



The 1st FAI Junior

The first FAI Junior World Hot Air Balloon Championship is now in the books. It was held in Lithuania the end of May. Lithuania?, I hear you say. Yes! This relatively small country is located in an area called the Baltic States, which consists of three countries. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Only around twenty years ago this area was still part of the Soviet Union but now the Balts are happily independent.

Lithuania is the most southern Baltic State surrounded by Russia, Belarus, Poland and Latvia. In the Netherlands we are used to say that our country is as flat as a ten cent piece. Well, that applies for the championship's host country as well. The only difference is that there is still plenty of space in Lithuania. It is not as crowded like my home sweet home.

The event took place in Marijampole, Lithuania's seventh biggest city. Its 47.000 inhabitants mainly live in Soviet style concrete apartment blocks. Quite unattractive at the first sight but actually very cozy to take off in between. It must be great to be a child there. There are always some buddies around

and the playgrounds are simple but very child fantasy friendly.

Outside Marijampole most 'villages' named on the map consist of one decent farm. We felt like flying back in time. Old ladies were milking their cows by hand, having their bicycle with attached milk cans parked next to them. What a lovely sight.

The Baltic States are very popular with storks. I somehow have a strange fascination for these animals, and no, I don't have a secret desire of having a baby. Imagine a field with 25 storks desperately looking for a juicy frog. Isn't that just impressive? When talking about fields I must say there are plenty of them. Landing spots in abundance. A disadvantage is that there aren't too many roads to declare your goals on.

So, let me introduce you to our team. I joined one of the two Swedish teams under command of 22 year old pilot Simon Josefsson. I was his co-pilot, aged 22 as well. We were accompanied by three crew members. Jonas, a.k.a. 'Mr. Musclemen'. He looks like a true Viking and got many scared glances from the locals. He is however



Worlds



Story and Photos by Nienke Bos

one of the most sensitive persons I know. Lars is Simon's dad. He's a fanatic chewing tobacco user, just like a lot of other Swedes. Lennart is better known as 'Bullen'. This word is Swedish for buns. When he was a child he was crazy about these things and therefore he has been proudly using it as his nickname for over 50 years already now. The last days of the championship Simon's girlfriend Tove and instructor Bengt joined us. Together we formed a solid team, ready to rock this championship.

This is how it all started.

Simon's team took the ferry from Sweden to Latvia. I picked them up in Latvia's beautiful capital of Riga where I have been living for the last few years. I had one day to show them around in my favorite city before we started our four and a half hour trip to Marijampole. The first official competition flight would take place on Wednesday

We arrived in Marijampole Monday and therefore we had enough time to make some practice flights and to discover the environment. It was quite windy and extremely hot. Nevertheless we managed to make a beautiful test

flight Monday evening. Within no time we passed the Soviet buildings heading towards Lithuania's countryside. My 60th flight, yeah! The feeling of freedom was however still the same as during my first flight at the age of eleven. It stays special, every single time, but I of course don't have to explain that to you all. The landing was a sportive one. Some of the pixels of our board computer unfortunately didn't survive. A lesson for the next landing: close the laptop and store it at a place where it can't move around too much.

Even though we landed in the middle of nowhere we were welcomed by a friendly, curious Lithuanian family. Especially the children eventually left satisfied, pampered with Swedish sweets and balloon pins. American pilot Andy Richardson happened to be nearby and gave us a helping hand packing our Cameron Racer.

Thursday we checked in at the competition center and walked around through Marijampole's city center. Even though most of the houses could use some renovation, all the churches were in a perfect state. The weather allowed

us to make a second test flight. We planned to take off not far from our hotel and we were not the only ones. The balloon laying next to us was a brand new Ultra Magic depicting Marijampole's coat of arms. Catholic as Lithuania is, the balloon was baptized by a priest before it was allowed to take off for its first flight. The basket was sprinkled with holy water and everywhere around me I saw non-Lithuanian eyebrows frown. Well, that was for sure an interesting happening.

Andy took off at the same field, as well as charming Ukrainian pilot Ksenia Belorusova. Good to see that there are also some female pilots competing! Simon and I had a calm flight and practiced setting some tasks.

