Event celebrates 80 years of women's transcontinental air racing

By Julianna Parker Jones

• The Norman Transcript

Women pilots from across the nation landed in Liberal Tuesday morning in their first stop in an all-women transcontinental air race that started in Denver and will end Friday Ashley Crawford, Lexi Taylor, Barb McClurkin, Kiersten Orrick and Micah Doeden are five women representing the University of Oklahoma and are taking part in the 33rd annual Air Race Classic, according to an article by Julianna Parker Jones published June 17 in The Norman Transcript.

The women will pilot two small aircraft for 2,359 nautical miles, Jones noted.

A total of 35 teams will participate in this year's race with women from California to New York and all points in between. The pilots have the option of landing in Liberal, or continueing to the next city in the race. If they were passing through, they have to do a low flyby and be timed by ground officals near the runway. That's what the women of OU decided to do.

"We're just going to be flying all day, so it's gonna test our endurance," Crawford said. "...The longest I've flown is six hours flying cross-country, so flying all day is gonna be pretty hard."

OU hasn't sent a team to the air race before. Doeden heard about it and got the support of the other women and that of OU to participate in the competition.

Doeden, Crawford and Taylor are aviation seniors at OU. McClurkin is a faculty member at OU who has flown for a long time but is just now making the transition from flying a Cessna to a Warrior. Orrick is a flight instructor.

"I'm looking forward to the experience, as we all are," Orrick said.

"...I'm looking forward to flying out of state, far out of state."

None of the women has participated in a race like this before.

McClurkin has participated in the Okie Derby, but that competition is about precision flying. This one is about "speed, pure and simple,"

McClurkin said. "And you're racing against your own handicap depending on what aircraft you're flying."

Each aspect of the plane is rated with different handicaps so all 34 teams in the race are competing against each other on a level playing field.

The race began at 9 a.m. CST in Denver and stopped first in Liberal.

The first planes started landing in Liberal around 10:30 a.m. The next stop will be Sweetwater, Texas; then on to Lufkin, Texas; Russellville, Ark.; Grenada, Miss.; Sparta, Tenn.; Jacksonville, Ill.; Racine, Wis.; and finally, they will end in Atlantic, Iowa.

The women representing OU broke into two teams: Crawford, Taylor and McClurkin on one and Orrick and Doeden on the other. Even though they're competing against each other in the race, adviser Julie Orrick said the women have worked together to raise the funds needed to enter the competition.

The women had to raise $8,000 total for the contest. All but a few hundred dollars has been raised.

"We're really grateful for all the support we've been given," Doeden said.

The last fundraiser is a silent auction that the public can take part in at the Westheimer Airport. The auction ends at noon Thursday.

The women headed to Denver Friday for pre-race events. Although this is a new experience, they said they felt prepared.

The women are eager to take part in a rich history of women's air racing. The Air Race Classic will celebrate the 80th anniversary of women's air racing. This race was started by the Ninety Nines, an all- women pilot organization.

McClurkin said there will be a lot of legendary women pilots at this race, if not actually flying then helping out in one way or another.

Gene Nora Jessen, OU aviation alumna and Mercury 13 astronaut, will be racing in the event, she said.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Thanks to Julianna Parker Jones of The Norman Transcript for this entire story. Only small parts were edited and added to reflect the race has already started.