



Balloonmeister- Dr. Coy Foster

by Glen Moyer

It was Albuquerque 1980 when Dr. Coy Foster saw his first cloudhopper. The late Dick Wirth had arrived with the small, 14,000 cubic foot, yellow, one-man balloon and Foster was immediately fascinated by it. But Foster was not the only one fascinated. Wirth and his hopper were featured on the front page of the Albuquerque newspaper on the fiesta's first Sunday.

"I followed Dick around and around that week begging him to let me fly it (the hopper)," recalls Foster, "stopping only to remind him that I would

need some instruction and would like to see a flight manual if there was one."

Wirth agreed to the flight and to provide the manual but continued to put Foster off for a few days. Finally on Tuesday afternoon, Foster got his chance, launching from the Holiday Inn on Menaul. The flight was a memorable one.

"I don't have a striker with me," Foster recalls Wirth advising as he handed him a box of matches. Wirth also did not want Foster flying too far, so Foster was advised there was little fuel in the tank, enough for perhaps a fifteen minute hop. With no instruction, no flight manual, and only a box of matches to protect against pilot light failure, Foster lifted off into what was to become a lifetime Journey.

Foster would eventually purchase the little yellow balloon and several more through the years. He later learned it had been Dick Wirth and Per Lindstrand's plan all along to sell him that first hopper. He was a target that year at Albuquerque and never knew it.

That first flight in Albuquerque, humble though it may have been, launched Foster on a decade-long quest of discovery regarding little balloons in the AX-1 to AX-4 category. Along the way he would write and rewrite his name in the record books, eventually setting more world records than any other balloonist alive.

Foster's attraction ran deeper than his own need and desire for exploration and discovery. He became the first US distributor for the little cloudhoppers. Recently Foster recalled for Balloon Life his initial attraction to the tiny aerostats.

"I think it was Just the simplicity and the beauty of it that first drew me to it," he says. "Plus, I had always wanted to capture the thrill and adventure of man's original dream of flight. To compare all of my ballooning experiences, a hopper or a balloon of that type, a back-pack balloon is the most exciting thing I think you can fly."

Foster's work in setting world records and his well proven ability at self-promotion helped make the cloudhopper a media darling here in the US, a fashion fad that culminated with an offering of matching "his and hers" cloudhoppers by the famed Neiman Marcus Christmas catalogue. Despite this success, the sale of cloudhoppers never took off as Foster expected.

"I really thought that many balloon pilots would buy one as a second balloon. They would have a full size balloon, generally a AX-7 at that time, and a hopper as a sport, fun balloon to go out with and do something really exciting.

"I can tell you that every pilot, in the early years, comes up, looks at it, wants to fly it. They go off shaking their heads. The excitement, the thrill, the adventure is there but they don't buy it."

Foster dedicated his ballooning career to these little aerostats, literally pushing the limits of the envelope as far as anyone dared. His assault on the record books began by simply flying his little hopper till it ran out of fuel and then crashing into the trees. Along the way he and his team developed computer programs that could predict to the nth degree the fuel consumption, distance, altitude and a number of other capabilities of the hopper based on a multitude of variables present in flight. Because weight was such a determining factor in his success, Foster was often on the cutting edge of technology, testing new designs in ultra small radios, instruments and barographs.

In the end, it was this penchant for the small balloon that would all but cost Foster his life. In the summer of 1992 he was flying the small, one-man special shape Owens Sausage "patty" that he and close friend Jerry Owens had designed. An unseen circumstance put the small balloon into powerlines, the fuel tanks exploded sending Foster falling to the ground in a ball of fire.

This was not the first time Foster had tangled with powerlines. In 1982, while attempting his first world record in Sweden, Foster tangled with powerlines escaping with two broken legs. So does Foster consider the hopper type balloon any different or more dangerous to fly?

"No, I don't think so," he says. "I think the weight to lift ratio is about the same as a big balloon. The difference in flying larger balloons is that you have a little bit more margin in the things, but the smaller balloon reacts a lot quicker. They don't have the mass or inertia of bigger balloons so they're not that difficult to stop."

Despite the accident, which Foster acknowledges might not have happened had he been flying a full size balloon that particular summer day, Foster remains true to the excitement of the cloudhopper. "I said after the accident that I would never fly another tiny balloon," he recalls. "But now, as my recovery progresses and I'm back flying balloons, I think that under the right circumstances I'd love to get back in the air in another hopper."

Just as he vowed to be there the day Foster was ready to fly again, his friend Per Lindstrand has offered to have a hopper ready and waiting for the day when Foster feels the circumstances are right. For now, Foster says he enjoys being back in the air in his 105 and asked Balloon Life to once again thank all of those friends world-wide who stood by him with prayer and words of encouragement during his recovery.

CAREER Highlights

1976-obtained private balloon pilot license 1977-obtained commercial balloon pilot license October, 1980-makes first flight in cloudhopper

January, 1982-sets first world record in AX-2 hopper 1991-sets final world records

August, 1992-severely injured in crash of Owens' "patty" balloon June, 1993-Foster rides in a balloon for first time since accident