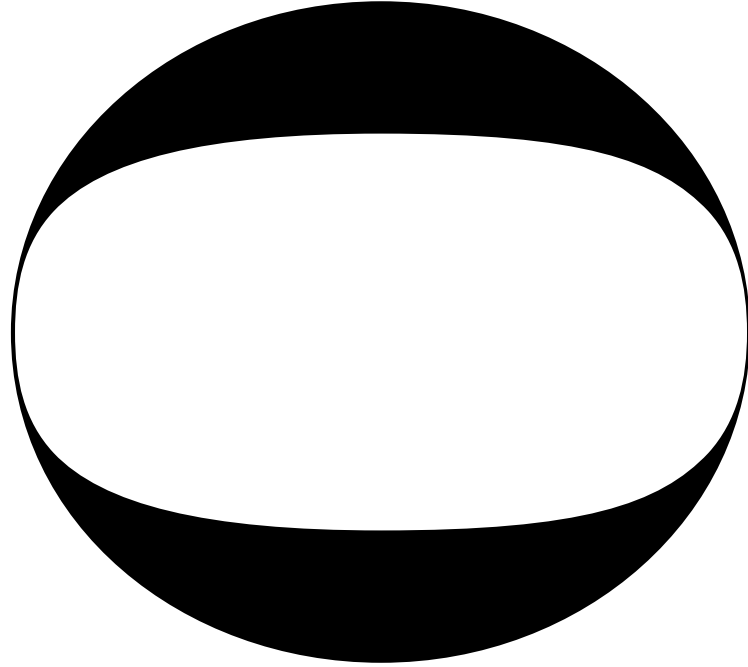




CORNELIUS BRAUN/RED BULL PHOTOFLEX

GUINNING WHEELS TRUBS

FLAMING WINGS, SPINNING CHOPPERS, CRAZY MID-AIR ACROBATICS: JUST WHAT ARE DIETRICH MATESCHITZ'S FEARLESS PILOTS DRINKING UP THERE? BY CRISTINA VELOCCI



n a crystal-clear, windless Texas day in April, Charles Aaron's BO-105 helicopter hovers 500 feet in the sky and begins to climb, spinning in circles from left to right. At the Corpus Christi Naval Air Station below, hundreds of eyes fix on him as the spinning stops and the chopper flips over backward. The crowd gasps. Just as quickly, Aaron brings the helicopter upright, a big smile on his face.

Virtually no one in the audience had ever seen a whirlybird perform a stunt like that and with good reason. Aaron is unique in his position (or at least the various positions he maneuvers his chopper into): He's the only pilot in the United States licensed by the Federal Aviation Administration to perform aerobatics in a helicopter. This accomplishment required two years of negotiations with the FAA as well as manufacturers. "Others have done some aerobatics with helicopters," he acknowledges, "but not to the extremes we're doing."

Aaron's stunt-copter career began two years ago, when he sold a helicopter to Dietrich Mateschitz, inventor of the energy drink Red Bull. Much as you'd expect from a company that positions itself as an adrenaline-peddler, Red Bull sponsors a number of hair-raising activities each year, from skydiving exhibitions to motocross races. Yet the events most in line with the credo of the company and its patriarch — "Red Bull gives you wings" — naturally occur in the sky.

Since last receiving FAA approval in September, Aaron has performed helicopter aerobatics for Red Bull at air shows and sporting events such as Nascar. He's done loops and rolls alongside the Blue Angels and the Air Force Thunderbirds, and he travels extensively. "We go coast to coast, so I've gotten to fly the helicopter from one side of the country to the other," he says.

Aaron isn't the only one whose passion for flying has been fueled by Red Bull. In Italy, five former members of the Italian



Air Force's infamous Freccie Tricolori make up the Red Bulls, the country's first and only civilian aerobatic team. Flying nearly wing-to-wing, the group pilots Sukhoi SU-29s at speeds up to 280 mph at national and international air shows.

