

My Adventure to Houston, TX for the 2023 Team Trials



*The 2024 U.S. F2B WC Team
Orestes Hernandez – 1st (Front Row)
David Fitzgearld – 2nd (Back Left)
Matt Colan – 3rd (Back Right)*

The U.S. Team Trials (TT) for selecting team members for the U.S. Control Line Aerobatic F2B team would be held in Houston, TX the weekend of October 7 & 8, 2023. As of July no one was sure where or when the 2024 World Championships (WC) would be held. Normally it would be somewhere in Europe or Australia.

In July of 2023 there were rumors that the 2024 WC might be held in Muncie, Indiana. As time when by the rumors became true. This caught the attention of several flyers around the U.S. because now they wouldn't have the large expense of traveling overseas and the hassle with logistics involved in getting their plane and equipment to attend the WC in Europe or wherever.

As it turned out, what would have been a smaller group of flyers competing for 3 spots on the team, now turned into a much larger group with the WC being held in Muncie. And with the WC being held in Muncie, this caught the attention of none other than David Fitzgerald. Now he became very interested in making the 2024 World Championships team.

In August, while doing some flying in Napa, CA with Dave, our talked turn to the TT and WC in Muncie. Dave was definitely going so I asked if he was going to fly to Houston or drive 2,000 miles to the TT. His new Thunder Gazer 3 is a full take-a-part plane and I figured that he would fly to Houston. But to my surprise he was going to drive. I told him that I would like to go to the TT just to watch and gain some experience as to what was involved.

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Dave suggested that I judge at the TT and to get in touch with Frank Williams, the Event Director, immediately as they were looking for some from the West Coast to judge at the TT. So I asked Dave if he wanted some company, someone to share a room, driving and traveling expenses with. Dave and I have done this in the past for the 2022 Nats and the 2022 Las Vegas contest. Dave thought it would be great. Besides, who else would he get that has a Sirius satellite radio account and the stations he likes on an iPhone that plugs into his Ford Explorer? So the travel arrangements were made.

Now what am I going to do at the TT, watch and help Dave or judge? On August 30, I sent Frank a private message on Stunthanger.com volunteering my services to judge at the TT, thinking (and hoping) that he probably found someone else. To insure that I wasn't selected I made it very clear that I did not have any experience with the FAI scoring method. To my surprise Frank responded that same day stating he would, "love to have me as a judge at the TT" and that Mark Overmeir, the Head Judge, is very good at preparing judges, even new ones. The email ended with, either he or Randy Smith would be in touch with me.

On September 18, I received an email from Frank confirming that I had been officially assigned as a judge for the TT. Let the fun begin!

Travel Plans:

The plan was to make the 2,000 mile journey in two days and share the driving responsibilities while one of us would get some sleep. For me this would be the longest trip I have ever made by car. My previous longest car trip was by myself that took me from Stockton, CA to Richmond, BC, Canada in 2019 to compete in the Western Canadian Stunt Championships. That trip was a little over 900 miles away and took 3-days, as I stopped in Springfield, OR for a day to visit my daughter and one night in Blaine, WA before crossing the border into Canada.

The plan was to meet at Dave's home and get an early start on the road. By the way, Dave is an expert at packing a vehicle full of planes, equipment, luggage, backpacks, food, etc., even a 2-gallon spare gas can full of gas! Everything is positioned so that in an event of a 'panic stop' everything stays in place. He's a genius at this!

Dave also brought along two large grocery bags full of snacks and munchies, such as apples, carrots and grapes, chips, along with two boxes of Pop Tarts and a box of granola bars. There was also an ice chest full of sodas, Gatorade and water. In one of the bags contained an infamous box of 'Peanut Butter Cap'n Crunch' cereal. Why? To annoy me, as I hate even looking at the box. How do I know he brought it to annoy me? He never opened the box during the entire trip!

I on the other hand, brought the most important snack of all, a family size bag of our 'golden carrots' otherwise known as 'Reese's Mini Peanut Butter Cups'. I never leave home without them.

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Day 1 – Wednesday, October 4, 2023:

For the first leg of our journey I was to meet up with Dave at his home in Napa, CA and the plan was to leave his house around 3:00 am to drive to Deming, NM some 1,150 miles away. That meant that I would need to leave my house at 1:30 am and drive 75 miles to Dave's house. Keep in mind that we will cross over two time zones in our road trip to Houston, TX.

