



WIND RIDERS

A Documentary Feature Film by Emi Katayama

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 Produced by.....Emi Katayama
 Executive Producers.....Emi Katayama
Michael Rosen
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WIND RIDERS

LOGLINE

WIND RIDERS, a feature length documentary, tells the poignant and inspiring stories of three American balloon pilots who dedicate their lives to their sport: a masterful solo hot-air balloon pilot whose quiet passion transcends generations with his iconic seagull balloon, and a driven championship gas-balloon team competing in a tragic quest to defend their world title.

SYNOPSIS

WIND RIDERS is a feature length documentary exploring the art and sport of hot-air ballooning, and the thrilling – and often dangerous – sport of gas balloon racing.

The championship gas balloon team, Richard Abruzzo and Carol Rymer Davis, take to the skies, boldly crossing continents and oceans in an epic and high-risk quest to defend their world title. The film follows the two avid competitors during the Gordon Bennett Cup, a prestigious gas balloon race that attracts the world's most skilled and daring pilots – and they pay a tragic price for doing so.

During gentle flights over the stunning countryside, Bill Hughes, a masterful hot-air balloon pilot, channels the inspiring message of Jonathan Livingston Seagull, Richard Bach's iconic novel about a young bird who defies convention in his search for life's purpose.

WIND RIDERS unearths the rare beauty and unexpected human drama of a sport unfamiliar to many. It unflinchingly depicts personal stories that are touching, poignant, and inspiring.

EMI KATAYAMA: DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

“There is no destination.”

“All other forms of flight move *through* the wind, but balloons move *with* the wind. And because wind blows in different directions at different altitudes, you must go up or down to catch a wind that's going in the direction you want to go. In ballooning, the only control you have is through altitude. For this reason, when balloonists set off

in a distance race where the team that flies the farthest wins, like the *Gordon Bennett Cup*, they don't say they'll land at a specific destination. They won't have a destination – weather will determine where they land. Ballooning, the first successful mode of aviation, is the only form of flight where you become part of the weather.

When I was about 10 years old, I read this iconic novella, *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, an international bestseller written by Richard Bach. I was very moved by the story of the young gull who does not bound by convention and tries to perfect his flight skills. He inspires others, although they first despise his actions. Then fast forward: I was working on a TV morning news show in New York and I met Bill, a hot-air balloon pilot whose balloon had the seagull design inscribed on it. He was also inspired by the same book. Then I found Richard and Carol, an avid team defending their world championship title in the *Gordon Bennett Cup*, a prestigious gas balloon distance race. Richard and Carol had achieved world records in ballooning, and were well known in those communities across the globe. I saw them all through the spirit of Jonathan Seagull. Everything sort of ... *connected* ... and led to this production.

WIND RIDERS focuses on the beauty of ballooning as well as the magnificence of the human spirit. The story of these pilots and their passion for their sport is linked with Jonathan's story.

I hope audiences connect to this film with the same inspiration I felt when I first encountered Jonathan's story so long ago, and that they have a glimpse of the essence that resides within us all."

Q&A WITH EMI KATAYAMA

Most of us don't know that there are two different technologies in ballooning. Can you explain that briefly?

All balloons float because the air inside the balloon is lighter than the air outside. Hot-air balloons create lighter air by heating it – you can see the gas burner heating the air that's inside the envelope. Most balloon rides are in hot-air balloons and last about 45 minutes. In contrast, gas balloons *replace* the air with lighter-than-air gas – low-density gas. Hydrogen and Helium are commonly used to lift balloons. That's costly, but you can fly longer than in a hot-air balloon. You can fly for days.

The pilots compete for the oldest aviation race, the Gordon Bennett Cup, yet not everyone outside the ballooning community knows about it or its risks. How did

you know about it and were there any other fatal incidents in the past?

I didn't know about this international gas balloon race until I found Richard and Carol. The *Gordon Bennett Cup* gas balloon race is the world's most prestigious aviation race. It originated in Paris, France, in 1906. This distance race is competed in by masterful balloon pilots from around the world. For gas balloons, if the weather cooperates, pilots can fly for days, traveling from the U.S. to Canada and across the Atlantic. The tradition of the race is that a winning team takes the race back to their home country. Their stage is the sky around the world, so it's very exciting, but it's also a very high-risk race often fraught with adverse weather conditions. Lightening is very dangerous to balloon flights because each balloon carries electrical devices. In the 1920s, five pilots were killed by lightning strikes. In the 1990s, even though the race organizers informed the Belarusian government about the race beforehand, one of the balloons entering their air space was shot down by their air force. So, from these past experiences, racers are very careful about storms and avoiding dangerous air space.

