

# Balloonists chase the perfect ride over Green County

By [Meg Jones](#) of the Journal Sentinel  
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**Monroe** - Think of it as the airborne equivalent of a free throw shooting contest, with each competitor's feet far above the ground.

And a couple of propane burners overhead.

And a giant multicolored balloon above the flames.

For hot-air balloonists not content to drift lazily over the countryside ogling scenery, the U.S. Open National Championships provide a different kind of challenge. The center of their world Tuesday was Monroe, in Green County.

"I'm a competitive person by nature, and I'm too old to play football," explained Johnny Petrehn, 40, one of eight balloon pilots in his family.

Twenty-two hot air balloons lifted off from farm fields on the outskirts of town for the final day of the national championships in Wisconsin; a second part of the national competition is scheduled next month in Illinois.

Balloonists competed against each other by completing as many as 10 tasks, ranging from dropping beanbags on targets to passing through a specific latitude and longitude at a certain height. Judges retrieved the numbered beanbags, measuring distances the bags landed from the targets, and checked competitors' GPS units charting their entire flight.

The contestants compiled points to earn money, prizes and bragging rights.

"It's called a balloon race sometimes, but it has nothing to do with speed. It's all about navigation. It's best described as a balloon trying to sink a five-mile putt," said event director Maury Petrehn, who is Johnny's brother.

Hitting all the coordinates is tricky. There's no rudder or joy stick.

Instead, pilots can only ascend or descend by heating the balloon or allowing it to cool. Wind direction often changes with altitude, so depending on where they want to go, a pilot may ascend to a certain height to go one direction or descend to a different height to go another direction.

Johnny Petrehn flies with a laptop, two GPS units, balloon instruments that record interior temperatures, an

altimeter and a variometer, which measures the speed his balloon is going up or down. He also carries Gatorade to stay hydrated (though not too hydrated, since there are no toilets in hot air balloons), plus a can of shaving cream he occasionally squirts to check speed and direction of the wind below his basket.

## **Best place to launch**

Competitors gathered at 5 a.m. Tuesday to receive the list of 10 tasks, which they marked on large topographical maps and plugged into their laptops and GPS units. One of the tasks was dropping a beanbag on an island in the middle of a pond; another task was to drop three bags at different targets within a 10-acre area.

In caravans of pickup trucks, they set off through the rolling farm fields of Green County pulling small wagons with wicker baskets, large fans, propane tanks and burners, and balloons carefully folded like parachutes inside canvas bags. They stopped to check wind speed and direction by releasing toy balloons and figured the best place to launch.

Standing next to a cornfield as the sun came up, map spread on the hood of a van with Illinois license plates "I Chase 4," Dan Reusch of Peoria, Ill., said figuring out where to launch is critical in this kind of balloon competition.

"We're just looking at the winds and trying to figure out the flight path," said Reusch, a second generation balloon pilot.

Balloonists typically fly at dusk and dawn, when winds are low. For safety reasons, they don't take off if winds are in excess of 10 mph.

## **Windy off the ground**

Tuesday morning proved to be much windier aloft than on the ground. As balloons lifted off one by one, they quickly ascended until they looked like children's balloons released at a birthday party.

While the 10 tasks were demanding, the wind proved to be the biggest challenge for competitors, said Kinnie Gibson of Dallas, Texas. Though winds were only 9 mph at terra firma, they picked up to more than 30 mph as the balloonists soared over dairy farms and hay fields.

"Today was extremely exciting, because this is the first event I've had hitting nine (out of 10) targets. The wind was blowing fast and we were throwing out baggies, and then it was only a few minutes before we got to the next target," said Gibson, a movie stuntman.

Gibson has been a balloon pilot for 34 years, has more than 2,500 sky dives under his belt and looks vaguely like Chuck Norris - a fact that proved lucrative since he ended up working as Norris' stunt double on "Walker, Texas Ranger." It's no wonder thrill-seeking balloonists such as Gibson traveled to Wisconsin this week to compete against each other.

"What's exciting about this is you have to plan ahead - you're using computers and your crew," said Gibson.

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## IF YOU GO

Though the **U.S. Open National Balloon Championships** in Monroe ended Tuesday, the 27th annual **Father's Day weekend Monroe balloon rally** is scheduled Thursday through Sunday. [Click here](#) for more information.

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