

The year was 1932 and a young modeler stood on the fringe of a crowd gathered at a small airport located near the edge of the city. Most of the parked airplanes had two wings except for a few parasol types with the name CORBEN on their fins. They were built in a sheet metal hangar which bordered the grass field and the boy later worked there washing airplanes with raw gasoline. That day he resented the crowd of thrill seekers taking over the airport, for he felt they neither understood nor loved the machines as he did, but like the others, he watched skyward as a small red ship dove and then streaked across the grass at eye level and with engine screaming zoomed almost straight up until it was small in the sky.

In the tiny plane was a young flyer from Oshkosh, Wisconsin, who had dreamed and designed and built her and now, speeding at almost 200 miles per hour, showed what his 19-foot dream could do. Many watched that day and one remembered.

The young pilot's name was Steve Wittman and his tiny racer, Chief Oshkosh, was the beginning of a series of designs which would help shape and make racing aviation history.

Though he was still in his 20's, he had performed as a test pilot, operated a flying service, and flown in the New York to California Air Race in 1928, finishing 11th in a field of 38 on the trip out and 4th in the return race. He was eventually to fly in every National Air Race held up to the present. As the Oshkosh Airport manager, he found time to race his 90-horsepower home-built job taking on all comers and, on one occasion, an open race in Schenectady, beat the favorite who was flying a 450 horsepower job — despite the fact he miscounted the laps and had to take off and complete the final go around after landing. Chief Oshkosh was to win five firsts in the National Air Races before being disassembled to become part of the postwar Buster.

The first Bonzo appeared in 1934, a 12-cylindered Curtiss engined beast with limited visibility and the prototype of the Cessna spring steel landing gear. It flew with and conquered many of the best of its day. Now retired, it is part of the collection at the EAA Museum near Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

As air racing resumed in the middle '30's and early '40's when outstanding racers topped most military designs of the period. Then World War II came and air racing ceased. The young boy won his own wings and flew the Atlantic to learn the smell of cordite, the sound of flak, and the sight of burning cities. When it was finished, he did not fly again for a long time.

As air racing resumed in the middle '40's, surplus military types dominated the unlimited class and it seemed that the day of the home builder-designer was at an end. It was the Goodyear event that saved the day by specifying the use of stock 85-horsepower engines and simple airframe requirements that could be met by those not having private or corporate subsidies.

Soon Wittman's Buster was on the scene and again he was showing the others how to get the most out of the least. In 1948 his continuing search for the little extra performance that wins the close ones took shape and form in the Goodyear Bonzo. It was a great design, superbly flown by the master, and it proved out. It is still great almost twenty years later and still winning, being topped by only one or two newer planes in its class, and the grey-haired man still flies it without regard for the years between.

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