



Norm DeWitt, UAUSA President

US Unlimited Aerobatic Team

By Michelle Abbott

Snap Roll, 8-sided Loop, Hammerhead, Spins, Rolling Turns. Throughout the world, only a small percentage of pilots can execute these complex aerobatic maneuvers. Even less can execute them in a 1 km cube of airspace, fighting crosswinds and G forces up to +/-10. In June of this year, the elite members of the US Aerobatic Team will be competing against other top aviators in the World Aerobatic Championships in Grenada, Spain and they will be seeking perfection in that magical 1 km cube.

The World Aerobatic Championships were first held in Braislava, Czechoslovakia, in 1960, when the FAI (Fédération Aéronautique Internationale) formed CIVA, or the "Commission Internationale de Voltige Aérienne" to administer aerobatic competitions all over the world. The FAI has nearly 100 member countries and many send teams to the World Aerobatic Championships. Every team member from each country is judged individually, but final standing is determined by comparing the top three male and top three female scores from each country.

The US Aerobatic Team was chosen last September at the IAC-sponsored U.S. Nationals held in Denison, Texas. The unlimited competition requires pilots to fly extremely high-performance aircraft in the most complex and difficult sets of figures of all aerobatic competitions. Competitors must fly four sequences: Known Compulsory, a Freestyle and two unknowns. Their

performances are judged by IAC approved judges who have completed the required education, assisted a grading judge in no less than 40 flights and passed a certification exam. Specific criteria are used for each figure flown. Judges' scores are multiplied by each figure's difficulty factor then the sum of each figure is added together to calculate the final score for each sequence. The top five female and top five male competitors are invited to represent the U.S at the World Championships.

The members of the 2007 team are Debby Rihn Harvey (Texas), Robert Armstrong (Georgia), David Martin (Texas), Michael Racy (Arizona), Zach Heffley (Texas), Dan Clark (Texas), Chandy Clanton (Nebraska), Allyson Parker-Lauck (California), Vicki Cruse (California) and Goody Thomas (South Carolina).

Debby Rihn-Harvey, the 2006 U.S. National Champion, has been a part of the US team 13 times. She's also an eight-time winner of the Betty Skelton trophy awarded to the highest placing woman in the US Nationals powered unlimited category. She's won 14 aerobatic medals, is an airline captain for Southwest Airlines and owns her own flight school/FBO. As a whole, the current US team includes two IAC directors, 1 IAC president, 1 IAC vice-president, four national champions, three commercial pilots, a flight attendant, and two professional musicians. They also hold nearly twenty aerobatics medals between them.

Georgia native, Robert Armstrong, has been a U.S. team member eight times. At previous world championships, he has placed 2nd overall (2001) and 3rd overall (2003). He won a bronze medal in 2000 and a silver medal in 2003. He's also a commercial pilot for AirTran.

Unlike many of the foreign competitors who have government funding, each US team member is responsible for the cost of training to peak performance and transporting their aircraft to and from the World Championships. They must also share expenses for the Team Manager, Team Coach, Team Doctor and Team Mechanic. Total costs can be as high as \$35,000 per team member. To assist team members with these expenses, the IAC has created a non-profit corporation, Unlimited Aerobatics USA, Inc. (UAUSA), which manages sponsorships and handles contributions. In the past, the US Air Force provided transportation for the team and their aircraft in a C-5A. With the current world situation, Air Force transport is unlikely, making private donations and sponsorships even more important.

The US team members are the best of the best, but even they must train. In addition to hours and hours of flying on their own, each team member will work with a world-class coach during several "camps"—intensive 3 or 4 day flying sessions.

Aerobic coaches watch from the ground and instruct pilots with a hand-held radio. They can tell by just by watching a flyer where his or her controls were positioned, where they needed to be and if the timing needs adjusting. According to Norm DeWitt, UAUSA president and aerobic pilot, "Only a handful of people in the world can do this." There will also be a team camp for 7 to 10 days in Spain immediately before the competition begins.

The US team won't be making any group appearances prior to the World Championship, but several individual team members will be flying at Sun 'N Fun and possibly at AirVenture in Wisconsin. Because of their busy schedules, the team won't have an opportunity to practice together before arriving in Spain, but they are very supportive of one another and are all working hard to prepare for competition. DeWitt said, "This (international aerobic competition) is one of the most challenging endeavors I've ever seen. It's a sport where one has to have a passion for this to learn to be the best of the best and to win in competition." ■

To learn more about the U.S. Aerobic Team or to make a donation, visit www.unlimitedaerobaticusa.com or contact your local IAC chapter.



*Front row, left to right: Debby Rihn-Harvey, Vicki Cruse, Melissa Andrzejewski, Allyson Parker-Lauck, Chandy Clanton
Back row, left to right: Dan Clark, David Martin, Goody Thomas, Robert Armstrong, Zach Heffley, Michael Racy*