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GB1 GAMEBIRD

*AN AMERICAN MADE ACRO CHAMPION BY GAME COMPOSITES OF BENTONVILLE, ARKANSAS,
WITH STUNNING X-COUNTRY SPEEDS AND COMFORT*

COVER STORY

MEET THE GB1 GAMEBIRD

By Ed Downs

A fantasy flight deserves a fantasy beginning to the GameBird story. We start our fantasy with a phone call from a senior General Motors official saying you have been chosen to conduct a test drive of one of their two most famous autos. You get to choose which car to drive and experience the adventure associated with it. Upon arriving in scenic Monterey, Calif., you find two curtains. Behind curtain number 1 is a fully decked out Cadillac Escalade. Chose to drive this car, and you will enjoy a leisurely sightseeing drive down famed Highway 1 to Carmel, Calif., followed by lunch and wine at a famed tofu bar. Behind curtain number 2 is a full bore Corvette. Chose this car and you head out on Highway 68 (again, lots of sightseeing and comfort) to the Laguna Seca Raceway, where you are allowed to explore the twist, turns and 200 mph straight-a-ways of this famous racetrack, accompanied by a skilled race driver. Once recovered, you return to Monterey to enjoy a cattleman's cut of steak with a dark ale of your choice. What will it be,



Above: Founded in 2013, the GameBird was designed to be a "crossover" plane that breached the gap between a full bore, unlimited aerobatic machine and a comfortable, easy to fly, cross-country hummer that could handle 200 knots. (Courtesy Game Composites)

Right: The GameBird features a full modern panel, front and back, with glass technology, namely the Garmin G3X Touch. (Courtesy Game Composites)

curtain number 1 or curtain number 2?

Sometimes fantasies come true. For this writer, curtain number 2 simply blows away the first option. A call from *In Flight USA* HQ alerted this writer to a new customer, Game Composites, and

asked if my ranch in Oklahoma was anywhere near Bentonville, Ark. Game composites was to become our special March front cover feature (the annual Sun 'n Fun issue) and, if distance were not an issue, would this writer be interested in visiting



their plant and possibly flying Game Composite's new GB1 GameBird. While a three-plus-hour drive would get me to Bentonville, weather and time considerations were a factor. Then I visited the Game Composite's website at www.gamecomposites.com, and realized

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Meet the GB1 GameBird

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that this aviation enthusiast has apparently been asleep at the stick. I had no clue that there is a new aircraft manufacturer, just a few hours drive from my ranch, located in one of America's fastest growing metropolitan areas, Bentonville, Ark. This fully certified airplane is being built in a new, modern facility at a quintessential GA airport. Not realized by many, two major highways meet in Springfield, Ark., and turn North (Highway 49) towards Bentonville and Rogers. This stretch of highway has become the tech belt of the Midwest, with tremendous growth in all forms of clean industry to support the beautiful surroundings. No doubt, the corporate headquarters of the giant, Walmart, located in Bentonville, have spurred this growth. Another little known fact is that Sam Walton, founder of the Walmart empire, was an enthusiastic pilot (Ercoupe!) and the Walton family has followed that lead. Walmart operates a huge jet center at Rogers Municipal Airport and one of the country's largest corporate fleets, which brings us right back to Game Composites.

Founded in a 2013 by well-known aircraft designer, Philipp Steinbach, and Stuart Walton (yep, the Walton's take flying seriously), a plan was put forth to design a "crossover" plane that breeched the gap between a full bore, unlimited aerobatic machine, and a comfortable, easy to fly, cross-country hummer that would eat up the miles at speeds up to 200 knots. From the beginning, this plane was defined as possessing unlimited acro abilities, the type that makes pro airshow pilots drool, but is equally appealing to the MBA type pilot who wants to go places... and occasionally share the enjoyment of recreational aerobatics with a friend or family member. This plane must be fully certified (FAA and internationally), not based upon previous designs, utilize advance composite construction, and be manufactured in the United States. Stability and ease of flight were deemed essential, as well as painstakingly careful testing within a certification process to ensured strength and quality. Finally, it must have a full modern panel, front and back, with glass technology.

By 2014, molds were being made and ground testing began. By 2015, a prototype was flying and first displayed at AirVenture 2016, after completion of the flight test program. FAA Type Certification was received in August 2016, the Production Certificate was received in 2019, after completing initial team training and three confirming airplanes in the new manufacturing facility at Bentonville Municipal Airport (KVBT). The entire certification process took just about three and a half years, a



Game Composites is building the GameBird in a new, Modern facility at a quintessential GA airport in Bentonville, Ark. (Courtesy Game Composites)



In 2019, Game Composites earned a production certificate after completing initial team training and three confirming airplanes in the new manufacturing facility at Bentonville Municipal Airport. (Courtesy Game Composites)

remarkable achievement.

