

Life At The 1949 National Air Races with the Christensen Goodyear Midget “Zipper”

by Warren Eberspacher, AAHS



The Christensen “Zipper” Goodyear Racer at the National Air Races in 1949. (Photo from author’s collection)

I had the good fortune as an aeronautical engineering student to attend the 1949 National Air Races at Cleveland. A fellow aero student knew Harvey Christensen who was taking a midget racer to the races and we, plus a 3rd mechanical engineering student friend, went along as “ground crew” so we could have free and full access to the race and all the “inside” events before, during, and after the race. For an aero engineering student, this was like “dying and going to heaven.”

Christensen designed and built *Zipper*. He was impressed with Steve Wittman’s *Buster* and *Bonzo* midgets and patterned his aircraft after them. It was well designed and well built. It had a steel tube fuselage shaped out with bulkheads and was fabric covered, as was the tail assembly. The wing had two wood spars, wood ribs, a plywood leading edge, and was fabric covered. The ailerons were fabric covered steel tube assemblies. The landing gear was a Cessna-type spring steel assembly. It was powered by a stock Continental C-85 engine to fit the 190 cu. in. midget rules and had a polished fixed blade metal prop with the backsides painted flat black.

Zipper was licensed N5713N, had racing number 59, and was painted all yellow. A local Minneapolis drive-in, Rich-O Root Beer, was a sponsor with their logo painted on both sides of the fuselage.

After Christensen arrived and we got settled into our hangar space, we looked around to see what the midget “pros” were doing. We got some wide masking tape and taped all non-functional openings to minimize parasite drag. We cleaned *Zipper* and polished it to a high gloss.

As Christensen was inspecting the engine and tuning it up, a representative from B&G Sparkplug stopped by to look

Zipper over. He offered Christensen a set of hotter platinum point plugs if he would carry the B&G decal. Christensen readily agreed, installed the plugs, and ran the engine to check the replacement. When he went to replace the cowling, it wouldn’t fit because the platinum point plugs were longer than the plugs he had previously used. Not one to be daunted by a mere problem, Christensen got out his ballpeen hammer and a piece of 2x4 and proceeded to raise blisters in the cowling to provide clearance for the new plugs. After this “field modification,” the cowl fit fine.

In our reconnaissance mission around the “racing stable,” we noted that most midget pilots put 10 pieces of masking tape on their panels numbered 1-10 to help keep track of the laps. This was a good and simple idea, so we fixed up *Zipper* with the same setup. When Christensen saw them, he asked what they were for. After we told him what other midget pilots were doing, he said he didn’t need them and took the numbered tapes off his panel.

Christensen qualified nicely at 156.425 mph, so much so that Steve Wittman came over, inspected *Zipper*, and asked a lot of questions. We three students considered this to be an honor because Wittman’s long-time racing success was well known to us.

The big day had arrived for the Goodyear race. We put *Zipper* in the lineup, helped Christensen run her up and check out, held her down so he could try different power settings, etc. We were as ready as we would ever be.

The flag went down and all planes headed for the low inside position at the first pylon. Christensen started doing very well from the start, even though it was his first major race. As the

race went on, Christensen had 3rd place secured by at least half a lap and was trying to catch up to No. 2. Bill Brennand flying Wittman's midget *Buster* was even further ahead of the field.

As Christensen came by the stands in his 9th lap in 3rd place, Brennand had lapped the field and was right behind Christensen in his 10th lap. When Brennand got the checkered flag telling him he had finished his 10th lap, Christensen saw the same flag and mistook it that he was getting the checkered flag for his 10th lap. He obviously had not been counting. So, Christensen slow rolled out of the race in 3rd place in his 9th lap and lost \$2200. He didn't bother or think about flying an extra lap like the others to make sure.

Christensen was elated when he taxied in. He thought he had won 3rd place. When he saw our disappointed faces, he asked what was wrong. His jaw dropped when we told him that he had pulled out in his 9th lap because it was Brennand who had gotten the checkered flag for his 10th. Bill Brennand won the race in Wittman's *Buster* at 177.340 mph.

Upon return to the hangar, we got a piece of masking tape, put a number 10 on it, and stuck it on the panel. Christensen didn't appreciate our "humor."

Regardless, we three had a great time and learned a lot. When the other aero and I started our junior year, we designed a pusher canard midget racer with tricycle gear. I built a wind tunnel model and we ran tunnel tests on it. It showed great promise but was never built, not on student income.

Jack Becker's P-38

Jack Becker arrived later than other entrants in his P-38. As he went out to fly his qualifying runs, we had *Zipper* out on the field doing engine checks. Becker took off and made a couple of laps along with other aircraft.