Before the real competition flights could take place we first had to attend the general briefing. Two full hours were scheduled for this so we prepared for a long sit. The officials went through the rules and most of the topics just didn't need further explanation. Or were the young pilots just too shy to ask? Surprisingly after half an hour we were finished with the briefing. Now we had to prepare for the



official opening ceremony which would take place at the Basanavicius square right next to our hotel. The square is marked by a huge monument with a statue of a man riding a horse on top of it. I can pretty well imagine that a huge Lenin stood here during Soviet times.

After the official welcoming speeches from the mayor of Marijampole, and the championships devoted officials, the flags of Lithuania, the FAI and the championship were raised. There was even a band playing the anthems and cheerleaders hopping around with their fluffy pom-poms. It's absolutely wonderful, this sentiment of unity during such a ceremony. It's pleasant to see happy people being proud of the countries they come from. Since I'm actually from the Netherlands but joining the Swedish delegation I called myself a 'fake Swede', but a very happy one.

As expected the first official competition flight was cancelled because of the wind. Such a pity. We've been waiting on the launch field for quite a while. The storks seemed confused about the fact their nice field was suddenly occupied by balloon trailers. End of story: black flag.

Thursday morning's flight was also canceled because of the bad forecast. It's for sure not the best start of a championship you can imagine. Even though there was no flight we were expected at the competition center Thursday morning at 08.00 am. The briefing which was held was not so much about the weather and the opportunity to fly, but about safety this time. Some teams were complaining about the Lithuanian propane. One of the Austrian teams even found little metal pieces in it after filtering. Also the loss of power was mentioned. We were all asked to do a burner test but didn't find any problems with our own material. The Schroeder burners seemed more sensitive to it though. The officials offered to use nitrogen in order to pressurize the tanks a bit more. This helped but was of course not too satisfying after the discovery of the metal pieces.

Later on that day the wind only seemed to increase. Some people were putting up tents and installing beer taps at the main square because of the Marijampole city days which would take place during the weekend. The beer fridges were rolling away because of the wind and also some of the tents took off and landed some meters away. Windy!

A HWZ and FON were scheduled for Thursday's evening flight. We all gathered at a sport field in between some Soviet blocks. We've been waiting a long time for the wind to drop down but luckily we had a lot of locals to communicate with so it was not so bad. Especially the children were very curious about our strange languages. But, surprise surprise, eventually the black flag was raised, again.

Are you tired already of all the canceled flights? Good, because Friday morning we could finally make our first competition flight! With a full task sheet consisting of five tasks we took off at a field a little bit outside of Marijampole together with a Danish, Swedish and Ukrainian team. The tasks were the following: FIN, HWZ, PDG, LRN and FON. The start wasn't that wonderful but Simon did well in the other tasks. We saw many storks and a lot of happy Lithuanians fanatically waiving at us with their out-of-bed looks. We enjoyed the sight of old granny's fanatically milking their cows. The hilly landscape came as a surprise too. Beautiful! Back at the competition center the debriefer told us our LRN was the best he had seen so far. Nice!

During the championship Flytec loggers were used to fulfill most of the tasks. There were no observers like during the good old times. As a co-pilot I was in charge of our little blue device. Declaring goals and even throwing markers could be done with it. Sometimes it was also up to the pilot to decide whether or not to use the logger. When approaching a goal in a perfect way there was also still the possibility to throw a marker instead of simply pushing some buttons to throw an imaginary marker.



In my opinion this logger usage takes away a bit of the true ballooning feeling. The same counts for the usage of laptops on board with complicated software doing most of the thinking and measuring. However, this was our first championship using a laptop as well and to be honest it was actually extremely useful.

Also Friday evening we had an exciting time flying above Lithuania again. The tasks during the second competition flight were the following: FIN, WSD and ANG. It was quite a struggle to find a suitable launch field because of the variable winds. The flight itself was eventually fine, even though we didn't manage an outstanding score. We did however make the fastest descent in my 'balloon career'. My goodness, that went fast, and we were turning around like crazy! When wanting to make a little video clip about a small part of the city I ended up making a 360° panorama within 12 seconds. Br! That continued for a while. The landing was a sportive one since the wind was still pretty strong, just like earlier this week. Both of my knees turned from snow white to blue. Ouch!

