

## LIFE FROM THE BIRD'S EYE VIEW

*Interview with Matthew Monfredi, the Channel 6 Zooballoon\* operations manager in Philadelphia Zoo, USA*  
*\*Channel 6 Zooballoon is the HiFlyer renamed after its sponsor*

Matt became a part of the Lindstrand family some 10 years ago: from Tenerife to Philadelphia Matt was the key person in installation and smooth running of the HiFlyer systems. He saw it all from the bird's eye view and went far beyond just the system maintenance: he was promoting the ballooning business by establishing strong relationships with tour operators and excursion companies, and made the balloon a real success on every site where he worked.

We caught him in Philadelphia, just after the inflation of the second envelope for the Channel 6 Zooballoon ride. Working for over 6 years in the Zoo is interesting enough, not mentioning other exotic sites where Matt was working, so we asked him to share with us some fun facts from his experience.

**The HiFlyer in Tenerife**



**The HiFlyer in Barcelona**

**Matt, how did you start working with the HiFlyers? What was the first location? Your memories of early days, maybe some interesting stories and facts.**

**M.M.** I was approached by a guy who I had worked for previously in the Channel Islands. My first reaction was to ask him if he was crazy to ask me because I had no experience with balloons (gas or hot air) he said that I could come to the Lindstrand factory and work with the guys for a while and they would teach me all I needed to know. Because of my situation at the time and the chance to work in Tenerife I accepted his offer. I lived and worked in Tenerife for 3 years on the balloon, and I also helped to build up the business by developing relationships with the tour operators and the local excursion companies. It was a great place to live and work and the balloon was really popular - it was one of the first things you saw driving in to Las Americas and we had people coming to ride from 12pm to 12am.

After about three and a half years in Tenerife I moved to Barcelona. I helped with the construction and inflation of their system. The launch of the balloon was a big event as they did it on 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2000 with a live TV broadcast. I stayed in Barcelona and managed the HiFlyer for about a year, but after a while I grew a little homesick and decided to leave and go back to England.

**How did you start to work for Philadelphia Zoo?**

**M.M.** I've been in Philadelphia since March 2002. Fortunately they brought me to Philly about a month before they were ready to inflate. Because of that I was able to take control and get a lot of things organized before the Lindstrand crew came out. The time of the installation of the system is always an event worth witnessing: from the heavy lift involved in placing the winch to the inflation of the envelope. If the site has been prepared properly the installation of the main winch, the mooring winches and the platform usually takes about 4-5 days. Then its time for the inflation of the balloon: this typically starts around noon and runs through the night but lately it's been getting quicker.

**Could you please share your overall impressions of operating the system and its maintenance?**

**M.M.** The Lindstrand HiFlyer is so well designed and built if you follow the instruction manual it is easy to operate and maintain. Operator error is the only reason that anything could go wrong really. I am proud of the fact that on all of the systems I have worked on there has never been an issue that was my fault or down to the system. That's over 10 years and I am even more proud that I am the first operator to do 6 and half years on one



**Philly Zoo 2002-2008**

site without incident, and the first operator to see one envelope to the end of its life and install a new one. All of this and more would not be attainable without having the best product available.



Matt Monfredi

**What is the difference that you found in operating the HiFlyer in Philly Zoo from the other locations?**

**M.M.** The biggest issue in Philadelphia are the extremes in temperature annually: in the summer it can get up to 95°F and in the winter we get winds blowing down from the artic. This is an issue because we like to keep our balloon inflated year round so when it gets cold the gas contracts so you need to top up the balloon with helium, but you don't want to put in too much of helium because you have to let it go again when the weather starts to warm up. So keeping the right amount of helium over the 12 months and sticking to a budget was a little tricky at first but its site specific like most things with the system and you soon learn the best way deal with the issues.

The difference in the temperature changes was never an issue in Tenerife because of the subtropical climate so everyday was more or less the same. Not to say that there were no issues, though one big one I can remember there was just getting the electricity supply on site, so we had to dig a half mile trench and install the cable.

Barcelona I'd say is mixture of the others but nonetheless still had its own unique issues that needed to be resolved, but that's the fun of the job.

**Matt, could you please share some funny stories that have happened in balloon? Working in the zoo you probably had some very unusual passengers.**

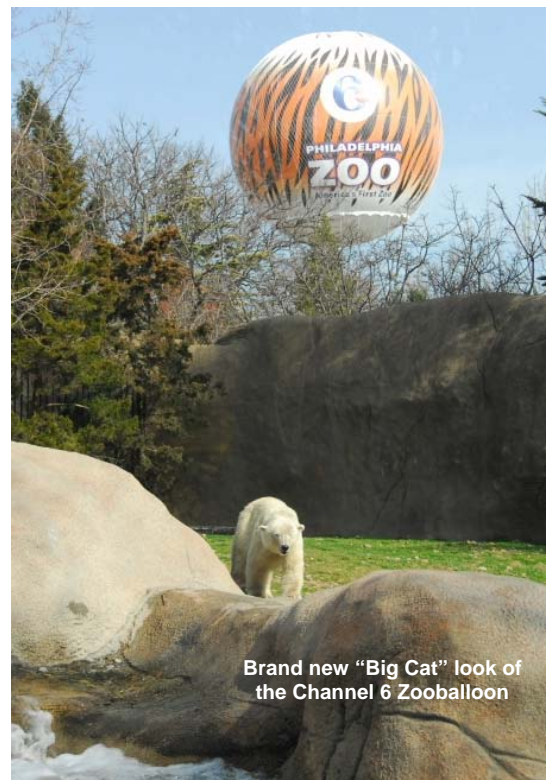
**M.M.** We used to have a bird show at the zoo and as part of that we used to release an African fish eagle from a special cage that I designed and attached to the gondola. We did this 3 times a day and it was a spectacular site to see a bird with a 12ft wing span swooping down from 400ft (120m) to its handler.

We had Jeff Corwin on one flight with a 13ft Python; and we let seeing eye dogs go with their owners, we've had numerous marriage proposals on the balloon, and a couple of weddings and Bar Mitzvah's.

Every year the zoo has its big fund raiser (Zoobilee) and the balloon is always the focal point usually serving as the VIP area. Athletes, local and international celebrities, more than I can remember have ridden not just on this one in Philly but also in Tenerife and Barcelona. The balloon here is booked on a regular basis for cooperate parties by some of the biggest companies in Philadelphia. You hear the balloon being talked about on local radio and TV all the time.

The HiFlyer that was in Niagara Falls flew the most people in one day but they were open for at least 12 hours. Their number pales when you compare it to the fact that we flew 1259 people in one 9 hour period and we regularly fly 1000 people a day and are only open from 9.30 a.m. to 5.00 p.m.

One funny story to finish - we did a special flight one evening for some elderly people who are very fond of the zoo. We get them to the top of the flight and after a couple of minutes I'm looking up and I see something like a white smoke coming out of the gondola! So I get on the radio to the pilot (thinking he had set off the fire extinguisher) to see what was happening, and it turns out that the friend of the elderly group who had passed away wanted his ashes scattered at the zoo! So they decided that the balloon was the best place to do this from and they didn't want to tell me before in case I wouldn't let them do it!



Brand new "Big Cat" look of the Channel 6 Zooballoon

*Interviewed by Lena Kononova*