When asked about the speed at which the GB1 GameBird was designed, certified and placed into production, Philipp replied, "We had great cooperation and help from the FAA. Most important, we stressed quality throughout the process, do it right the first time. We listened carefully to what the FAA and other certification agencies needed to see and gave it to them. It is this attention to detail and pulling together the best team possible that makes great achievements happen in a short time." What Philipp did not specifically mention, was his extraordinary experience in the development of composite designs, awareness of past industry challenges and ability to think into the future of customer support and general maintenance. Adding to the substantially skilled team at Game Composites are Production Manager Scott Kagebein and former fighter pilot Craig Gourley. The final, certified product hits all the goals, with 81 gallons of fuel, including a dedicated 25-gallon acro tank. Range can reach 1,000 nautical miles with cruise speeds of 200 knots. And all of this with up to a10 G acro limit.

Key to the personal experience this writer was afforded was Cristian Bolton, Sales Manager for Game Composites. Cristian's career in professional aerobatics is an evolution of his experience as a military fighter pilot. During the 2013 and 2014 air show seasons, Commander Bolton served as the team leader of the famous Chilean Air Force Halcones aerobatics team. In 2014, he made his debut as an air race pilot in the Red Bull Air Race World Championship, graduating to the Master Class of pilots in 2016. In the years since the rac

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Meet the GB1 GameBird

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has provided upset recovery training for Flight Safety International. After a few contacts with Cristian, it was concluded that the best plan, considering weather and time, would be for him to pick this writer up in the GameBird at my local airport (Cushing KCUH, about a 15-mile drive for me) and a 30-minute flight for him, the same as my drive time on rural roads! Yep, I would be compelled to fly the GameBird, try a little acro, assess its flying style and performance and then tour the factory... with great burgers for lunch (skip the beer till later). Sounding a lot like that Corvette fantasy... right?

Be sure to take a look at the Game Composites' website, www.gamecomposites.com. It is exceptionally well done and provides much more detail than this one article can cover. But allow this writer to share the personal thrill of flying the GameBird. The Cushing terminal was its usual quiet self as Cristian taxied in, the Lycoming engine claiming its 303 HP even at idle. Those present were drawn to the GameBird for a looksee and Cristian exited the cockpit greeting me with a smile that ensured a good time would be had.

In our short conversation before the flight, I explained that my acro skills had nearly 50 years of rust on them. A guy like Cristian could be intimidating, but never has this old CFI met another instructor so professional, calm, and reassuring. There is no doubt in this writer's mind that any individual stepping out of a straight and level cruising machine will feel any anxiety when being introduced to the GameBird.

Demo flights are carefully planned to meet the specific expectations of the customer. Cristian also conducts the 10-hour training program that comes with the GameBird. High performance and tailwheel endorsements are required as a prerequisite to the GameBird training, but the folks at Game Composites can help you meet those requirements, if needed. This training program will ensure safe and competent operation of the GameBird, including simple recreational acro and the ability to increase skills as flying time builds. A bit more about these thoughts in a moment.

A walk-around discloses a super slick, beautifully finished airplane. Cristian carefully explained the GameBird's features and conducted a thorough parachute briefing. One does not "enter the cabin" of the GameBird. You are "inserted into the cockpit." With a bow to Walter Mitty type thinking, this is fighter pilot stuff! Cool! Oh yes, this is a tandem design, like a real airplane, with the first-flight student starting in the front seat and then transitioning to the rear "captain's quarters." The full acro harness also needs



Demo flights in the GameBird are carefully planned to meet the specific expectations of the customer. The company also provides a 10-hour training program. (Courtesy Game Composites)

a briefing, but for many, the front cockpit panel will be familiar, utilizing the latest technology, 7-inch Garmin G3X Touch Fight/Engine display system. A mechanical airspeed and altimeter are provided as back-up. The rear station is equipped with a full-sized Garmin G3X Touch, avionics that permits operation in all complex airspace, and mechanical backups that include a "G" meter. Flight controls are just as they should be, right-hand stick and left-hand on engine controls.

The leather seats are great and rudder pedals adjustable. Once comfy, Cristian climbed into the command seat and commenced with the starting check list, reading each item aloud so I could follow along. Engine start was seamless, and the four-bladed prop soon turned into a blur, reminding this writer of a P-51 flown many years ago. The exhaust had a starting "bark" that was reminiscent of the Mustang's short stack Merlin. While the nose of this taildragger does block some forward view, like my remembrance of the Mustang, the narrow profile makes it easy to look around the sides. The intercom made communication a breeze and Cristian explained every move he was making. I was soon taxiing with no difficulty. The steerable tailwheel and powerful rudder provide immediate response. You push, it goes!

Cristian made the take-off, with this writer following on the controls, expecting a hand off upon leaving the pattern. Power was applied smoothly at first, starting an acceleration that immediately brought all of the flight controls to life, followed by rapid application to full power... resulting in the kind of acceleration that presses you back in the seat. Almost immediately, tail up, then lift off to a gradual climb (600/700 fpm) as the GameBird is allowed to gain energy. By the time we reached the end of Cushing's 5,000-plus-foot runway, the GameBird is indicating over 160 knots, in perhaps 5-6 seconds from first power application. Eat your heart out, Corvette! With a MTO of 2,200 pounds (this plane is very light)

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and with more than 300 horsepower at hand, the ability to build energy rapidly is extraordinary, vital for competition acro.

