

SUSSEX AIR SHOW

The Biggest Little Air Show in the World

BY ROGER MOLA



Jim Franklin and wingwalker Todd Green at this year's Sussex Air Show.

Photo: T.M.R. Hamilton

The Sussex Air Show, August 22-24, is testament to the power of word-of-mouth, drawing from near and far. Well, far, anyway.

"My family lives about 40 miles away," says Dan Buchanan, a hang glider performer from California.

"They came because I was performing there, but otherwise hadn't heard of the show."

Buchanan had his first East Coast appearance at Sussex this year.

"I'm impressed that a little show creates such a draw. People travel such a long distance to see it. It's a little country airport, and droves

of people come out," he remarks.

Modern word-of-mouth travels by wire. One fan on the America Online Message Board said the drive of six hours was worthwhile.

"I don't care if it rains or shines or whatever, I'm going again next year for [all] three days. Please make it a point to try to get there anyway you can, whether it means squishing ten people in a car, or taking the train."

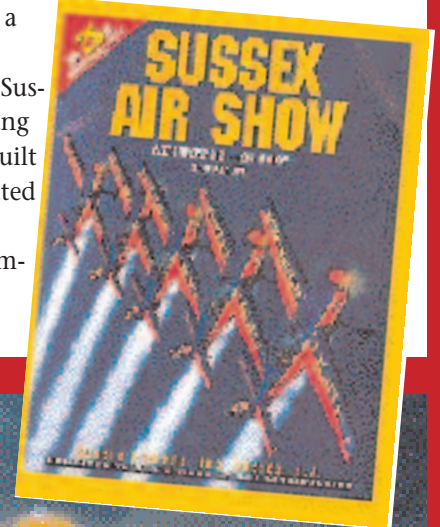
Performer Mike Goulian grew up hours away in the Northeast, but knew the reputation of Sussex from the time he was twelve, before he took a single flight.

"Leo Loudenslager started the Sussex Air Show with Paul Styger. He had the best competitors and pilots then, and ever since. I never went there, though, until I performed this show. It was wonderful," says Goulian.

Sussex celebrated its 25th anniversary this year, a poignant hallmark following the loss of Loudenslager a month before the show. Loudenslager had made Sussex his home base, starting with a modified, homebuilt Lazer. Paul Styger dedicated the 1997 show and program to his memory, committing to erect an on-field memorial to his

longtime friend.

The bill also featured Jim Franklin with wing walker Todd Green, Roger Lehnert and his truck-top landing in a J-3 Piper, the Misty Blues all-women parachute team, and the French Connection. Eugene Nock and his Aerial Trapeze Act also presented the BatCopter in a Batman



Hang glider performer Dan Buchanan works the crowd at the 1997 Sussex Air Show.



Montaine Mallet and Daniel Heligoin of the French Connection have become regulars at the Sussex Air Show



suite. The Northern Lights, Mike Goulian, Steve Coan, Wayne Handley, Sean Tucker and a “warbird parade” rounded out the show.

Steve Coan of Sailplane Aerobatics says Sussex Air Show is as warm and welcoming as a backyard barbecue.

“When I went up there, I didn’t even have a signed contract. Paul Styger and his wife Jean came by my booth and said, ‘Hey, you gonna be there?’ There’s very few people in this business you can take their handshake and it will be gold. That’s Paul and Jean.”

Coan thinks of Sussex like his own private airport. “On Sunday, you break down your equipment and have a cookout, going campfire to campfire.”

Sean Tucker of 1-800-COLLECT missed Sunday’s cookouts, but also had a great time. Tucker says that Sussex fans have come to

expect, “‘an Oshkosh of New Jersey.’ It’s fun to fly because they’re such loyal fans. It’s a prestigious show, a good line-up every year.”

The Jersey landscape, though, could hardly be mistaken for Wisconsin.

“The strip is relatively short,” says Coan (3,500 feet, 420 feet MSL). “The terrain is challenging. You’ve got the crowd line and not too far away is a stand of trees. The show is so safe because Styger picks the best [performers].”

Coan made dramatic use of surrounding hills and foliage.

“I would roll out below tree level outside crowd view. The announcer thought my routine was over. Then I’d turn base to final over a gumdrop Styger calls ‘cheapskate hill.’”

That’s where people who don’t pay admission gather to watch the show, a two hundred foot mound and

break in the trees.

Coan thrills fans in graceful silence, but finishes with a rush.

“At the end of my routine, I go down through 2,800 to around 2,500 then dive at about 300 knots, do a tail slide, an inverted high-speed pass, and a hammerhead to turn around before another couple of maneuvers. I

bleed-off airspeed during those last five maneuvers, entering the last [maneuver] at 70-80 knots.”

Relative to his blistering dive, Coan’s final maneuver looks almost pokey, giving Sussex fans, and even fellow performers like the French Connection, a scare. “They think I’m going to land, maybe stall,” says Coan.

Coan credits Paul Styger

with creating the welcome that draws top talent. He met Styger two years ago at PAPP. Coan boasted to Styger that in a demo flight the next day, 95 percent of the crowd would be on their feet in silence. Coan paused for effect, then acknowledged, “Well, I’ll be playing the National Anthem, of course.” The two have been

friends ever since.

Sussex draws a maximum 15,000 a day, but even at that level, creative commuting like carpools, or ad-hoc roadside accommodation is common. A kind word for local roads, is "secondary." The promotional brochure lists as many campgrounds as hotels.

The intimate scale of the show, contrasted with powerhouse names in performance, causes some to scratch their heads about show economics.

"I don't see how it could have possibly made money," says Wayne Handley. "Once you saturate your bill, it's not going to bring in any more customers to add more acts. They had a full schedule."

Sean Tucker comments.

"He pays top dollar. Styger owns the gate and conces-

sions, and it's all volunteer staffed. It's not an upscale, lucrative demographic, either. This is how he subsidizes his airport."

Sussex Airport tenants pitch-in, because they know the show keeps lease rates in check. A show program and parking are included in the \$15.00 admission. One performer pointed out that concession sales were brisk, but uneven.

"A ten-minute rain shower came through, and the T-shirt vendors sold out their whole inventory in dry shirts" he observed.

Judging by fan reviews, Sussex will be a greater draw in 1998. America Online received gushing reviews.

"For several years, I've been planning to attend this show that is dubbed 'The Biggest Little Air Show in the World.' This year I final-

ly cut out the excuses, and attended. I have to say that without a doubt, it was the best air show that I have ever seen, either civilian or military."

Wayne Handley agrees.

"It's a fun show, a folksy little show, down in a hollow. You're totally involved with the audience the whole time. I'd rather go to that show than a military event with ten times the attendance. It's really hands-on."

Handley likes the small, rural venue, estimating three-day attendance at 25,000, tops. "Small shows are my favorite, but not my sponsor's, of course," he jokes.

Paul Styger helps performers recall the romance that drew them to the business. Perhaps among the supremely loyal fans of Sussex, are future performers, who share that sentiment.



Roger Lehnert performed twice each day at this year's Sussex Air Show...First with his Flying Farmer routine early in the day and later with his truck top landing act.