I don't like driving at night to a destination that I'm not familiar with the roads, as my vision at night is not the best. I can do it, but I prefer not to if I have a choice. I did drive in the dark to get to Dave's house at 1:30 in the morning. But I've done this trip dozens of times and making this drive was not an issue.

Driving some 1,100 miles would take a little over 16.5 hours according to Google Maps. Add an hour or so for gas, breaks and food stops, we are looking around 18 hours of traveling for one day, which is a long, long travel day. Our goal was to arrive at the Hampton Inn in Deming, NM around 9:00 pm MST. This would be our longest and the hardest travel day. Dave would drive the first leg of our journey until daybreak. I on the other hand, was able to get a couple of hours of sleep along the way. We stopped somewhere near the Grapevine in southern California to get gas, stretch our legs and eat some snacks. I took over the driving duties and got us through southern CA and into AZ while it was Dave's turn to get some sleep.

By the way, Google Maps and an iPhone is indispensable when traveling. As we could find gas stations, rest areas and/or places to eat along the way. Dave set up the entire trip from Napa to Houston on his Android phone and plugged it into his car display. I would use my iPhone for everything else including monitoring traffic condition. But most important of all was playing the music we liked because I have a Sirius satellite radio account with the app on my iPhone and was able to connect to his cars display and sound system. That was probably one of the main reason Dave was more than willing to bring me along just to use my phone for the Sirius radio. And it was sure nice not to have to fiddle with the radio trying to find a radio station for some music while traveling through the middle of the desert where the majority of the stations are Spanish!

Somewhere before Phoenix, AZ, Dave took over the driving duties while I got some more sleep and got us through Tucson, AZ. I then took over the driving duties until we got to Deming, NM and it was dark. Remember, I don't like driving at night. I ended up pulling into a Wendy's, while under the watchful eyes of Dave, for a late dinner at around 9:00 pm MST. We ordered our food and sat down inside Wendy's to eat when we discovered that we had no napkins. Dave goes up to the counter and ask the young lady 'where are your napkins'? The response was priceless. 'Sorry, we are out of napkins'. Being the troopers that we are, we sat down, ate our meal (without napkins) and survived and enjoyed our meal.

It was time to head to our hotel for the night. Dave ended up driving to the Hampton Inn a few miles away. Our first leg of the journey went really well with no issues other than Dave snoring while I was driving and no napkins at Wendy's.

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We checked in, made our way to our room. Then back to unload the Explorer, include Dave's Thunder Gazer 3. Once we got settled into our room it was off to bed as both of us were very tired. Our goal for the next day was to get up at 5:00 am, shower, eat breakfast at the hotel and be on the road by 7:00 am MST to Houston, TX.

Day 2 – Thursday, October 5, 2023:

We got up at 5:00 am MST, showered, ate and refilled the ice chest with drinks and fresh ice. Dave loaded his Ford Explorer. After eating breakfast we were on the road for the second leg of our journey to Houston, TX by 7:00 am MST.

This leg of the journey was 'only' about 830 miles. Driving time was about 12 hours. With various stops it should take us around 13 hours to get to our hotel, another Hampton Inn in Houston, TX where we will spend the next 4 nights.

The drive again went without a hitch, though by now the two paper grocery bags of snacks was torn and stuff was spilling out all over the place. Dave's Ford Explorer is not the most economical vehicle when it comes to gas. I believe our largest expense for the entire trip was for gas, which we shared, ran over a \$1,000 for the entire trip. In California, gas was almost \$6.00 a gallon. As we got closer to Houston the price of gas dropped dramatically. In Arizona gas was \$4.93, New Mexico \$3.49 and in Houston, TX it was \$2.99 a gallon. One station in Houston had gas for \$2.89 a gallon!

We made several more stops along the way for gas, stretching and changing drivers. We arrived in Houston around 8:00 pm CST. Upon arrival, Dave wanted to drive by the Dick Scobee Field to see if anyone was there before checking into the Hampton Inn. It was dark by the time we got there and no one was around. So we headed to our hotel.

