

It's all about a passion for ballooning

# the launch crew



the week surrounding The Great Reno Balloon Race, Koh Murai, director of field operations (commonly referred to as the balloonmeister) will get up at 4 a.m. each morning and will work nearly 126 hours. He will watch the weather, file

paperwork, organize competitions and launch balloons; and he won't get paid to do any of it.

"It's all volunteer work," Murai said. "You don't get paid and it will probably cost you your vacation or some time off from work. It's for the love of the event and the love of the sport. It's not something you are going to make any money at."

Murai and his field operations crew of 25 are responsible for planning and directing all flight-related aspects of the Race. It's a big job and the work for the next year's Balloon Race begins the day after the Race finishes.

"We have to obtain the necessary waivers from the Federal Aviation Administration to conduct operations at anything other than a standard altitude," Murai said.

This is important because "standard altitude" is 1,000 feet and if the Balloon Race was conducted that high it would be a pretty poor show for the spectators on the ground.

"We also have to set up other official flying paperwork and obtain support from other flight services," Murai said. "Unless you petition the government well in advance, you can't get anything done. We have petitions to the government well into 2012 for meteorological flight services."

Field operations is of course more than just paperwork. Once the Balloon Race is underway, Murai and his crew are responsible for safety, flight operations, marking where balloons are to take off and land, setting up targets for competitions, conducting and scoring competitions and of course, launching balloons.

With so many important responsibilities, including coordinating the Dawn Patrol, it's natural that Murai and his crew come from a heavy background of ballooning. He himself has been ballooning for 30 years, while his safety officer and the chief scoring officer have 40 and 45 years of ballooning experience, respectively.

"You need to be involved in ballooning for a

really long time," Murai said. "We have kids of balloonists who were born and raised in ballooning families, people who were balloon crew members and people that worked on the crew during the attempts to fly a balloon around the world. It's like giving back to ballooning."

Murai himself was the launch master for three different around-the-world attempts.

"It's a one of a kind experience. You are trying to do something that no one has done before," Murai said. "One of the greatest things that all of us accomplished was that the sum of all the things that went wrong to hurt a human, in all the attempts to fly around the world, was one pinched finger. One person, one time, pinched a finger."

Murai said that the stress levels of trying to fly a balloon around the world and directing all field operations for the Balloon Race are about even.

The preparations for the Balloon Race take the entire year," Murai said. "They literally start the day after the races, and that was the same with transglobal balloons. When you look at the overall logistics of putting it all together and getting everything in place, it probably comes out even at the end of the day."

Murai said that even with him and his crew putting in 18-hour days, the aeronauts -- the volunteer supporters of the Balloon Race -- work harder than they do.

"The only people that put in more hours out there are the aeronauts," Murai said. "They pretty much do anything and everything and that is a pretty thankless task. Without them there wouldn't be an event, because if they were paid for what they do the Balloon Race wouldn't be a free event anymore." ●