Cristian conducts a formal control hand-off, yours truly grabs hold of a GameBird that is rock solid, stable at about a 165 knot cruise climb with about 2,000 fpm showing on the digital VSI. While encountering some moderate low-altitude turbulence (related to recent frontal passage), the GameBird does not waver in pitch, roll or yaw, but simply pounds its way through the rough air. A few simple coordination maneuvers disclose exceptional control balance in all axes. But it is the stability and solid feel of flight that will be welcomed by those utilizing the high speed cruise speed (200 knots-plus) of the GameBird. Want to maneuver, the GameBird will respond instantly to a control input, light and quick, but with comfortable control loading that lets the plane talk back to you. The GameBird goes exactly where you want it to go. Very little (virtually none) rudder coordination is required, with pitch inputs resulting in instantaneous reaction, but never giving the feel of being overly sensitive. This writer found it easy to hand-fly a precise altitude and heading, knowing that if you let go of the stick, the GameBird will stay where you put it.

As we approached Bentonville, the offer to head for the acro box was too great to resist. This writer is in no way qualified to express an opinion of the acro capabilities of the GameBird but will let their current customer set (includes pro acro pilots, the Red Bull Team, and Air Force Academy) do that for them. Let me approach it from the perspective of a ham handed, old guy who has a hard time parallel parking a car. Several loops and rolls were accomplished, falling out of one loop (stalling inverted), but never leaving me with any doubt that the GameBird was fully controllable. A mistake can tell one a lot about the margin of safety in a design, and the GameBird has a margin so wide that even mistakes become just part of the learning process... no big deal. The stall speed is just 60 knots, with slow flight down at about 70-75 knots. Again, steady, and stable. The electric pitch trim sure helps. Easing the nose up to a stall brought on a clearly felt, high frequency buffet and sharp, but clean break. Simply decreasing the angle of attack by just a few degrees allowed the GameBird to virtually "leap" out of the stall, even at a low, almost idle power setting. While 50 years of rust can take time to remove, this old pilot absolutely believes that given the full 10 hours of training included with a GameBird purchase, I would be suffi-

ciently proficient to be safe and introduce others to the fun of recreational acro.

Met by Philipp and his management team, upon landing at Bentonville, we headed out for the great burger, to be followed by a quick trip to the new OZI Flying Club, a remarkable new FBO at Bentonville. Back at the plant, Philipp led a detailed tour of the manufacturing process by Game Composites. The GameBird uses a "low-temp curing" composite methodology, having in-house equipment that blends the resins specific to the component being manufactured. Game Composites does not depend upon the storage of perishable, vendor supplied, pre-preg materials. The advantage of this process is reparability in the field, something many composite designs lack and one of the important questions purchasers of composite designs often forget to ask.

Quality control documentation is incorporated into training documentation, ensuring that trainees "do it right" the first time. New manufacturing employees at Game Composites start out with small part inventory control, then move up to sub-components, sub-assemblies, and finally major assemblies. In other words, they learn the GameBird from the inside-out. This writer cannot over stress how important this type of training is. The entire plant is new, with plenty of space for expansion. Success will not challenge manufacturing quality due to lack of facility. While some components are outsourced (weldments and machined parts) to an Austrian firm that is fully certified to both U.S. and European standards, a process is underway to bring all manufacturing in-house. A small company now, with some 58 employees, Game Composites is a well-funded, superbly managed company that is proud to be producing an American made plane that challenges (and beats) both internationally famous acro competitors and the best of the cross-country cruisers. Truly, a fantasy vision come to life.

Late in the day, it was time to "endure" the second flight of the day, this time proving the speed and travel capabilities of the GameBird. Thirty-knot head winds still left us with 185-knot ground speeds, for a quick flight back to Cushing. Once again, we did not just fly through turbulence, but "penetrated" it, with no pitch or roll oscillations. The day ended all too soon, with ranch chores calling and a sense of once again becoming a mere earthling. Just one last thought, when asked how the name "GameBird" came to mind, Philipp recalled a meeting with Steuart Walton in a London pub. While talking names, they concluded that all the predator bird names were taken, when Philipp (residing in Lincolnshire at the time) recalled that

English "English" and American "English" are quite different. You see, a "bird" in England is not necessarily a feathered critter. To "game" in England can mean to kick a soccer ball, or to party. And a "GameBird" is... well... what a couple of guys might come up with while hoisting a few Guinness brews in an English pub. And to take the low road along with these guys... they ain't wrong!

Now for the hard part... how much for the well-equipped, basic GameBird? Write down the number 445, and then add three

zeros. Spenny, sure, but look up the prices of other piston planes with a competitive range and speed (there are not many) and you hit the "million" mark pretty fast. Even a Cessna 172 hits the starting grid at \$412K and the Skylane starts at \$530K. The folks at Game Composites seem to have hit all the marks for fun and performance, at a surprisingly competitive price. For more information about the GameBird, go to www.gamecomposites.com or call 479-319-6641 or 479-715-4342.

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