Once we checked into our hotel room and got everything unloaded, we decided to go to Willie's Grille & Icehouse for some dinner hoping that they had the Thursday Nite Football game on their TV's, which of course they didn't. I also happen to have an Amazon Prime account so using my iPhone and we watched, more like listened to the game on my iPhone as I enjoyed my chicken wings and beer. It was kind of funny watching to grown men staring at the small screen of an iPhone trying to watch the game. After we ate we headed back to our room where I was able to connect my laptop to the TV and finished watching the game with my Amazon Prime account. It wasn't much longer that we went to sleep for the night.

Day 3 – Friday, October 6, 2023 – Practice:

We woke up at 5:00 am CST, got cleaned up, and refilled the ice chest with drinks and fresh ice. Dave loaded his Ford Explorer. After eating breakfast we were on our way to the Dick Scobee flying field for Dave to get in some practice. We arrived around 7:00 am and found several individuals already there putting in some practice flights just as the sun was rising.

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Apparently several days before our arrival in Houston, a series of thunderstorms hit the Houston area dropping several inches of rain. This made the grassy areas of the field a little soggy. We were also informed that several days before, a R/C helicopter crashed in the dry grass area, setting off a 200 acre fire which led to a "No Burn" ban for the entire park along with a ban of all model flying! A special waiver was obtained to allow the TT to fly off the asphalt circles, but no one would be allowed to fly on the grass areas.

We also had to deal with the wind as it was blowing around 8-12 mph with the gust going a little higher. However, the temperatures were very mild and the humidity was low.

Once we arrived at the field it was great to see many who I've met from my trips to the Nats and VSC. Joe and Coleen Gilbert was first to greet me. It was great seeing them again. What a great couple! Then I saw Jose Modesto, Joe Daly, Todd Lee, Matt Colan, Orestes Hernandez, Darrell Harvin, Howard Rush and his wife Marylou. I met Richard Oliver, The Moon brothers, Steve and Doug Moon. Eventually I met Frank Williams who I only communicated with through email. Frank warmly welcomed me and was very appreciative that I volunteered to be a judge at the TT. It was great to see and meet everyone.

The only issue I found with this flying site was the restroom location. It seemed like it was a mile away and was a bit of a walk to get there. It reminded me of a book entitled, "50 yards to the Outhouse", written by Willie Maket and illustrated by Betty Wont. After practice everyone was invited to meet at the nearby West Houston Airport. This would be for those competing to have their planes processed and weighed. Afterwards, a Pilots Meeting was conducted on the upper floor.

All the competitors were divided up into two groups. One group was assigned Circle 1 and the other group assigned to Circle 2. Each Circle would be assigned 3 judges.

After the pilot's meeting, the judges meet in a small conference room with the Head Judge, Mark Overmeir, to review the FAI rules and discuss any questions or issues.

Being a judge at the TT requires that we don't do several things. (1) Do not look at the scoreboard in the administration area. (2) Do not discuss anyone's score or flight with the pilots or other judges or listen to those who talked about their flights until the contest was over. (3) Do not look on the internet sites like Stunthanger or Facebook at the scoring or who qualified or the flight order which may or may not be posted. This led me to isolate myself from the competitors and their helpers while the contest was going on.

This was very difficult to do. Because of being a competitor myself at other contests, we are always talking about what we should or could have done after our flights. I really missed the interaction you normally have with the other flyers during competition.

It also was important not to discuss Dave's flights when in our hotel room, at breakfast, dinner or driving to and from the flying site. Dave knew what I could or could not do or

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say and made it really easy. We were able to talk about everything else under the sun thereby not allowing the subject of flights and scoring to even come up.

Then it was back to our hotel room later that afternoon where Dave decided to go for a jog and I decided to take a nap. Later that evening we headed back again to Willie's Grill & Icehouse for dinner. The chicken wing are really fantastic! Then it was back to our room to watch a little baseball and off to bed for a 5:00 am wake up.

Day 4 – Saturday, October 7, 2023 – Qualifying:

We woke up at 5:00 am, got cleaned up, and refilled the ice chest with drinks and fresh ice. Dave loaded his Ford Explorer. After eating breakfast we were on our way to the Dick Scobee flying field for Dave to get in some practice before the competition began and I would learn of my Circle assignment.