Somewhere along the way his left wheel well caught on fire and he declared an emergency. He made his approach towards the stands trailing smoke. As he let down for landing you could sense that he was feeling for the ground, but neither the gear

nor the flaps had come down. In this condition, he was running out of field fast and heading for the vacant spectator stands where he would crash if a change wasn't made.

The Navy had the *Blue Angels* aircraft lined up along a taxiway (see layout). They had just refueled. Their R4D (Navy DC-3) had just pulled out of the lineup and was taxiing down the taxiway.

Becker saw through the gap, did a sharp right turn with the wings almost vertical and the low tip about 10 feet off the ground. He flew through the gap with the wings almost vertical, rolled it level as soon as he was clear, and hit the ground about 700 feet beyond the parked aircraft. Becker was out of the cockpit and running off the right wingtip before the P-38 even came to a stop. The crash left one prop and gear behind in the process.

That was some of the most phenomenal flying I had ever witnessed, even better than stunt pilots at an airshow. Being an experienced private pilot, I knew what it took to hold that dying P-38 in its wings vertical attitude as I had tried that maneuver at far greater altitude myself. My hat was off to Becker. He prevented a lot of damage that might have stopped the races.

Women's T-6 Revolution

A women's race for advanced trainers was a scheduled event. All those who had shown up by the time we arrived were flying some variant of the T-6 (i.e., AT-6 or SNJ).

Shortly after we arrived another woman arrived in a Navy Curtiss SNC advanced trainer. By visual comparison with a T-6, it looked smaller, lighter, cleaner, and faster. I observed the obvious concern and agitation amongst the T-6 pilots from the sidelines.

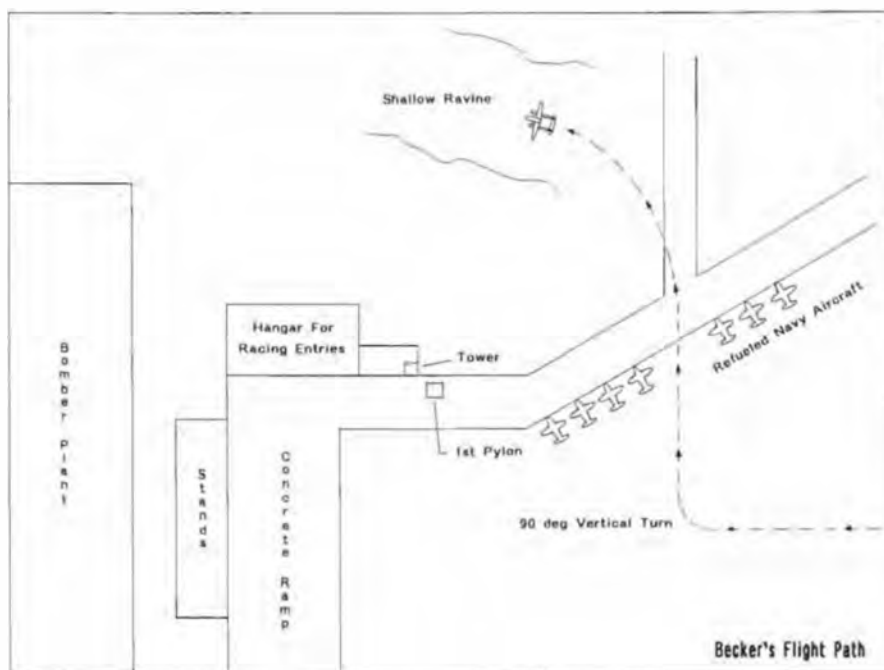
There was apparently genuine concern about the likelihood of the SNC being the fastest advanced trainer, meaning one of them would be second best. There followed a rather animated discussion amongst those whom I concluded were the T-6



Jack Becker's Lockheed P-38 in the ditch after an in-flight fire and some great piloting. (Photo from author's collection)



A close look at the remains of Becker's P-38. (Photo from author's collection)



A diagram of the flight path of Becker's P-38 (From author's collection)

“leaders.”

A small group of T-6 “representatives” approached the air race officials and race sponsor and laid down an ultimatum: either they withdrew or disqualified the SNC as an entrant or all the other T-6 pilots would back out of the race. Despite the fact that the race had been open to all advanced trainers, the race officials and race sponsor relented and it became solely a

T-6 race flown by women. So much for the published entrant conditions.

I personally would have liked to see the SNC compete to see what it could do. The “concerned” women forgot that a race is more than horsepower and piloting skill also plays a part in the outcome. □