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PRESS SUMMARY – Human Interest, Competition.

Monday, July 29, 2002 Sailplane competitions are dramatic events but most of the action takes place high above in the sky. Take off and landing is the best time to watch the action. In this article the contest pilots at the National Soaring Championships in Lubbock, Texas are ready to go.

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Pilots from across nation, Canada arrive for soaring competition

BY JANE ALDRED
AVALANCHE-JOURNAL

Flying sailplanes is a hobby, sport, art form and something Fernando Silva said he has enjoyed doing for more than 20 years.

The management consult from Atlanta, Ga., is visiting Lubbock's Reese Technology Center to compete with about 80 other pilots from across the nation and Canada.

The Sports Class & 18 Meter Nation Competition organized by the National Soaring Foundation will decide who will compete for the United States at the world championship in Poland, Silva said.

"We travel as much as 300 miles per day, and the flights can take three hours," Silva said.

"We'll race every day for 10 days. The first race is Tuesday."

During the race, pilots will take flight between noon to 2 p.m. and return between 4:30 and 7 p.m.

When the signal is given, they set out for their destination, he said.

"The planes can travel anywhere from 60 to 90 miles per hour," Silva said. "Whoever has the fastest speed around the course wins."

The pilot who wins that day earns 1,000 points. Depending on how their time score compares to the leader's time, runners up can earn from one to 999 points, he said.

"Whoever collects the most points at the end of the competition wins," Silva said.

Charlie Spratt, competition director from Charlotte, N.C., said he will decide every morning where the pilots will go during their large circling flight.

"We can't send them out into bad weather," he said. "They have places they have to go. (It) could be as far as Hobbs, New Mexico."

Sunday's practice run was postponed because skies were overcast, he said.

The engineless planes, which cost about \$80,000, are constructed of carbon fiber, a substance lighter and three times stronger than steel, Silva said.

The small cockpit houses a seat and instrument panels, which include a Global Positioning System for directional and safety purposes, he said.

The planes are connected to a tow plane, which takes off, pulling the sailplane into flight with a cable. When the plane is at the right altitude, usually about 2,000 feet, and the pilot is ready, the cable is released and the sailplane glides free, Silva said.

Sailplane pilots must find thermals to give their plane lift and speed, or they will be forced to land, he said.

"We can ride those thermals as high as the clouds," Silva said. "You have to really think hard, and finding them can be challenging."

Thermals are rising air that is generated when the ground is heated. It is one method birds use to fly long distances, Silva said.

"We're making the same decisions the birds are and looking for the thermals," he said. "We often are flying with the birds."

Mike Smith, a pilot for United Airlines in Pennsylvania, said he discovered his love for flying after taking a flight when he was 14 years old — 28 years ago.

"I started flying sailplanes when I was 15 years old," he said.

Those experiences led to a career in commercial piloting, he said.

He said most sailplane pilots usually have more harrowing stories about dealing with people on the ground than scares in midair.

If a pilot cannot find thermals consistently throughout the race, the plane will be forced to land on any flat surface the pilot can find — often a farm field or in the middle of nowhere, Smith said.

"I knew a guy who had to land in a farmer's field and the farmer wasn't about to let him take back the plane," he said. "He had to call the police to sort it out."

Admission to the competition is free for the viewing public.

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