I was assigned to Circle 1 with Mark Overmeir and another judge. Mark has much experience at judging and the training of judges. He has served as a Head Judge at several Nats and TT. Mark made me feel very welcomed and comfortable in judging at my first TT and did a remarkable job.

A warm-up flight was done to assist the judges to make sure we were all on the same page when judging. Tom Fluker had the honor of doing the warm-up flight each day. The format for the TT was those assigned to Circle 1 and Circle 2 would start at the same time. After the Round 1 there would be a short break. The competitors would move to a different circles to fly Round 2. The same thing was done for Rounds 3 and 4.

After 4 rounds the pilots best score from Circle 1 and their best score from Circle 2 would be added together to determine their qualifying score. The Top 10 scores would qualify and go on to the Finals on Sunday.

For Saturday's qualifying flights the temperature was very mild but the wind was starting to blow. After a few flights the wind was in the 8-12 mph range, making for difficult flying conditions. But remember, we are dealing with some of the best pilot in the U.S., they can and should be able to handle these type of conditions. The wind proved to be difficult for some more than others. As the flights progress the wind did also. Here are the Qualifying Scores for all the pilots:

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FAI Control Line Precision Aerobatics (F2B)														
US Team Selection, 2023														
Qualification Flights, Senior														
Contestant	Round 1			Round 2			Round 3			Round 4			Total Score	Place
	Circle	Flight Order	Score	Circle	Flight Order	Score	Circle	Flight Order	Score	Circle	Flight Order	Score		
Matt Colan	1	2	1085.79	2	4	1004.50	1	8	1102.00	2	6	0	2106.50	Q
Joe Daly	2	7	971.23	1	3	1062.86	2	6	1006.29	1	5	1121.23	2127.52	Q
Wes Eakin	1	5	739.66	2	8	745.10	1	5	847.10	2	5	726.89	1592.20	16
Gaylord Elling	1	8	963.53	2	3	893.60	1	1	956.89	2	8	951.46	1914.99	13
David Fitzgerald	2	2	1046.96	1	8	1136.36	2	3	1060.26	1	6	0	2196.62	Q
Joe Gilbert	1	4	1019.76	2	1	978.26	1	4	0	2	2	0	1998.02	Q
Darrell Harvin	2	5	763.63	1	6	958.56	2	5	813.43	1	8	977.83	1791.26	15
Orestes Hernandez	2	4	1063.06	1	1	1098.63	2	8	440.53	1	2	0	2161.69	Q
Todd Lee	1	1	982.93	2	6	1005.13	1	2	1073.26	2	3	1084.86	2158.12	Q
Frank McMillan	2	1	905.20	1	5	1030.20	2	7	955.26	1	4	1018.19	1985.46	Q
Jose Modesto	1	3	926.83	2	2	843.19	1	3	963.63	2	1	949.93	1913.56	14
Doug Moon	2	8	990.40	1	2	1074.26	2	1	1064.96	1	3	1085.00	2149.96	Q
Steve Moon	2	3	908.13	1	4	1012.56	2	4	929.83	1	1	1026.06	1955.89	Q
Richard Oliver	1	6	1009.46	2	5	944.86	1	6	993.23	2	7	900.70	1954.32	11
Howard Rush	1	7	1062.83	2	7	1031.93	1	7	0	2	4	0	2094.76	Q
Eric Taylor	2	6	922.66	1	7	950.79	2	2	912.93	1	7	1010.79	1933.44	12

In the first round I thought I made a mistake with the score sheets. Each judge received a clip board with all the score sheets for the first two rounds. These were placed in order of their flight assignment. On the sixth flyer, my score sheet showed that Joe Gilbert was next. The only problem was Joe had just recently flown two flight earlier. I let Mark Overmeir know right away and he had to check to see what the issue was and if I had turned in someone else's score sheets. Come to find out someone had inserted an extra score sheet for Joe Gilbert into my stack. Whew, was I ever relieved! That was the only judging issue of the day. At least I didn't make any rookie mistake that I know of. After the fourth round all the flying was competed. Now came the difficult part. As judge we were not to know who qualified for the Finals or the flight order on Sunday. I ended up taking a long walk to the restroom, sitting in the park away from all the activity and talking on the phone with my wife to see how everything at home was going and later to Tim Just letting him know of my experience so far at the TT.

