



“Left Turn Only!”

Bill Brennand on the amazing racing career of Steve Wittman’s *Chief Oshkosh* and *Buster*

BY BILL BRENNAND, 1947 & 1949 GOODYEAR TROPHY RACE WINNER,
AS TOLD TO AND WRITTEN BY JAMES P. BUSH

PHOTOS COURTESY BILL BRENNAND

The great *Chief* sat forlornly atop the hangar rafters, a musty coating of bird droppings and dust covering the remains of this once proud racer. The name and caricature of *Chief Oshkosh* could still be seen faintly on the front cowl that housed the previously finely tuned Menasco engine. The same engine that seized and imploded on its designer/pilot while flying in the Oakland, Cali-

fornia, races back in 1938. After flipping over upon landing, the *Chief* was pulled from the soggy marsh. Its pilot, Steve Wittman, shaken and bruised but otherwise unhurt, had the remains trucked back to Wisconsin, where it began its almost 10-year state of hibernation.

“As a kid living on a farm just south of the Oshkosh airport, my interest in aviation was fueled by airplanes flying overhead. But my passion and desire to become a pi-

lot was ignited by Steve Wittman and his racing airplanes that rocked by our farm in the 1930s,” recalled Bill Brennand.

“‘Witt,’ as he was called by his

Above: 1932—Steve Wittman standing in front of *Chief Oshkosh*. Broken, battered, and stored in the rafters of Steve Wittman’s hangar in Oshkosh, after World War II, pieces of it would rise again as *Buster*.

'old time' friends and colleagues, would be out practicing for future races in either *Chief Oshkosh* or *Bonzo*. At that time [1935] *Bonzo* was probably one of the three fastest airplanes in the United States. It was faster than the current military aircraft, but not quite as speedy as the Howard Hughes racer. However, Witt was able to obtain these breakneck speeds utilizing half the horsepower compared to his round-engined brethren!

"As I grew, so did my desire to become a pilot. Being the son of a farmer did not provide the financial opportunity I needed to obtain this goal. With war clouds growing, I attempted to join the Air Corps to obtain my dream, only to be 'shot down' and occupationally deferred to the farm during the war. My brother was already in the service, and that was enough for my dad. I really hated the farm because when you weighed only 100 pounds and had hay fever, you didn't make a very good farmer!

"Fate soon showered me with a wonderful opportunity. In the frigid Wisconsin winter months, not much was happening on the farm, and being an airport bum, I soon found myself working for Steve Wittman, unofficially. Technically, I couldn't work anywhere else with my deferment, and Witt couldn't hire anybody. Witt came up with a barter system, keeping track of my time and giving me credits toward my ratings: private, commercial, and flight instructor.

"Soon after the war, now officially an employee of Wittman's Flying Service, I began building up my hours instructing new pilots on the GI Bill. At the end of most flying days, Witt and I would sit around the hangar and he would talk about pulling the *Chief* down that hung above our heads, fixing her up, just to have something to 'play with.' But the conversation would always end with Witt saying 'maybe someday.'

"With my persistent nagging and grouching of Witt (on an almost



1938—*Chief Oshkosh* after the crash in a swamp during the races in Oakland, California.



Steve Wittman along with *Buster* and many of the trophies won with the racer during its racing career. *Buster* is now enshrined in the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum's Golden Age of Flight gallery on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.

daily basis!), pleading for the rescue of the *Chief* finally paid off. Witt looked at me one day and said, 'Okay, we'll get it down and rebuild her.' And with that nod of approval from Witt, I propelled myself into the rebuild project. Little did I realize it at the time, but I was an apprentice to an aviation master/designer of a soon-to-be noteworthy, historic aircraft.

"During the latter part of 1946, an announcement was made that would forever compose and forge my destiny: the creation of a new class

of competition race aircraft. The U.S. Professional Race Pilots Association (PRPA) formulated and drafted the design requirements for this new class. Emphasizing simplicity and safety along with affordability, the PRPA came up with a winning combination, both for pilot and spectator alike. The first showing of these 'midgets' would be at Cleveland in the late summer of 1947.

"The only engine allowed would be the very reliable and dependable 85-hp Continental. A minimum empty weight of 500 pounds with a



Upon returning to the Oshkosh airport after winning the 1947 Goodyear trophy race during the National Air Races in Cleveland, Bill Brennand is greeted by a lineboy.

wing surface of at least 66 square feet along with visibility requirements and fuel-carrying capabilities were only some of the very strict rules placed on this new class. An emphasis was also placed on the racecourse and its dimensions. The entire race of these midgets would be flown in front of the 'paying crowd,' rocketing around pylons and thrilling the spectators all while flying inches away from one another barely 20 feet off the ground.