What challenges did you go through after the tragic incident?

I had been documenting Carol and Richard's lives for a few years, and when the devastating news broke in the media, I was a bit lost – I never thought the two balloon pilots I was following would go missing during this production. I was watching their faces in the footage almost every day, so the reality of their death became quite a challenge for me to deal with on a personal level. I had also lost my father two years before this incident, so, mentally, it wasn't an easy process for me, and as you would expect, there were many changes in the production after that. This meant extra work with extra cost – not only was it tough financially, but I also ended up going through a mountain of technical issues along with other various issues during the process. But I had a responsibility to get the story out with this world exclusive footage.

Why does this story need to be told now?

The big surge in ballooning was in the early 1980s, and since the end of the 80's it has gone into decline. The number of balloon pilots has been decreasing because there aren't enough opportunities for younger generations to discover the sport. For example, in Australia, there are not enough tutors or flying schools to teach ballooning, resulting in a serious shortage of pilots. In recent years, there has been a balloon that holds 30 passengers and requires several people to operate. When people see these large balloons, they feel it is something they can't be part of because of its size. But a small balloon, like Bill operates in the film, needs only one pilot and one chase crew. So, people can relate to doing it themselves.

Also, there's a concern about the safety of ballooning. If a pilot receives proper training, ballooning is a safe sport. Fatalities are rare in hot-air ballooning. The equipment is very safe – you hardly ever hear of a mechanical failure in balloon accidents; it's almost always due to pilot error. The lack of public knowledge has caused a shortage of hot-air balloon pilots.

Balloons are simple, yet astonishingly beautiful and valuable. They're used for scientific research and experiments. They expand our imagination and perspective, especially when flying in a small balloon where you can see the scenery below, see the place you live, and see how your community connects to its vast surroundings -- that's quite an eye-opening experience. This bigger perception is needed now more than ever as we hear dreadful news stories of the disconnect in our society. This documentary shows all of that through these extraordinary balloonists' love of flight and their human spirits.

What other things does ballooning contribute to a community?

Commercial ballooning and balloon festivals provide economic growth to a community. According to the Albuquerque Journal, the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta – one of our filming locations – generated \$172.98 million in total economic impact in 2018. The event had 880,000 guests over the nine-day affair. There are about four dozen balloon festivals held across the U.S., and each festival and balloon activity creates an economic impact. Ballooning attracts spectators. People love to see them, and it's magical to experience the flight.

AWARDS & FESTIVALS

To date, WIND RIDERS has received:

Official Selection -- Beaufort International Film Festival

Audience Best Documentary -- Manhattan Film Festival

Best Inspirational Film -- New York Film Awards

Indie Filmmaker -- Festigious International Film Festival

Best Inspirational Film -- Los Angeles Film Awards

Women Filmmakers Award -- Accolade Global Film Competition

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ABOUT THE BALLOON PILOTS

RICHARD ABRUZZO

In 2004, Richard and co-pilot Carol Rymer Davis won the *Gordon Bennett Cup*. In 1992, Richard and co-pilot Troy Bradley were the first team to set world records for

duration, distance, and altitude by flying from North America to Africa. In 2003, Richard was the first person to fly solo in a gas balloon on a transcontinental flight from San Diego to Atlanta. Between 1995 and 2004, he was a five-time winner of the America's Challenge gas balloon race.

Richard's awards also include the Harmon Trophy for world's outstanding aviator, aviatrix, and aeronaut (2001, 2003, and 2005); the Fédération Aéronautique Internationale De La Vaulx Medal; the Balloon Federation of America Shields-Trauger Award; and the Montgolfier Diplome. He was a member of the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta Board of Directors and the Chair of the Board of Trustees of the Anderson-Abruzzo Albuquerque International Balloon Museum. Richard's father was famed balloonist Ben Abruzzo.

CAROL RYMER DAVIS

In 2004, Carol and co-pilot Richard Abruzzo won the *Gordon Bennett Cup*. She began flying hot-air balloons in 1972 and was one of the first female balloon pilots in the U.S. In 1978-1980 Carol won world records in the AX-5 category for altitude, distance and duration. In 1990 she won the World Ladies Cup Saga Japan, and in 2001, she was the Ladies Champion at the US National Championships. With Richard as a co-pilot, Carol won the REMAX National Gas Balloon Race in 2000, and America's Challenge race in 2003.