That evening several of us got together at a Mexican restaurant in nearby Katy, TX for dinner. What started out to be a small group of 5 turned in a group of about 12 as the evening went on. I think everyone had a great time! I know Dave and I did. After dinner it was time to head back to our hotel room and off to bed and get ready for the Finals.

Day 5 – Sunday, October 8, 2023 – Finals:

Again, we woke up at 5:00 am, did our morning ritual and Dave loaded his Ford Explorer. After eating breakfast we were on our way to the Dick Scobee flying field for Dave to get in a practice flight before the competition began. The weather for Sunday was ideal with light winds, moderate temperatures and low humidity. This was the best weather of all the days we were there!

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Now the Top 10 flyers would compete for the top 3 spots to be a member of the 2024 U.S. F2B World Championship Team, along with an alternate. Also added to the team was the only junior that entered the TT, Gabriel Alimov.

It was a privilege to judge some of the best stunt flying that I've had ever seen. It was a show of shows as there was 3 rounds of flying. The two best scores of three flights would be used for their Final scores. As each round was flown the flying seemed to become better and better. You could feel the intensity and the pressure. Some handled the situation better than others, it was a fantastic opportunity to see some of the greatest stunt flying.

In the end Orestes Hernandez, Dave Fitzgerald and rookie Matt Colan will be the three representatives of the U.S. F2B Team in Muncie, along with Gabriel Alimov, who flew exceptionally well, as the junior. Gabriel and his father flew into Houston and surprised a number of individuals as he flew extremely well. After two completed flights Gabriel passed on the third round and they packed everything up and headed back to the airport to fly home. Joe Daly finished fourth and is the first alternate in the event one of the three cannot fulfill their obligation.

Now it was all over. All the planning, all the practicing, all the tweaking and all the official flying (and hiding) was over. Now for the fun part. After the dust had settled and everyone was relaxed, it was time to have some fun. This was where some got together would fly planes that belonged to others. Dave allowed other to fly his Thunder Gazer 3, Doug Moon asked Dave and other to fly the Gieske's 2003 'Bear', powered with a PA 75. Joe Daly was letting just about anyone fly his 'Shark' as he needed to discharge some batteries. I was given an opportunity to fly Joe's plane but declined as I was brain dead after judging too many flights over the past two days. It was a great time had by all. As Dave put it, "This was the best part of the entire event". Then the next thing you know everyone had left the field and was headed back home. Dave and I were the last ones to leave the field. It was kind of a bitter sweet moment.



*The 2024 U.S. F2B WC Team – Gabriel Alimov – Junior
with Frank Williams*

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Here is a brief matter that was not related to the TT. It became very interesting when the conversation came up about the Sunday Nite Football game. The San Francisco 49ers were hosting the Dallas Cowboys. Of course several individuals were from Texas and are diehard Dallas Cowboys fans (*poor miserable wayward souls*). With Dave and I being from California we have an interest in the San Francisco 49ers. Afterwards, instead of going out to dinner Dave and I decided to order a pizza and have it delivered to our hotel room and enjoy watching the San Francisco 49ers “destroy” the Dallas Cowboys. Go Niners! Another great highlight of our adventure. The only minor problem was, I was totally exhausted and laying in my bed after eating several pieces of pizza, I fell asleep and didn’t see the last half of the game. In fact, I think at one point Dave yelled at me to wake me up because I was snoring so loudly that he couldn’t hear the game. Sorry Dave!

FAI Control Line Precision Aerobatics (F2B) US Team Selection, 2023								
Finals								
Seniors	Flight 1		Flight 2		Flight 3		Total Score	Place
	Flight Order	Score	Flight Order	Score	Flight Order	Score		
Orestes Hernandez	3	1146.63	5	1182.88	1	1188.75	2371.63	1
David Fitzgerald	6	1155.18	3	1161.93	4	1178.14	2340.07	2
Matt Colan	9	1110.78	7	1130.50	6	1143.28	2273.78	3
Joe Daly	1	1077.16	2	1099.06	2	1133.48	2232.54	4
Todd Lee	7	1109.75	6	1117.74	8	1112.18	2229.92	5
Howard Rush	4	1073.08	4	1107.11	5	1116.46	2223.57	6
Doug Moon	8	1075.60	1	1101.21	3	1112.54	2213.75	7
Joe Gilbert	5	1067.46	8	1085.13	9	1098.23	2183.36	8
Steve Moon	2	976.29	9	1014.60	10	1061.98	2076.58	9
Frank McMillan	10	972.81	10	1000.26	7	1008.73	2008.99	10
Juniors								
Gabreil Alimov	11	996.75	11	1038.96	11	0	2035.71	1