"In early January of 1947, the Goodyear Corporation announced that for the next three years, Goodyear would sponsor this new class

and donate prize money for the winners. With this new development and announcement by Goodyear, especially the potential of winning the lion's share of the \$25,000 purse, Witt and I both agreed that the *Chief* would easily fit into this new midget category, and with no minimum pilot weight requirement, Witt selected me to fly his plane in the first Goodyear trophy race.

"Rebuilding the fabric-covered steel-tube fuselage began in earnest as a new set of larger wings was also added. The large 250-hp Menasco engine was replaced with

the little 'popcorn popper' Continental 85 hp. Because of the size difference in engines, the cockpit was moved forward one bay. The basic tail group and landing gear remained the same as when it flew as *Chief Oshkosh*. Wheel brakes and instrumentation was also added per the race rule requirements. The aircraft was painted overall red with a bright yellow race number (20) and N number. The 'phoenix' airplane that lay dormant for 10 years was given a new name that air-racing fans would soon remember, *Buster*.

"With the rebuild nearing completion and the Goodyear race in Cleveland, Ohio, fast approaching, Witt and I were scrambling to get *Buster* finished on time. I had never flown a midget racer before and was starting to have some self-doubt and concern over embarrassing myself and the Wittman race team in front of 175,000-plus screaming fans. [On the day of the big race], sensing my dilemma, Witt just belted to me, 'Remember, left turn only!' and with that I relaxed and focused on the race ahead.

"On the eve of departure for



The racers are towed past the grandstands by Goodyear vehicles. *Buster*, race number 20, is second in this parade, behind James Kistler's racer, race number 31, the *Kistler Special*.



Bill Brennand perches on the edge of the turtledeck of *Buster* before his qualifying run. In this shot you can see the scimitar-shaped race propeller that was destroyed during the qualifying attempt. With a stock propeller, Brennand would go on to win the \$8,500 first-place prize money and the inaugural Goodyear trophy race.

Cleveland and the Goodyear race, I was finally able to test-fly my new mount. I can honestly say that without a doubt, *Buster* was the best-flying airplane I ever flew. I had flown enough in different aircraft to realize that sometimes these planes had abrupt characteristics. *Buster* was unlike anything I had ever flown. The stall configuration was very docile with full aileron control and little buffeting. That in itself was a real advantage in racing because you didn't have to spend your time 'flying' the airplane, giving me more time to see the next pylon and other aircraft. My entire racing configuration practice lasted a whopping 20 minutes! I was certainly the underdog!

"The Wittman racing team departed for Cleveland. Witt in his clipped-wing Bell P-63 Kingcobra arrived well before *Buster* and I because of all the fuel stops I had on the way. This really gave me a good chance to test out the stopping characteristics of a plane with no brakes.

"The race rules required all aircraft to have brakes installed, but they never said they had to work! And I can assure you, these didn't!

"After landing at Cleveland, I taxied over to the ramp across from the big military hangar. A wave of people started to cross the tarmac and move toward me. I started to think something was wrong. Was I leaking gas? Did I park in someone's spot? The mob of people turned out to be all the competitors and their crews. Everyone wanted to see Wittman's entry because every challenger knew that if you were going to win this race, you had to beat Wittman's machine. I slowly backed away, analyzing my competition. Boy, was I out of my league!

"There they stood, larger than life. Famous Lockheed test pilots Tony LeVier and Herman 'Fish' Salmon spoke to one another in hushed voices, pointing and gazing at *Buster*. Both Tony and Fish had their own spectacular aircraft designed and built by a contingent of Lockheed employees. Near the tail of *Buster* stood Art Chester, one of the most successful race pilots from the 1930s, analyzing *Buster* and surmising that he had seen this aircraft or parts of it before. *Buster* was now completely encircled by the inquis-

itive racing disciples as my confidence level began to spiral. They glanced at me, knowing *Buster* was going to be tough to beat, but with a highly inexperienced pilot at the controls, they thought they had a 'helluva' good chance of winning!

"I left *Buster* to the curious and wandered over to the technical committee to announce my arrival. The committee acted as judge and jury to make sure all the requirements were met. In fact, to obtain the minimum weight (500 pounds), ballast was added to *Buster*. I smiled to myself, realizing that I was the lightest pilot flying the lightest ship! After getting the okay from technical, I was handed off to operational flight test, to make sure I could handle this little rocket.

