Free balloon festival a family affair

Capital's hot-air spectacle costs sponsors $500,000

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George Richard carefully piloted his hot air balloon just after a downpour Saturday, firing the burner as he slowly crested over a pecan tree, the giant X-shaped target painted on the ground in his sight.

Richard thought he had the tree line cleared. He was wrong.

“When I felt the trees hit the bottom of my basket, I knew I was disqualified, anyway,” Richard said. “So I decided to give the audience a show.”

Richard came in for a soft landing among the crowd, touching down just feet away from many of those attending the Pennington Hot Air Balloon Championship on the Pennington Biomedical Research Facility grounds.

Richard, the executive director of the Pennington event and the longtime pilot of The Advocate and WBZ Channel 2’s balloon, was one of nearly 40 hot air balloonists participating in the three-day competition, which annually brings the colorful aircraft to the Baton Rouge skies.

Emma Lee and Donald Mayeaux, of Gonzales, sit in the shade of a small tree Saturday, watching as the nearly 40 brightly colored balloons floated through the morning sky.

The pair first saw hot air balloons at the national balloon championship in Baton Rouge in 1989, and they’ve been hooked ever since.

“It’s just a beautiful sight,” Emma Lee Mayeaux said, noting the couple tries to make it to the festival every year. “We have a lot of fond memories of these balloons.”

Balloons used to take off from the couple’s 15 acres of land in Gonzales, and Donald Mayeaux used a scanner to listen in on the competitors’ radio conversations so he could “chase” them.

The couple of 51 years joked the lighter-than-air craft are the secret to their marriage success.

“That must be it,” Donald Mayeaux said with a laugh. “Our shared love of hot air balloons and hummingbirds keeps us going.”

The couple stayed in a Baton Rouge hotel overnight, but got up at 4:30 a.m. to see the competition, which began at 6:30 a.m.

Pilots ascend from various locations throughout the capital region for the competition, seeking to steer as close as possible to the target on the Pennington grounds as they can.

Once the target is within range, the pilot tosses a bean bag and the closest one wins.

Winds were particularly “strange” Saturday morning, Richard said, causing very few pilots to even come close to the target.

After the competition Saturday, organizers discovered Richard’s bean bag had miraculously made it within feet of the target, despite the fact that his balloon had completely missed the mark.

Competition officials, largely composed of Richard’s close friends and relatives, then remembered seeing a young boy running to the target with a bean bag shortly after Richard landed in the crowd.

“I had to do something to win!” Richard joked over the “you dirty dog” calls of his comrades.

“This is a serious competition,” Richard said when the laughter settled, “but it’s important to have fun.”

And, Richard said, it’s essential to keep that fun free to the public.

All told, the competition costs about $500,000 a year to host,

David Hoover, pilot of the Sunrise Fellowship balloon, starts packing up his aircraft’s fabric envelope with help of his crew and volunteers during the second day of the Pennington Hot Air Balloon Championship on Saturday. The event ends today at the Pennington Biomedical Research Center on Perkins Road. Hoover’s crew was one of the last to launch Saturday morning and finally touched down in the parking lot of The Chapel of the Oaks off Siegen Lane.
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Richard said. Organizers rely heavily on corporate sponsors, but it can be a struggle.

The state had partially funded the competition in the past, but this year’s budget woes put an end to that, he said.

Richard said he’s determined to keep the balloons coming to Baton Rouge “as long as it’s free to enjoy it.”

“Every child ought to be able to come out and see this,” Richard said. “This is a way for families to have an amazing experience for free.”

Family permeates nearly every aspect of the championship, with many of the picnic blankets checkering the Pennington grounds filled with three generations of relatives.

It’s even a family affair for the competing balloonists — one of Richard’s biggest competitors is his son, Ryan Richard.

“We just have that competitive spirit about us,” Ryan Richard said. “But we do want the best for each other, so we toss tips back and forth on the radio while flying.”

“We still give each other a hard time about past losses, though.”