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For the Love of Flying



Balloonist Attempts Around-the-World Solo Voyage Again

Balloonist Kevin Uliassi, prior to the launch of his solo around-the-world balloon flight attempt. At right is the capsule he will live in during the 20,000-mile trip. (Christina N. Bowles/AP Photo)

By *Kate N. Grossman*
The Associated Press

CHICAGO, Feb. 24 — An engineer who quit his job in hopes of making the first solo voyage around the world in a hot air balloon was floating over the Atlantic Ocean and nearly two days into his journey.

Kevin Uliassi, 36, lifted off in his 160-foot balloon from a stone quarry near Rockford, Ill., early Tuesday. He hopes to complete the journey in 14 to 20 days.

By Wednesday evening, he was about 140 miles east of Nassau in the Bahamas, cruising about 15,300 feet at 25 mph.

It is the second attempt for Uliassi, who lives in Scottsdale, Ariz., but lifts off from the Chicago area to be close to his family and ballooning friends. In December 1997, the bottom of his balloon ruptured over O'Hare International Airport, forcing Uliassi down in Indiana.

He sat out the last two years out because of bad health and bad weather and watched last March as the team of Bertrand Piccard of Switzerland and Brian

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Jones of Britain managed to circle the globe in 19 days.

Low-Budget Ballooning

Unlike his wealthier rivals, such as Chicago millionaire Steve Fossett, who went head-to-head with Uliassi in 1997, Uliassi has no flush bank accounts to draw from. He relied on sponsors and donations to raise the \$500,000 dollars he needed, and 15 volunteers are staffing his flight command center.

"He wanted to show people that it could be done," Uliassi's wife, Renee, said from the command center, in the Chicago suburb of Homewood.

She contends her husband isn't any different from the guy next door: "Your neighbor may be working toward a better golf score," she said. "Mine just wants to fly a little bit higher."

Uliassi — an engineer and architect who is described as the consummate inventor with a drawer full of ideas at home — began his love affair with ballooning as a kid.

His mother, Shirley, remembers him poring over encyclopedia entries about ballooning and retreating to their yard to send off crepe paper balloons.

Uliassi earned his ballooning license by the time he was 18 and put off college to run his own ballooning company. During his years at the Illinois Institute of Technology, the idea of circling the globe began to germinate.

No Regrets

"There are some things out there that people are very afraid of," his mother said. "If Kevin looks at something that seems frightening to the rest of us, he'll just say 'I'll do it.'"

Friends and family say Uliassi is relaxed in the air — he's called in to say he's enjoying music from the Chicago Symphony Orchestra on CD. He's also a

little bit scatterbrained; he asked for help finding his spoon for his morning bowl of Corn Flakes.

Uliassi said that although there is plenty of pain and discomfort involved in this type of ballooning, completing the journey is simply something he doesn't want to miss. "If I didn't do it," he asked, "how could I live with myself?"

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