So, Congratulations to Orestes Hernandez, Dave Fitzgerald, Matt Colan and Gabriel Alimov in making the U.S. F2B Team. Thanks to Frank Williams and his staff for hosting and putting on one of the best control line events that I’ve ever been too. And ‘Thank You’ Frank for allowing me the opportunity to be a judge at my first TT. Well done to all!

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Day 6 – Monday, October 9, 2023 – On the Road Again:

Well it that time to start the long, long trek back home. Again, we woke up at 6:00 am, did our morning ritual and Dave loaded his Ford Explorer. After eating breakfast we were on the road again around 7:30 am CST, this time heading west towards home. Our next destination was back to Deming, NM and the Hampton Inn for one more night's stay before making the long 18 hour 1,100 mile trek back to Napa, CA.

We got into Deming around 8:00 pm MST. When checking into the hotel we asked the hotel desk clerk if there were any sports bar nearby that she would go to, to eat and watch Monday Nite Football. The young lady recommended 'Yoya's Bar and Grill' that was just a couple of miles away. After unloading Dave Explorer we headed to Yoya's and had a very good dinner and was able to watch the game. I wanted to try their 'Diablo' burger but the waitress recommended that I get the 'Diablo' sauce on the side rather than have it put on the burger. That proved to be a very excellent recommendation! That Diablo sauce was extremely hot! In fact I didn't put it on my burger at all. All I did was dip my French fries in it as that was enough heat to set the world on fire. After eating and watching some of the game we headed back to our hotel room to finish watching the game and then off to bed.

Day 7 – Tuesday, October 10, 2023 – Returning Home:

We decided to wake up at 4:00 am and get on the road early to start our long 18 hour 1,100 mile trek back to Napa, CA. As we were passing through the lobby of the hotel Dave notice someone was putting the coffee pots out in preparation of the morning breakfast which we had to miss because of our early depart. So I was able to get me a small cup of coffee to start our journey.

No sooner did Dave get on the road, I was asleep. Dave drove most of the way with a stop in Las Cruces, NM for gas. I think I took over the driving from Las Cruces to Tonopah, AZ while Dave got some sleep. Another gas stop in Tonopah. Seeing how we didn't have breakfast at the hotel, we ate some of the goodies that Dave brought along for the trip along with my 'golden carrots'. By the time we hit Tonopah, AZ I was craving a breakfast sandwich from Jack in the Box. But no Jack in the Box was showing up on my phone. We ended up at a nearby McDonalds after 10:00 am where of course, breakfast was no longer be served and I ended up eating a burger, fries and a coke for breakfast. Dave ended up taking over the driving duties for the rest of the way home. I think his adrenalin was still pumping from making the WC team!

Our last stop was in Buttonwillow, CA for gas, bathroom break and stretching. Then on to Napa, CA were I got plenty of sleep. We arrived at Dave's house at around 8:30 pm PST. We made very good time getting to Dave's house from Deming, NM.

Once we arrived at Dave's house, his daughter came out to greet us. As we were unloading his Explorer, the box of Peanut Butter Cap 'N Crunch reared its ugly head.

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Actually it fell out of the torn paper grocery bag. I asked Dave's daughter to burn it or get rid of it when she had time. She too was not a fan of this cereal.

It was time for me to get my stuff from Dave's Explorer into my car and make the last leg of my journey home to Stockton, CA. An hour and half later I was home greeted by our dogs, a large male Akita (Chance) and a small female Chiweenie (Chloe) that were very excited to see me, along with my wife! An end to a very long, long but an enjoyable trip.

Someone asked me if I would do this again, travel over 2000 miles to be a judge at the TT. Without hesitation I say, "Load up the car and let's go!" There you have it, another one of my boring adventure stories.

Enjoy,

Dennis Nunes