

# TOM GABEL: 1947-1995

THE SLIGHTLY BUILT MAN FROM ILLINOIS WAS ONE OF THE PIONEERS IN OUR SPORT. FROM HIS DAYS ORGANIZING THE KOOL BALLOON PRO RACING TOUR TO RECENT YEARS FLYING PASSENGERS IN AFRICA, HIS DREAM WAS TO MAKE BALLOONING A SPORT RESPECTED AROUND THE WORLD.

REMEMBERED BY BILL MURTORFF



photograph from the collection of Alice Fletcher

Before I knew ballooning, I knew Tom Gabel. In 1969 I lived in Corpus Christi, Texas. I had both a roofing business and a surfboard business. Both of these played a part in Tom's life.

In 1969, Hurricane Celia came to town. It messed up the surfboard business, but roofing more than made up the difference. When my roofing crew and I used to go to the job, we saw a hippie type driving a green VW bus. We'd always wave, because he looked like one of us.

One day we ended up at the same place and this little guy told me he was looking for work. He had come from California to do carpenter work for a man he never found. Tom went to work for me. He and his wife Linda moved into a house just behind mine.

In the summer of 1970, there was a story in the Sunday paper about hot air balloons. People were being tethered in Connecticut for \$5 a ride. It looked so easy and I decided I could get rich doing that on

Padre Island. (It is always windy there, so you know the rest of that story.)

It took me six months to get more information and the name of Derek Howard from Austin, who gave me lessons. I ordered a Piccard Balloon. I got my commercial license on a tether line in July of 1970. I had 14 hours.

Two flights later, on August 1st, I had Tom getting his first lesson. In fact, he got several lessons that day. On the third flight we had a noon landing in funny winds. The envelope

touched the ground while the basket was still 20 ft. in the air. Later that month at the Nationals, Bob Rechs explained thermals to me.

Tom and I did several flights before he decided to move back to Illinois that fall to work for his father-in-law in the construction business. When he got to Illinois, he ordered a red and gold balloon. I went to the St. Paul Winter Carnival in January, and on the way home Tom and I did a couple of flights in *Babylon*. I signed him



off and he got his ticket a couple of months later. This started him bringing ballooning to that area.

Tom never did get into the construction business. He taught a lot of people and sold a lot of balloons. He got the first repair station in that area of the Midwest. In 1972 he was part of my crew at the Nationals. By 1973 he was so good with my training that he won the Nationals.

Lady Bird Johnson wanted to remove all the signs along the roadways. A tourist stop near Chattanooga, Tennessee, Rock City, had painted all the barns in the South with their ads. They decided to help Lady Bird out and get a balloon to advertise for them. Tom was chosen to run the program.

By this time he and Linda had a son Nate. They moved to Rock City. Now about this same time, Kool Cigarettes got into ballooning. With the suggestion of their pilot, Bob Cory, they picked Tom to head up a tour of balloon races.

The Kool Pro Tour was like none before or after. For four years, most of the top pilots in the United States flew in these events. Some came all the way from Europe. Prize money was good and everything else was first class.

I flew all four years, and we flew in most of the bigger cities across the country. Boston, New York City, Chicago, Houston, San Diego, Las Vegas, and so on. The events were either Fly-In or Hare & Hound. You were measured from where the basket ended up or first touched down, which ever was farthest. No Baggies!

The flying was sometimes wild and FARs were pushed to the limit. A few balloons were messed up, a few things (cars, balloons and powerlines) were hit on landing and a few pilots got broken bones. Nothing too serious though.

None of those involved will ever forget it. The competition was the best ever. It was exciting and fantastically fun. Maybe this

was the "Golden Age of Hot Air Ballooning."

On the Tour a lot of parties were held and drugs came on the scene. By the time the Kool Pro Tour ended, Tom had substance abuse problems. He also had another child, Annie. Linda couldn't handle Tom so she got a divorce.

The next few years Tom drifted in and out of ballooning, sometimes doing promotions and rides for several operators around the country. He finally got help from Alcoholics Anonymous and had been on the wagon for six months the last time we met. Doug Mills got Tom a job flying in Kenya. This was heaven to Tom, and he used to write me about how great it was. He told me he was going to fly for Kenya in the 1995 World Championships.

This past February Tom got to feeling bad. He lost weight and was diagnosed as having malaria by a local nurse. Finally, when he realized he couldn't do the next day's flight, he

called Doug to come to his lodge in another area to fly his passengers the next morning.

Tom passed out that evening and Doug got a visiting French doctor to look at him. He said Tom was dying. With no lighted airstrip to bring a plane in and fly Tom out, Doug put him in a truck and tried to drive Tom to the nearest hospital. Tom died on the way.

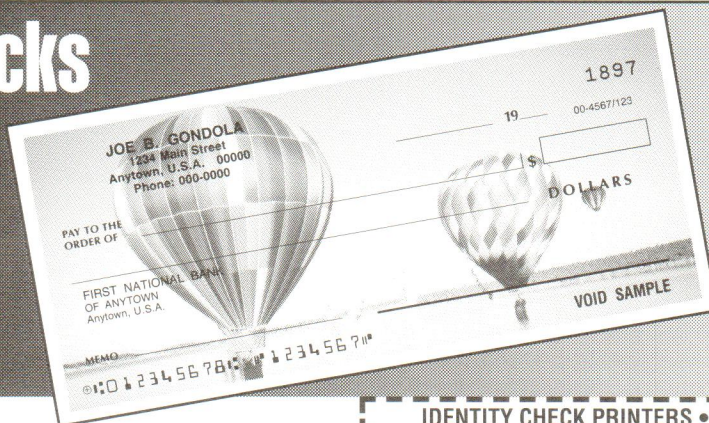
Tom was cremated in Kenya and a memorial service with Nate and Annie attending was held under a large tree at the game preserve. His ashes were given to several pilot friends and spread over the land he loved so much.

Tom was a small man, but he had a big heart. He had a tremendous impact on the sport of balloon racing as we know it today. He will be remembered and missed by his many friends each time they fly out for another target.



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