"As I put my chute and helmet on, the operations people installed an accelerometer to the interior of *Buster*. I was told that in order to race, I must show that *Buster* and I can sustain 9 G's. I knew how *Buster* was built and had every ounce of confidence that she would hold up under the pressure. It was me I was worried about! I disclosed my concern to Witt as I



Tucked under the nose of a United Airlines Mainliner DC-3 are four Goodyear trophy racers. From left to right, they are Steve Wittman's *Buster*, Art Chester's *Swee Pea*, "Fish" Salmon's Cosmic Wind *Minnow*, and Charlie Bing's *Flightways Special*.



One of the guiding forces behind the first Goodyear trophy race, Benny Howard (center) is flanked by his wife, Maxine (everyone called her "Mike"), and Ed Allenbaugh, owner and builder of race number 95, *Californian*.



1947 National Air Races—Left to right: Paul W. Litchfield, Goodyear board chairman; William Brennand, winning pilot; E.J. Thomas, president of Goodyear; and S.J. Wittman, designer and builder of the winning plane, *Buster*.



Art Chester's *Swee Pea*, flown by Paul Penrose, is just outside of Charles Bing's *Flightways Special* (right) as they round one of the Goodyear pylons during the 1947 National Air Races. The Goodyear trophy race was set on a rectangular course in front of the grandstand at the Cleveland, Ohio, airport.

strapped myself in. 'That's pretty tough to pull 9 G's without blacking out,' I said. Witt just smiled and laughed and said, 'Just make a slight turn, pull back a little on the stick, and rap your knuckle on the bottom of the instrument.' I climbed to 4,000 feet, made the turn, and whacked the accelerometer. It pegged at 12 G's! I reset it and that time gave it a 'gentle' tap. Nine G's, just as Witt predicted.

"After landing and having the G meter removed and verified, it was time to qualify *Buster*. The course was laid out in a rectangular shape—2.2 miles, turning around four pylons. In the middle of these pylons was the grandstand. I was given strict instructions to never, ever—under any circumstances—fly over the grandstand!

Here's how Bill remembered that day:

"Taking off, I locate the first py-



Flashing a winning smile is Bill Brennand after taxiing in with his racing mount, *Buster*. The crash helmet used by Brennand was borrowed from a friend who used it to race boats. On the front in hastily applied paint is Bill's nickname at the time, Willie.

lon and turn around it. I am still in one piece. As I round the second, all heck breaks loose, as time slows way down. Traveling close to 200 miles per hour and 3000 rpm at 50 feet above the ground, the engine is vibrating so severely that I feel it may 'blow.' Instinctively pulling power and climbing almost vertically, on my way up I roll the wing down to see my options; I have only one, taking me over the 'sacred ground' called the grandstand. I see a strip of grass in front of the bleachers. Pushing the nose down as I come over the grandstand containing 4,000 onlookers, I think to myself, 'We'll argue about it tomorrow,' as I turn into the wind. The wheels touch as I slow effortlessly in front of the cheering crowd.

"As the shaking in my body begins to subside, I climb out of the cockpit and gaze in horror at the front end of *Buster*. The beautifully curved wooden racing propeller that graced *Buster's* nose is nothing more than a saw-toothed piece of lumber. Over 1 foot on one of the blades is gone. The spinner is all chewed up, and the cowl has vibrated loose. My mind wanders and I wonder if it is too late to be a farmer!

"After a long night of repairs, *Buster* is patched and mended by Witt and crew. The racing prop is replaced by a wood Sensenich that Witt was able to borrow from the vendor. The prop looks like it belongs on a Piper Cub, not a midget

Witt was able to obtain these breakneck speeds utilizing half the horsepower compared to his "round-engined" brethren!

racer. I am able to qualify *Buster* and make it around all four pylons without any pieces falling off! I then advance to the heat races and am placed in between two legends.

"'Somebody on the race committee must have really messed up,' I thought to myself sitting in *Buster* with the prop idling. Here I am, sandwiched in between Tony LeVier on one side and Fish Salmon on the other. I am sure they will pull me out at any minute after realizing their mistake. My hope is shattered and dashed as the white flag is dropped, indicating one minute to race. 'What am I doing here?' I say out loud. I increase the rpm. My jaw matches the boost as I attempt to destroy the piece of gum in my mouth. My crew is doing a great job of holding down the tail



as the throttle is jammed forward, awaiting the drop of the green flag.

"In one harmonious second the green flag is lowered and my crew releases me as I propel forward. The lightweight configuration of *Buster* and pilot works to our favor. I keep it on the runway as long as possible to gain speed. As I trade altitude for acceleration, the overinflated tires rotate faster until I am airborne. A quick glance to either side, and I find myself out in front. I feel myself beginning to 'gray-out' as I round the first pylon. I am having a lot of difficulty finding the second pylon as I swing out wide. Fish Salmon flashes by me and around pylon number 2. I latch onto his tail and acclimate myself with the entire course. Round and round we go, and with each lap my confidence builds. I retake the lead, and in a few short laps I am given the checkered flag.

