

Tzaneen

RACE OF CHAMPIONS

Text and photography by Athol Franz

There can be no doubt as to why the Letaba Flying Club based at Tzaneen Airfield has won the African Pilot Trophy for the best airshow of the year, twice in the past. This year due to the staging of the 'Race of Champions' for the second year running, the club decided not to hold an airshow, which means that several other airshow organisers have a chance to win the coveted trophy. However, hosting the Race of Champions event is rather similar in many ways to hosting an airshow, but with more focus on the pilots rather than the spectators.



Parked competitor planes

As has become customary at Tzaneen, the level of hospitality shown to the many visiting pilots, navigators, their families, officials and the media was amazing. The fact that such a small aviation community can deliver such a high standard of professionalism is noteworthy. Congratulations to Eddie Vorster and his committee as well as the team of willing helpers for a truly successful air race. However, the driving force behind the Race of Champions has been Chris Briers, past CEO of Naturelink based at Wonderboom in Pretoria. Chris is a man, not only passionate about his flying, but in his willingness to share his love for aviation with the flying community. Chris is also a man who loves to race, but he forsook this in order to fly the camera team in his Eurocopter EC 130 in order to capture some incredible footage which will be aired on Supersport in the near future.

The overall Champions of the Race were Arddyn Moolman and Ron Stirk from Durban Wings Club flying a 172 ZS CNZ. Second aircraft across the line was a Cessna 402B ZS OAL flown by Tertius Myburgh and navigator Adrian Barry. Third place went to another Cessna 172 ZS MSP piloted by Willie O' Driscoll and navigator Stu Low, also from Durban Wings Club. Fourth was the team of Dave Bruce and Barry Kinnear flying a Cessna 172 ZS JTA. It was interesting to note that the first five positions of this year's race went to Cessna types including four Cessna 172s.

DURBAN WINGS CLUB TAKES THE SILVERWARE

The impressive performance of the Durban Wings Club members is noteworthy. Sporting matching golf shirts the members of the Durban Wings Club were out in force with no less than seven mainly Cessna aircraft

competing in the race. Club members took first, third and fourth places. DWC had issued a challenge to all other clubs in South Africa to participate in the race and beat them because clearly they had a plan.

INCIDENTS AT THE EVENT

Fortunately no one was hurt in the two most serious incidents of the race. The father and son team of Johnny Meyer senior and junior unfortunately experienced an engine failure in the Bonanza in which they were competing. Apparently the engine had recently been overhauled and at low level the catastrophic failure of the engine resulted in a forced landing in inhospitable terrain. The result was substantial damage to the plane, but good airmanship resulted in neither crew member being hurt in the incident. The second incident was completely unnecessary. A Ravin 500 parked on the slope of the adjacent taxiway was not 'chocked' and when the brakes cooled down they 'let go' and the plane rolled down the slope crashing into a Seneca parked on the opposite side. Both planes were seriously damaged and could not be flown in the Saturday race. This was a seriously disappointing situation for the owner of the Seneca because he was lying in fifth position after day one of the race. The importance of chocking the wheels of an aircraft when parked cannot be emphasised enough.

Some other highlights of the weekend were:

- SA CAA's CEO and Commissioner, Colin Jordaan took part in the race flying a Beech Baron together with Chris Erasmus and managed to achieve 19th place overall. When I interviewed Colin, he said he had enjoyed the event and was impressed with the standard of organisation.
- NAC's CEO, Martin Banner flew the race together JP Fourie in a

Filming the take off



1st Place: Arddyn Moolman and Ron Stirk



Diamond single engine diesel powered plane and managed to finish in the twenty-second slot.

- Graeme Conlyn, recently appointed CEO of Air Safety for the African continent, was the official starter. In his own words: "Dancing with propellers".
- Eddie Vorster and the committee of the Letaba Flying Club received a standing ovation for the exceptional commitment they displayed to make this race safe and pleasant for everyone involved.
- Naturelink's Charmaine de Klerk, who looked stunning at the awards dinner, was applauded for the hard work which she and her team had put in, in order to secure accommodation and land travel arrangements. Charmaine was also congratulated for the splendid organisation of this year's event.
- The awards function held in a beautifully decorated hall at the Tzaneen Show Grounds had a Chinese theme that was very different to what was expected. Another innovation provided by the organisers.
- Brian Emmenis and his Capital Sounds team provided the usual high standard of information on the airfield and the race throughout the two days. However, at the awards dinner, Brian provided some great entertainment with lucky draws that had the audience on the edge of its seats with anticipation. In all the years I have known Brian, he has always delivered exceptional standards of fun and entertainment to the aviation community of South Africa.
- The brilliance of the television camera team which projected a snippet of the event at the awards dinner. I was impressed at the quality of the production considering the short time in which they had to 'put' this together.
- Next year's Race of Champions will be held in Ermelo. If the Ermelo flying community is going to 'top' this year's event it will have to start working right away. However, knowing the back-up that will be forthcoming from Naturelink, I am certain that the 2009 Race of Champions will also be a most successful event.

2nd Place: Tertius Myburgh and Adrian Barry



3rd Place: Willie O'Driscoll and Stu Low



JP Fourie and Martin Banner



On a personal level, I would like to express my gratitude to everyone involved in making this year's Race of Champions a certain winner for General Aviation in South Africa.

Thank you to everyone involved, including the man driving the tractor towing a water tanker, every pilot and navigator, their families, the supporters, the generous sponsors and the host flying club, Thank you for keeping General Aviation alive. As Chris Briens commented: "Everyone involved in the success of this event is a champion." 🏆