In the U.S., pilot Bill Reesman has become the world's only nighttime jet-fighter pyrotechnic act, the Red Bull Meteor. Five hundred feet above ground, Reesman soars through the night skies in a 1960s Russian MiG with flames rising 1,000 feet high off each wing — the effect

mimicking a shooting star, and visible up to 30 miles away.

Though it seems such spectacles could be conceived only by an overcaffeinated mind zonked on a sugar rush, their true beginnings were sparked instead by passion. It started with Austrian pilot — and Mateschitz flying instructor — Siegfried Angerer, who collects and restores vintage aircraft. In the '80s, he bought a former military training aircraft, a 1954 T-28B — an acquisition that was the first in a long line of operational historical aircraft. Soon after, he purchased a Vought F4U-4 Corsair and a



BULL GRIT:
(Clockwise from left)
The Red Bulls in
Practica di Mare, Italy;
Flying Bull Radka
Machova; Dietrich
Mateschitz in Germany,
2005.

B-25J Mitchell. By 1999, Angerer's collection numbered four classics — more than his Innsbruck base could accommodate. Mateschitz, a fixed-wing and helicopter pilot himself, recognized an opportunity to combine business with pleasure and did for Angerer what he would do for so many

other pilots in the years to come: He gave him wings — 10 new sets, to be exact.

In 2001, Mateschitz formed the first of his Red Bull-branded aviation programs, the Flying Bulls Aerobatics Team, placing Angerer at the helm of the crew. Today, Angerer serves as its head

pilot, managing a fleet that includes a Cessna CE 208 Amphibian Caravan, Pilatus PC-6, three Alpha Jets and four helicopters, plus Angerer's original four planes. To house all these historic aircraft, Mateschitz constructed the sleek, modern Hangar 7, built of 1,754 plates of glass.

Just a cab ride from Salzburg Airport's main terminal, "7" has become a hip destination spot since its 2003 opening. Visiting is like "being a part of aviation as a scene," says Greg Nevolo, head of Red Bull's North American aviation marketing. Guests can dine at the restaurant Ikarus or sip a cocktail at the Threesixty bar while taking in views of the Austrian Alps and, most importantly, the restored, functional flying beauties below their feet (the hangar's floors are transparent).

The crown jewel of the collection is a Douglas DC-6B. Built in 1958, it was delivered to the national Yugoslavian airline JAT before Yugoslav dictator Marshal Tito converted it to his own personal luxury plane. In 1975, Tito sold the aircraft to Zambia's president, Kenneth Kaunda, who also used it as a private plane before boredom compelled him to store it in a corner of the airport in Lusaka, Zambia's capital, for 10 years. It found new life as a sightseeing plane touring over Victoria Falls until 1999, when Angerer snapped it up. By then, more than three-quarters of the structure needed to be replaced — a four-year job.

Nearly all the aircraft owned by the Flying Bulls have similarly illustrious histories — perhaps, most notably, the Lockheed P-38L,

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: KATSUHIKO TOKUNAGA/RED BULL PHOTOFILES; CORNELIUS BRAUN/RED BULL PHOTOFILES; VLADIMIR RTS/ROGNETA/GETTY IMAGES

otherwise known as Lefty Gardner's infamous White Lightning.' The plane had been gathering moss in a field in San Antonio after an engine fire forced it to make an emergency landing. The Flying Bulls moved it to its maintenance facility, brought it up to scratch and equipped it with new engines. White Lightning' returns to the skies this June.

Though each plane is museum-worthy, Mateschitz says he'd never ground one indoors. "There's nothing more morbid than an airplane that is unable to leave the earth and fly anymore," he says. "We are the opposite of an aircraft museum. Our passion is that all of our vintage aircraft must be able to fly and must be in perfect condition. We view our collection of aircraft more as a 'flying circus' than a museum."

And what a circus it is. The Flying Bulls' signature move, the "mirror" — mastered by only a few formations — requires the lead plane to fly upside down while another plane flies right-side-up directly below, mirroring the leader's every move. A third plane circles the first two in a continuous roll, each nearly touching the others while executing complex maneuvers.

