



Hayward Air Rally rewards pilots' logistical skills

By Eric Kurhi
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HAYWARD — A plane leaves Hayward Executive Airport with the destination of Bend, Ore., which is 500 miles away. How long will the trip take, and how much fuel will be used, traveling at 160 mph and 18 miles per gallon?

That's 3.125 hours and 27.7 gallons of gas, right?

Not so fast. There are variables involved. Head winds. Tail winds. Crosswinds. A midpoint stop in Redding. The effect of altitude on the fuel mixture. And checkpoints that must be flown over at a close enough distance to make out topographical details. And yes, you will be tested on that.

Sound a little more difficult now?

That's the whole point of the Hayward Air Rally, an annual competition that pits pilots against each other in terms of how well they can plan a course, predicting flight time to the second and fuel consumption to the tenth of a gallon. The rally is now in its 45th year.

"It's all about planning your flight and flying that plan," said Tom Neale, a rally organizer. "Winners are often within two-tenths of a gallon and single-digit seconds."

Nearly 30 teams of pilots — including some from the East Bay, South Bay and Sacramento — flew out of Hayward on Friday morning, after waiting for

Altamont clouds to clear enough to permit safe passage. While there is a "digital class" that allows Global Positioning Systems and other modern tools of convenience, most of the pilots fly by what they call "dead reckoning" — using a map, compass, airspeed indicator, clock and eyeballs.

"You've been going this fast for so many minutes in this direction — according to the map, you should be seeing this," Neale said. "It's a chance to use your skills as a pilot, as opposed to being a button-pusher and a typist."

Going into the event, all they knew was that they'd fly from Hayward to Redding, then Redding to Bend. In a briefing room at the airport late Thursday afternoon, they were given a list of checkpoints that must be visited between the airstrips, and teams hunkered over maps, charting courses that would take them between mountain peaks while keeping as close as possible to the minimum straight-line distance — extra miles means extra room for error.

Those checkpoints can be a swimming pool behind a grove of trees, the shape of an office park or details of an airstrip, and pilots take a multiple-choice quiz with them to fill out as they spot the landmarks.

One thing the landmarks can't be is visible on Google Maps.

"Last year, you could find nearly all of them on Google," Neale said. "This year, we made sure that the landmarks are new enough so that they're not there (on Google)."

Winners will be announced today at a dinner gala in Bend, with trophies for top contenders and a \$500 prize for first place.

For more information about the air rally, visit

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