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TALK  
AERO GP

# A NEW ERA IN SPORT

## JEFF ZALTMAN ON THE AERO GP RACE SERIES



BY JEFF ZALTMAN

→ In the last issue of Lusso, the editors drew your attention to a new motorsport series called Aero GP. In doing so, they did in fact more than introduce a new series, they insightfully dug their pickaxe into a vein of gold and discovered a new era in sporting history.

The sports industry is booming like never before, yet only two thirds of the world's possible sports venues – land and water – have been utilised by the media, leaving the world's biggest pitch – the sky – virgin territory in an otherwise saturated market. Recognising this, I set out on a mission, a number of years ago, to change all that and to bring air sports into the mainstream of the sporting world. Enter Aero GP.

Aero GP is a new motorsports series which brings together the best pilots in the world to compete in the ultimate test of man and machine. Each Grand Prix consists of three disciplines; an air race with up to 8 airplanes racing together around a tight circuit just metres above the ground, a freestyle stunt manoeuvre combined with a target bombing challenge, followed by competitive dogfights – real air combat.

The whole format of Aero GP is designed to appeal to the broadest possible audience demographic. My vision is to make air sports accessible to everyone and to raise it from its grass roots into a mighty oak that climbs as high as the very aircraft we fly! Ok, that sounds a bit grandiose, but all indications seem to evidence that nothing short of a revolution in sport is taking off. This was underscored just this

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month when the Motorsport Industry Association (MIA) announced to its members – many of whom represent the old “establishment” – that it was taking any reference to “four-wheeled” out of its Memorandum of Association. (Now, a purist shouting holy blasphemy might suggest that this is intended to include motorcycles, but then they would have just taken out the word “four”. In any case, it's clearly a thinly-veiled allusion to three-wheeled aircraft.)

### Reaching Terminal Velocity

There are a number of influential stakeholders in the air sports industry alongside Aero GP that are driving forward this new era. The FAI (Fédération Aéronautique Internationale), for instance, is the most influential and respected name in aviation. The FAI is the 101-year-old world federation of all air sports, and is on the vanguard of this change. They are successfully managing an evolution that would threaten the existence of most other sports governing bodies, by looking ahead at how its constituent sports will need to adapt to the changing industry landscape to maximise its media coverage in this

content-is-king IPTV Web 2.0 new media environment – all while maintaining the authenticity and competitive sporting qualities of its time-honoured events. (Look out for the FAI World Air Games in 2009!)

Technology is also playing its part. Only over the past few years have broadcast equipment and techniques really been up to the challenge of filming aviation, with its 3-dimensional dynamism and massive G-forces to tackle. Furthermore, aircraft manufacturers are pushing the envelope of technology like never before. Manufacturers like Extra Aircraft, founded by Walter Extra and maker of one of the most sought-after sports aircraft, the Extra-300, are busy researching new designs that can compete at new levels. In fact, rumour has it that Extra is busy labouring away on a new design of sport plane deep in its secret skunk works in Germany.

Now, I don't pretend to be the father of modern air racing – at least not until DNA tests come back – but since I've been promoting the Aero GP, there has been a new awakening in the air sports world. A few years ago another high profile air competition was launched by the drinks company Red Bull (whose presence in sports sponsorship boasts a level of

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world domination that would make Dr. Evil writhe with envy). The event is called, not-surprisingly, the Red Bull Air Race, and has quickly earned its place in the not-to-miss events calendar. For those unfamiliar with the Red Bull Air Race (and you won't be for long), it's a slick aerobatics competition timed against the clock. A lot of speed and a lot of Gs.

In the wake of Red Bull there have been a number of new air sports competitions based upon similar aerobatics formats – all of which are vying for the top spot in that segment of air sport. Aero GP, however, is the only (motorised) international air racing series in the world with more than one airplane racing together. It's a dramatic and adrenaline filled contest that tests the nerve and skill of the most skillful pilots on the planet.

It's little surprise that no other sports series in the world does what Aero GP does. Of course, it's fair to say that I might be, ooh, just a smidge biased, but I defy anyone to watch the Aero GP live or on TV and still be able to look upon a Formula One driver with the same awe as before. (I say this with all due respect to our welcoming “four-wheeled” friends at the MIA!)

### Experience it!

Proper air racing, also known as “pylon racing”, like Aero GP, can trace its roots back to a nostalgic time of heroes and adventurers, when, in air racing's heyday early last century, competitions like the Cleveland Air Race, the Schneider Trophy and the Reno Races (the latter two still carried on today) were the biggest spectator draws in the sports world. This is not too dissimilar today with Air Shows being the largest spectator-drawing events each year, after only football. But now there's a competitive element coming back in and new sportsmen heroes are being born to follow in the footsteps of those early pioneers.

So, what does all this mean for the Lusso reader? Luckily, a lot. Lusso's readers want to get the most out of life and enjoy its finer points. Live life to the hilt. That spirit permeates aviation. So, as you peruse the pages of Lusso and speculate on your next luxury acquisition or dream experience to enjoy, you might just consider looking upwards.

And for those with a penchant for entrepreneurship, buying in on an actual Aero GP team franchise could add the crown jewel to your portfolio. In 2008, Aero GP will be setting up 8 professional air racing teams – fully equipped with a qualified world-class pilot, high-performance airplane and all financial rights to sponsorship branding and hospitality, not to mention complete decision-making authority in the pit lane!

But if owning and managing a sports franchise is not your bag, you should still keep watching this space because we will be offering Lusso readers special access to Aero GP events in 2007 and 2008. Plans will be announced soon... ←

RIGHT: Another pilot readies himself for a high-octane, high-adrenaline round of the Malta Aero GP. MIDDLE: Author and series organiser Jeff Zaltman and Bruce Dickinson (Iron Maiden front-man and flying enthusiast). BOTTOM: 2 planes go head to head over the water in the most action packed air race in the world.

