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Friends compete as team in air race

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BLUFFTON – Dottie Anderson and Jean Sloan have a friendship unlike most women their age. The majority of their time together is spent in the air, racing airplanes at full-throttle speeds.

Anderson, a resident of Bluffton, and Sloan, of Lima, will be flying a 1979 Piper PA-28 – racing number 15 adorning the side – in the 32 Annual Air Race Classic, all-woman transcontinental air race. It will take place June 24 to 28, and this will be the 25th year the two friends have teamed up to participate.

"I've been flying for over 60 years," Anderson said. "I actually don't remember when I didn't want to fly. When I was a little kid I used to watch the airplanes and I really, really wanted to get up there."

Anderson has been an active flight instructor since 1948, and with over 40,000 hours under her belt, she holds a commercial certificate. She has also served as president of the Air Race Classic, and currently holds a position that enables her to help in the route selection of the race. Anderson is also a recipient of the Wright Brothers Master Pilot Award.

Anderson's life has always revolved around airplanes.

"That woman right there – she could make that airplane talk to you," Virgil Sloan, Jean's husband, said.

Though Anderson's first Air Race Classic was in 1979, it wasn't until 1983 that the two women joined forces.

"I taught Jean's husband, Virgil, how to fly," Anderson said, "and he wanted her to fly, too. He gave her a gift certificate for flying lessons which she looked at for about a year, I think, before she did anything about it."

Sloan said that she was 40 years old when Anderson first taught her to fly; her rationale being that she was too scared to ride along with her husband when he was flying. She decided to conquer her fear by taking the controls.

Sloan has since logged more than 1,000 hours, earning her Private Single Engine Land certificate.

"Once she learned," Anderson said, "she was hooked."

This year Anderson and Sloan will continue the tradition that was started in 1929. That year, 20 female pilots – including Amelia Earhart – made history by flying in a race from Santa Monica, Calif., to Cleveland. The race was officially named the Air Race Classic in 1977, and is currently the only all-woman transcontinental air race in existence. The race takes places during the final days of June each year, and is 2,400 miles in length.

This year, the race will begin in Bozeman, Mont., and finish in Saratoga Springs, N.Y. The four-day race will include pit stops in Miles City, Mont., Aberdeen, S.D., Mason City, Iowa, Decatur, Ill., Frankfort, Ky., Franklin, Pa., and Mansfield, Mass.

Sloan, who will be piloting this year, explained that the race is judged strictly on time. Each airplane is also assigned a specific handicap based upon its size.

"They start our time when we take off at the beginning," Sloan said, "and at our first stop they'll tell us to do a fly-by and they'll stop our time."

According to Anderson, there are 36 entries (each a pair of female pilots) competing this year. Both women are hoping for a top-10 finish.

"Our best was fourth one year," Sloan said. "We've been seventh or eighth quite a few times. Those seem to be our lucky numbers."

Sloan's husband, Virgil, added, "They are flying against CEOs, college teams and everything else. They're just a couple of little ol' farm girls."

Anderson said the top-10 placers are honored with medals after the competition.

"It's like the Olympics; you get a great big medal and ribbon," she said. "So that's why I tell everybody, if you don't look real close, you can't actually tell what place you got."

The main concern this year for the flying duo is the price of fuel for Anderson's plane. Anderson said that gas is well above \$5 a gallon, and averaging 17 gallons an hour, they get roughly 450 miles out of a full tank.

"It's amazing to me that there are still 36 entries considering," Anderson said. "It's definitely going to be more expensive than usual this year; it'll be something we take the rest of the year to recover from."

The pair plans to depart for Bozeman, Mont., on June 19 to participate in pre-race safety meetings and banquets. Both women are looking forward to seeing the other teams.

"One of the girls calls it sky camp," Anderson said. "We're really looking forward to seeing everyone since it only happens once a year."

Both Anderson and Sloan said that traveling across the U.S. is one of the greatest benefits of their shared passion and that flying has proved fulfilling to both women. Neither of the aviators foresees retirement in the near future.

"I'll tell you like I tell everybody else," Anderson said. "As long as I can get in and out of these airplanes, I'm going to keep doing it."

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