We usually went to some restaurants for our lunch and dinner. Lithuania is extremely wallet friendly. A proper meal and half a liter of good local beer cost as much as a starter alone in western Europe. No worries, no drunk flying! We were surprised to find a true 'Ultra Magic bar' in such a small city like Marijampole. The interior was truly amazing. The backside of the benches were like baskets and on the side of the bar there were two swinging chairs looking like well invented hopper seats. The walls were filled with diverse balloon pictures. Yeah, this is for sure a place where balloonists feel at home. No matter which country you come from. The food was pretty much like in any other restaurant, however, they did have some exceptionally good garlic bread. It was worth the teasing of the American team about my breath afterwards. I would only recommend eating this typical local delight if you know beforehand

you won't be near another person the next few days.

The third completion flight happened to be the last one. The flight of Saturday morning consisted of five tasks. A JDG, HWZ, 'Pilot declared race to an area', ELB and FON. The start was horrible. No result for the JDG. Simon was quite disappointed about this but luckily we were heading the right way for the HWZ. I told Simon that if he did not score outstanding on this task I would (can I just write this openly?) kick his a**. That threat worked. 1000 points on the HWZ! I made a small movie clip about it and every time I watch it back I get goose bumps again. What a wonderful moment. Also the further tasks went quite well. Would it be good enough for a top 10 place?

Saturday evening, the championship is over... The last flight was cancelled because of the wind and rain. Since we didn't agree with one of our results we went to some officials to ask for further explanation. Our result was eventually changed, positively.

Finally the results were available on the official notice board. One of the French teams started to cheer and shout. The champions? We were tied for 8th. At least, that's what we thought. These results were not the official ones yet. During a nice dinner at the hotel with both of the Swedish teams and the friendly Ukrainian team by my side I was told that the true winner of the competition is Rokas Kostiuskevicius, one of the Lithuanian pilots. At the last moment the French team, who actually thought they won, got a penalty of 500 points because of distance infringement during the Elbow, task 12. So, instead of a Frenchman, a young citizen of Marijampole won the championship. The official results furthermore stated that we were now definitely number 8. We eventually were scored higher than the Austrian team who had been tied with us. Whoohoo, 8th!!! You can imagine it was time for a good beer after that news.

Sunday around 11.00 am the

prize giving ceremony started at the town hall. There were four women playing classical music. On the one hand this was very beautiful and emotional but on the other hand I didn't really feel like being at a happy gathering. It was a nice and positive get-together though! The music was just a bit like attending a funeral... The officials held their speeches and all top 10 pilots were invited to appear on the stage. The three winners were proclaimed:

1. Rokas Kostiuskevicius (Lithuania)
2. Thomas Merceron (France)
3. Pascal Kreins (Germany)

Congratulations to them all!

After the closing ceremony we were invited to the banquet. What an abundance of food, it looked wonderful!

I had a traditional 'cepelinai' (zeppelin), a potato with meat inside shaped like a zeppelin. A photo exhibition of the championship was located in this same venue as the banquet. From concentrated faces to balloons with only half of the hot air still inside because of a fast descent; every facet of the championship was covered.

It was great to get in touch with some more ballooning people during the banquet. I made a small chat with part of the Japanese team for example. They gave me a sweet little gift from Saga. This made me think about the wonderful stories of my dad, balloon photographer Bennie Bos, when he visited Japan during the world championship ballooning in 1997. I definitely recognized the happiness and friendliness he told me about. I eventually gave the

Japanese some typical Swedish candy called 'polka pigs'. Happy faces are priceless.

The week flew by, just like the clouds during most of the days. We had a wonderful time with a lot of motivated young pilots the older generation definitely can rely on. I think there was no better way to get to know Lithuania and its inhabitants. I would be glad to see all the youngsters back during the second FAI's youth world championship hot air ballooning which will hopefully be held in 2014. The maximum age of participating is 26, so both Simon and I still have some years to join. This was just the beginning. Our team is ready for many more ballooning adventures all over the world!



Task Designations:

FON - fly on
HWZ - Hesitation Walts
LRN - Land Run
FIN - Fly in
PDG - Pilot Declared Goal
WSD - Watership Down
ANG - Angle
JDG - Judge Declared Goal
ELB - Elbow

For a detailed description of each of these tasks, log on to www.bfa.net. Go to the competition section and use the link to the 2012 US Nationals Rules. See Chapter 15 of that PDF document.

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