

6 THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT PILOTING A BLIMP

BY CHARLIE SMITH (AS TOLD TO BRAD NELSON)
PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL GRECCO
ON CHARLIE SMITH: PANTS BY DOCKERS, SHIRT BY METLIFE



1. SNOOPY HAS SIBLINGS. "Our company, the Lightship Group, owns and operates three MetLife blimps. Two fly full-time year-round, while a third, Snoopy 3, is inflated only in summer months. We primarily cover golf and football, with the occasional basketball game or tennis match thrown in. Otherwise, we'll spend time in cities giving tours to groups or flying around to advertise."

2. OUR PLAN IS PAT. "A typical game day flight is six to eight hours, unless a storm or strong winds force us down. Our route depends on the sport we're covering. If it's a stadium event, we either circle the venue or stay on the same side as the sun, which is better for the picture. Golf is harder, because we have to cover 18 holes that run in different directions and players moving all over the place."

3. OCCASIONALLY THERE'S SOME TURBULENCE. "My favorite stadiums to fly over are Lambeau Field and the new Cowboys one; it's impressive. On the other hand, events in New York and DC are tough because there are so many airspace restrictions. We don't file a flight plan, but we stay in contact with air traffic control to make sure the skies are clear."

4. THERE ARE LOTS OF COOKS IN THE COCKPIT. "Each crew has 14 people: two pilots, two mechanics, a crew chief and a ground crew, who assist with takeoffs, landings and transporting equipment. On game days there's also a cameraman with us, and I'm wired to the TV director."

5. THE REAL FLYING IS POSTGAME. "We spend roughly a week in each city. During football season, we'll leave on Monday after the game. The blimp has a cruising speed of 40 mph, so it takes a few days to get to the next destination. The rest of our crew drives. We can land only in certain spots, because few airports have the open fields we need."

6. DIRIGIBLE AIR IS RAREFIED. "I started piloting three years ago, after I graduated from flight school. The salary is less than airlines pay, but since we travel all year, we have no car payments or mortgages. It's a stepping stone to other piloting jobs for some people, but it can be tough; we're gone 11 months of the year. Most people can't do that."