Carol's awards also include the Montgolfier Diplome (1981, 2000), Sabiha Gokcen Medal (2005), and the Harmon Trophy (2005). She was an avid skier, won first place in numerous skiing events, and she was the youngest female to climb all 53 of Colorado's 14,000-foot-plus mountains.

Retired from the U.S. army, Carol had been a specialist in Diagnostic Radiology. She served as a Vice President, a member of the Board of Directors, and Treasurer for the Balloon Federation of America.

BILL HUGHES

Bill is a veteran hot-air balloon pilot and former Navy pilot who has flown everything from jets to helicopters. Bill entered ballooning in the early 70's and in 1973 helped Malcolm Forbes make a transcontinental flight across the U.S.

Bill has flown competitively and won events throughout the U.S., Canada, Europe and Japan. He was designated by the FAA as a Pilot Examiner and Safety.

Counselor and served as "Balloonmeister," responsible for all operational aspects of

balloon events. Under his leadership, events achieved a perfect safety record. Bill has served as a vice president and board member of the Balloon Federation of America and, during winter months, he travels the U.S. teaching classes that help prepare students for their FAA pilot written examinations.

ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

EMI KATAYAMA (Executive Producer, Producer, Director)

During her childhood in Japan, this award-winning producer/director was inspired by the iconic book *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, an international best-seller published in 1970, written by Richard Bach. Decades later, her feature film, WIND RIDERS, begins with a hot-air balloon pilot who was so inspired by the same book that he adorned his balloon with the image of seagulls in a blue sky.

In 2019, the City of Albuquerque and Balloon Fiesta, the world's largest ballooning event, sponsored a three-day screening of Wind Riders at the historic KiMo Theatre and the Anderson Abruzzo International Balloon Museum in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

After graduating college in the U.S., Emi Katayama worked in New York on numerous news shows and television programs produced by major Japanese broadcasters for many years.

She's also served as a part of jury members of the Harlem International Film Festival.

MICHAEL ROSEN (Executive Producer)

Michael Rosen is an award-winning writer, director, and producer. He's the recipient of five Telly Awards, The Fund's Social Justice Award, the CINE Gold Eagle, and multiple film festival awards. Over the last 20 years, Rosen has worked with many of the biggest names in the entertainment industry, from Lauren Shuler Donner to Norman Lear to Matt Damon, who he recently worked with again for Matt's international nonprofit, Water.org. There, he created award-winning original digital content that helps raise awareness of the global water and sanitation crisis.

His feature documentary producing credits include "Breach" (Amazon), "When I Rise" (PBS), "Murder by Proxy: How America Went Postal," (limited theatrical release, Documentary Channel), "Running the Sahara," executive produced by Matt Damon (limited theatrical release, Showtime).

RAMIN FATHIE (Executive Producer)

Ramin Fathie has produced films ranging from illegal whaling in Iceland ("Breach"), to the partition of India/Pakistan ("The Sky Below"), to numerous national commercial spots, web-based series, event promos and mini-docs. Prior to producing, Fathie served as DP and Editor for such clients as The

History Channel, A&E, PBS and over 100 network, corporate and commercial clients, including three Academy Award and Peabody Award winning Directors. Ramin was the original series DP for the award winning "Onion News Network." From 1995–1998 he was a DP for the Steven Spielberg founded "Shoah Foundation," as well as the Academy Of Television Arts and Sciences "History of American Television" project, headed by Michael Rosen. Fathie graduated from UC Berkeley with a B.A. in cultural anthropology (elected Phi Beta Kappa). As one of only 50 U.S. Jacob Javits Fellows selected across the nation, he pursued an MFA at UCLA's School of Film and Television. His thesis film, "Still Point," was nominated for a regional Student Academy Award and selected for screening at Cinefest Experimental/Madrid.

FILMED ON LOCATION

Poughkeepsie, NY, US (Hudson Valley Hot-air Balloon Festival)
Rockaway Park, NY, US
Queensbury, NY, US (Adirondack Balloon Festival)
Albuquerque, NM, US (Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta)
Santa Fe, NM, US
Garden City, Kansas, US
Kansas City, Kansas, US
Saint-Jean-Richelieu, Quebec, Canada (International Balloon Festival of Saint-Jean-Richelieu)
Bristol, UK (Bristol International Balloon Fiesta)
Saga, Japan (Saga International Balloon Fiesta)
Lorraine, France (Lorraine Mondial Air Ballons)

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

TRT - 55:44 minutes
Shooting format - Digital
Aspect Ratio - 16:9
Film Color - Color
Sound Mix - 5.1 surround sound

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