

“GENTLEMEN, YOU HAD A RACE ... ?”

The end of the Reno Air Races BY JAN TEGLER

It has been almost 59 years since legendary pilot Bob Hoover first uttered the famous words, “Gentlemen, you have a race!”

Hoover’s now iconic phrase was the cue commencing the first-ever air start for Unlimited class racers at the inaugural National Championship Air Races a few miles northeast of Reno, Nevada in 1964. In early March, the Reno Air Racing Association (RARA) announced that 2023 will be the final year that Reno-Stead Airport, the site of the event since 1966, will host the Air Races from September 13-17.

After nearly six storied decades in Reno, far surpassing the longevity of the renowned pre-war/postwar Cleveland Air Races, the National Championship Air Races—the world’s only multi-class air racing event—appear to be a casualty of concerns including “rapid area development, public safety, and the impact on the Reno-Stead Airport and its surrounding areas.”

That’s the official rationale from the Reno Tahoe Airport Authority (RTAA), which runs Reno-Stead Airport, on why it chose not to renew a contract with RARA to hold the event at the airfield.

Speaking to Forbes.com, RARA COO Tony Logoteta told my brother Eric Tegler, “They gave a variety of reasons. From concerns about public safety and area-development around the airport to possible future plans for development on the airfield to concerns about the BLM [Bureau of Land Management] on site. At the end of the day, it was a mix of everything and they decided, ‘Let’s do this on our terms.’”

The decision has sparked controversy, with many speculating that the real reason RTAA cancelled its contract with RARA is a desire for development on and off airport. That development would complete the encroachment on the existing racecourse that has threatened the event for decades.

Since 1966, just 22 pilots/participants have died in competition crashes and airshow accidents at Stead, according to the *Reno Gazette Journal*. Ten spectators perished in 2011 when Jimmy Leeward’s P-51 racer crashed, but in the entire run of the Races at Reno-Stead, there

have been no reported off-airport deaths, or even injuries, as a result of air racing/practice/airshow activities.

That comparatively good safety record is juxtaposed against the presence of current Bureau of Land Management fire-tanker operations at Stead, which see chemical-laden firefighting aircraft fly from the airport over surrounding residential and commercial developments 24/7, year-round, suggesting that public safety concerns are in the eye of the beholder.

Reaction to the announcement has been overwhelming, literally. On March 22, RARA’s Facebook reported that its ticketing servers were overloaded when tickets went on sale for the final event. Tens of thousands of fans as well as aviation luminaries are expected to descend on Reno-Stead in September.

There is a glimmer of hope that this one of a kind event can continue, somewhere. According to Logoteta, RARA has begun a process to identify and potentially sign with a new location. But finding a site with the right combination of an airport amidst undeveloped land yet close enough to a population center is a stiff challenge.

Still, it’s worth the effort. Where else can you see aircraft racing at 500 mph?

“This is a beautiful piece of Americana here,” Logoteta told Forbes, “a unique event that sees more than 150 airplanes in six classes race on a pylon [delineated] course heads-up against each other. People come from all over the world to see it.”

In the early 1980s my father, John Tegler, penned the definitive history of the Reno Air Races to that point. Hoover’s phrase is the title of his book. Let’s hope we’ll hear it beyond 2023. ➔

