, and in other countries. It also deals very briefly with the post-WW1 European races – such a pity that the best European and American planes of that era, a period when air racing really contributed to the development of airframes and engines, never competed against each other!

Before WW2 the book only mentions the major races and race series. The rise and fall of the "Golden Age" is represented by pretty detailed coverage of the 1929-1939 National Air Races, but the secondary races held in towns like Chicago, Oakland, St Louis and Omaha are not mentioned. From 1946 it covers more or less every race held in the USA. Particularly the coverage of the often-ignored Midget races of 1950-1960, when only that class kept air racing alive, is very interesting. The chapters about the post-WW2 and early Reno period, when Don was involved himself, are very good reading. The coverage of the latest couple of decades of mainly Reno racing gets a bit repetitive, but I guess that just reflects the state of things, with the dominance of Reno and the stability of the format of races and the participating pilots and planes.

I would have liked to read more about the Formula V class, and more about the European Formula One races, but no book can cover everything... The book ends with a rather pessimistic chapter about the future of air racing. Let's hope Don is wrong and that somebody can write another similar book in fifty or hundred years' time!

The photos are mainly well chosen and well reproduced, but at a maximum width of 12 cm (5 inches) they are not very big. There are a couple of errors in the captions, particularly in the pre-WW1 section.

Conclusion

This is a very well-written and interesting book which I whole-heartedly recommend to all air racing enthusiasts. It is more accurate and much more complete than previous books that have been written with the same purpose. It is however not of much use as a modelling reference, since there is little technical data and relatively few photos.

Thanks to Don Berliner and the publishers McFarland & Company for the review example!