


Balloon brothers



By Matt Frassica

mfrassica@courier-journal.com
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PASSION
FOR
FLYING
LIFTS
NICK AND
CHASE
DONNER
TO TOP
RANKS

Think of the great athletic siblings — the DiMaggios, the Williamses, the Mannings. To that list you should probably add Louisville natives Nick and Chase Donner. Their sport? Hot-air ballooning.

Nick, 28, is one of the best balloon pilots in the world. He has won the national championship in ballooning five times, most recently in 2011. In the last world championship, held in 2010 in Hungary, he came in second.

But at this year's national championship, in Longview, Texas, Nick came in sixth place. His brother Chase, 25, came in first.

Although they race against each other, Nick takes pleasure in his brother's victory.

"As my brother's instructor, I've taught him a few things," he said. This week in Battle Creek, Mich., the Donners are competing in the biennial World Hot Air Balloon Championship.

FOLLOW THE DONNERS' PERFORMANCE

To check out Nick and Chase Donner at the World Hot Air Balloon Championship, follow them on their website: www.balloonpong.com. The competition continues through Friday.

Nick, a tall man of athletic build, recently sat in his mother's Simpsonville kitchen, where miniature hot-air balloons dangled from pendant lights. Visible from the kitchen,

See FLYING, Page D2

FLYING: Donner brothers rise to prominence in world of hot-air ballooning

Continued from Page D1

a larger decorative balloon stood on a side table in the living room.

The brothers' mother, Terri Donner, is a pilot for UPS. "Flying instincts are in our blood," Nick said.

Nick started learning to fly balloons when he was a teenager. "He was kind of a natural from the start," said his teacher, Brian Beazly, owner of Balloon Odyssey.

Beazly recalled Nick being eager to get started. "He actually soloed on his 14th birthday, which is the absolute earliest day that you can possibly do it," he said.

"He took to it right

away," said Jerry Copas, the president of the balloon society of Kentucky. "For whatever reason, this level of competence caught on with him."

"I didn't necessarily play sports in high school," Nick explained. "What I did was compete with balloons."

It's not an inexpensive sport — the balloons the Donners fly cost \$40,000 each, Nick estimated, while entry fees can run \$5,000. So far, their winnings have covered their expenses. "Between the two of us, we've spent between \$175,000 and \$180,000 all in."

A few years after learning how to fly a bal-

loon, Nick started flying planes as well. For the past 5 ½ years, he has flown an Embraer RJ145 as a commercial pilot based in Chicago.

The experience of flying planes is quite different from flying balloons, Nick said. "I tell the airplane where to go and we go there, by either autopilot or me directing it."

That's not the case for the pilot of a hot-air balloon, who can adjust the balloon's altitude but not its direction. "I cannot put my balloon somewhere the wind isn't going to. I can put a target in the GPS; if the wind isn't going there, you're not going to get there."

Instead, balloon pilots have to be able to read the winds and use different layers of wind to blow them toward the target area. They also need to get approval from landowners all around the competition area to be able to launch from the right direction to catch the winds.

Copas said the Donner brothers are unusually dedicated to improving their flying through computer models and watching videos of their performance.

"A lot of us are kind of ballooning for the fun of it

and the joy of floating out over our towns and cities, enjoying the view," he said. "These guys don't take a day off like that. Each time they go out, they set goals for themselves ... and it shows."

As Chase grew up, he followed his older brother into the sport. "Nick was always supremely talented, and I got to see him make a lot of his mistakes — and luckily I haven't repeated a lot of those," Chase said by phone as he drove to Battle Creek.

Chase, who works in accounting in Atlanta, said

that despite his win at the nationals, he has a long way to catch up with his brother. "I had one good event," he said. "(Nick) has five of those, three in a row."

Whoever wins, the Donners' rivalry is an amiable one. "If I don't win a balloon race, I want my brother to win," Nick said. "We always fly better when we compete against each other."

Reporter Matt Frassica can be reached at (502) 582-4502 or on Twitter as @mattfrassica.

GIVE IT



Nick Donner, 28, started learning to fly balloons as a teen. CINDY PETREHN



Chase Donner pilots the balloon at left as his brother, Nick, flies the one at right. They'll be competing this week in the World Hot Air Balloon Championship. CINDY PETREHN