"My crew is ecstatic. Witt beams a smile as long as the new prop. I am finally able to relax as I pry the gum from the roof of my mouth. I wait until everyone is out of earshot, and I pull Witt aside. 'I just wanted to let you know something, Witt,' I say in an apprehensive voice. 'When I retook the lead, I pulled the power back because I knew no one could catch me, and I didn't want to show them how much power we had.' Witt is in shock, standing there smiling at



Some of the Goodyear racers taxi by the stands before the start of the 1947 Goodyear race. Bill Brennand and *Buster* lead the parade, followed by Art Chester's *Sweet Pea*, "Fish" Salmon's *Cosmic Wind Minnow*, Tony LeVier's *Cosmic Wind Little Toni*, the Loose racer flown by Warren Siem, and the Brown B-1, now modified with a Continental C-85 and dubbed *Suzie Jayne*.



This color photo, taken in late 1946 or early 1947, shows *Buster* near a U.S. Army Air Corps B-17. The slide was taken at the Oshkosh, Wisconsin, airport by author Jim Busha's grandfather Orville Perdue Sr. It was taken before *Buster* had its race numbers applied and the 75-hp engine changed to an 85-hp Continental.

me, rubbing his hand vigorously over his jaw. 'Good job, Bill,' followed by a pat on the back is all I needed to realize 'I done good.'

Bill continued to reminisce about that fantastic racing day:

"*Buster*, along with the other racers, is tweaked to perfection for the big race. All the finalists' midgets are towed out to the starting line. With the planes lined up wingtip to wingtip, the start has all the appearance of a horse race takeoff. The flagman then drops the yellow flag, indicating engine start-up.

"Remembering all the things Witt told me earlier began to flash through my mind. I have placed small pieces of tape on the instru-

ment panel: one for each lap. My plan is to remove a piece after each circuit. That way I will know when to pour the coal on. As the oil begins to warm and rpm increases, the flagman stands on the tips of his toes, waving the green flag ex-

uberantly. The takeoff is a sight to behold as these midgets, like a swarm of bees, accelerate forward to takeoff.

"To conserve weight, *Buster* carries 5 gallons of fuel in its 15-gallon tank. Turning over 3000 rpm, this little engine gulps gasoline. The grandstands are full of race enthusiasts. Over 175,000 paying customers are here with another 175,000 outside the fence to become a part of air-racing history.

"Just like the heat races, the midgets stay low, close to one another. I begin to lose track of the laps. Was that number seven or eight? Glancing at the billowing pieces of tape, I'll just rely on the checkered flag. Oil pressure's good and cylinder temps are normal as I cruise around the pylons, being closely followed by Paul Penrose in Art Chester's *Sweet Pea*. Fish Salmon and Tony LeVier are in a battle for third place in their look-alike *Cosmic Wind* racers.

"As I round the fourth pylon I see a 'crazy man' up ahead on the ground waving a black and white checkered flag at me. I still have pieces of tape to peel off. Was that 15 laps? Then it hits me. I have just won the inaugural Goodyear trophy race. Not too bad for a boy right off the farm!"

Buster and Bill Brennand raced for the next three years, winning the Goodyear trophy again in 1949. *Buster* completed a robust 23 years of air racing and earned a place of honor in the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum, having one of the longest careers in air racing as both *Chief Oshkosh* and *Buster*. 🏆

Back Cover aircraft list: The racers pictured on the back cover are (by race number/CAA registration number, and from left to right): 40, N1210M, Thompson, *Screaming Meaney*; 39, N24C, Keith Sorensen, *Dearfly*; 63, N5541N, *Ace of Diamonds*; 97, N9059H, Denight Special, *DDT*; 94, N68732, Al Foss Special, *Ginny*; 51, N2E, Johnson, *Betty Jo*; 4, N21C, *Cosmic Wind Minnow*; 20, NX14855, Wittman, *Buster*; 35, N10E, Coonley, *Little Toot*; 67, NX5111H, D. Long, *Midget Mustang*; 29, N138C, Lawrence Tech, *L.I.T.*; 3, N20C, *Cosmic Wind Little Toni*; 92, N60089, Bill Falk, *Rivets*; 10, N1E, Kensington-Corkill, *Tater Chip*; 47, N66317, Pack Model C, *Lil Rebel*; 1, NX1292, Wittman *Bonzo*; 5, N22C, *Cosmic Wind Ballerina*; 34, N44183, Williams, *Estrellita*; 14, N74J, Miller, *Little Gem*.