As if twirling through the air within inches of other aircraft doesn't provide enough danger and excitement, Peter Bensenyei, the Hungarian solo pilot for the Flying Bulls, pushes the throttle

THE "7" UPS:
(Clockwise from bottom)
A B-255 at Salzburg's
Terminal 7; Flying Bulls
over Tirana, Albania;
Siegfried Angerer

even further. Perhaps it was the blood rushing to his head from all that upside-down maneuvering, but the creator of the inverted flat spin — an aerobatic move in which the airplane revolves nose-first and upside-down around an imaginary point — went on to devise what would come to be known as "Formula One in the sky."

The first Red Bull air race



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: ULRICHGRILL.COM/RED BULL PHOTOFILES; PREDRAG VUCKOVIC/RED BULL PHOTOFILES; JURGEN SKARWAN/RED BULL PHOTOFILES

ONE RED BULL AVIATOR SOARS THROUGH THE NIGHT SKY WITH FLAMES RISING 1,000 FEET HIGH OFF EACH WING.

took place in Zeltweg, Austria, at AirPower 2003. Racing against the clock, pilots navigated a challenging race course in the sky, executing tight turns through inflated "air gates," or pylons, with no room for error. The event's success led to subsequent races in Budapest, Reno, Nevada and Kemble, England. That first race has since grown into its current

incarnation, the Red Bull Air Race World Series, a 13-stop racing tour through nine countries, with only the most experienced pilots competing.

If flying at 350 knots 30 feet above ground in a Zivko Edge 540, diving through gates set just 50 feet apart (a plane's wingspan is 30 feet) and pulling back on the stick as hard as possible — all while experiencing up to 10 Gs of force — seems like the ultimate rush, that's about right. But don't expect to take part anytime soon. Due to the extreme nature of the race, wannabes must place in the top 15 at the World Aerobatic Championships, *then* must still be invited to be a Red Bull air racer. "Who gets to go is pretty exclusive, and it upsets some people," Nevolo says. "But big deal, because safety is number one for us. It's pretty dangerous. Not everyone [can fly this way]."

One person who can is Kirby Chambliss, five-time U.S. National Aerobatic Champion and current Red Bull Air Race World Series Champion. Though this do-or-die pilot claims to drink Red Bull for breakfast in lieu of coffee, it's safe to say he doesn't need canned energy to compete. "Flying like this is almost a form of exercise," he says. "I love performing the race and extracting everything the machine can give. In Red Bull races, you're pulling huge Gs and the gates are whizzing by, so it's hugely exciting. You're being slammed around. It's 10 Gs on your body — I weigh about 200 pounds — so that equates to my body weighing about 2,000 pounds. I also do about eight negative Gs, and that equates to about 1,600 pounds trying to throw me out of the airplane, with the seat belt the only thing holding me in. It's pretty wild."

For others, perhaps. Chambliss, who has logged more than 25,000 hours in the air (or nearly four years), says it's become as predictable as flying autopilot: "I do it so much, it's just the way I make my living now."

Chambliss's job, naturally, comes with one crucial benefit: the excitement of having millions of spectators around the globe flock to his Red Bull demonstrations. The Red Bull Air Race attracted 1.2 million viewers in both Berlin and Barcelona last year and another 1.1 million in Budapest. "We have some of the largest live-event draws of almost any sporting event in history," Nevolo claims. Angelo Boscolo, the Red Bulls' commander, has said, "All one does is take risks. But when there are 10,000 people below you, their eyes glued to the formation, you're filled with a terrific euphoria."

"A lot of what we try to do is get people interested in aviation and give them a show," Nevolo says. And whether Red Bull is providing the platform for accomplished aviators to push the limits or exposing others to the history of aircraft and the excitement of flight, it all boils down to Mateschitz and his desire to share aviation with as many people as he can. "It's so close to the owner's heart, it's a true passion," Nevolo adds. "And [the airmen] love to do it. At any price, at any cost it doesn't matter — as long as they get to fly and have fun in airplanes." ■

Additional reporting by Liz Moscrop