

Balloon Race Has Its Ups and Downs

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PALM SPRINGS — The U.S. balloon Benihana shot into space in the most spectacular liftoff of the Gordon Bennett International Cup race Saturday, the only problem being that no one was aboard.

Crew members George Hahn and Milt Clark were hanging from ropes over the gondola, trying to keep the helium craft on the ground, but they dropped off as it rose.

Then, like a horse without a jockey, the stubborn white balloon took off on a race of its own, landing about two hours later.



“It’s in Fortynine Palms,” radioed an excited ham operator, overstating the destination by exactly 20 palms.

Hahn, momentarily stunned after he fell, was taken to a hospital for observation and then released.

Brief as it was, Hahn’s ride was longer than that of the jinxed French pilot Thierry Villey.

In last year’s Gordon Bennett, Villey needed a last-minute loan from a Robinson’s department store in Palm Springs to come up with the \$5,000 entry fee. This time, he couldn’t find a balloon to bring, and Robinson’s didn’t have any handy, so he sat out the race.

Seven other teams ascended without incident in their six-story-tall crafts Saturday morning before a crowd of about 5,000 in Ruth Hardy Park.

This was the 33rd Gordon Bennett, named for the New York newspaper publisher who founded the race in 1906. The winner is the (manned) balloon that travels the farthest, measured in a straight line from liftoff to plop-down.

The favorite was the yellow and red Rosie O’Grady, piloted by Joe Kittinger and Bob Snow, which triumphed last year by floating 1,002 miles to Hobart, Okla.

Other entrants this year included Assemblyman David G. Kelley (R-Hemet) in the red, blue and yellow City of St. Louis (Hemet doesn’t have its own balloon) and Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist Paul Conrad, a crew member in the blue and yellow Los Angeles Times entry.

The first manned balloons to come down Saturday were the U.S. entries Excelsior, which landed near Desert Hot Springs, and the Universal, which came down near Twentynine Palms, both after three-hour jaunts.

Meanwhile, back on the ground, Ron Clark, the third member of the Benihana crew, was still trying to figure out how his balloon got away.

The immediate cause was the breaking of one of the craft’s high binders, ropes attached to sandbags that hold the balloon down as it is being prepared for launch.

“One rope snapped and then all the others did,” Clark said. “We had 600 pounds of ballast aboard, but I guess that wasn’t enough (to hold it down).” Race organizer Tom Heinsheimer, who heads the South Coast Air Quality Management District, pointed out that the warm morning air, which caused the helium inside the balloon to expand, was also a factor. Some of the helium had to be vented to keep the balloon from exploding.

Heinsheimer speculated that the Benihana’s troubles stemmed in part from the absence of the craft’s pilot, Ben Abruzzo, who was killed in a private plane crash in February. Abruzzo gained fame in 1978 when he participated in the first balloon crossing of the Atlantic.

“I think the (Benihana) crew probably missed Ben emotionally and otherwise,” Heinsheimer said.

This was the second Gordon Bennett race for The Times’ Conrad, who traveled 29 miles in a French balloon in 1982.

Assemblyman Kelley was making his debut.

As he ascended, announcer Bill Adams, who is the Palm Springs city attorney, called out that he wanted Kelley to sponsor a bill that would relieve cities of liability for balloon races held within their boundaries.

Kelley’s reply from outer space could not be heard.