



Tribune Photo/ED RONCO

‘Blueberry Cluster’ takes flight

Cluster balloon pilot Jonathan Trappe ascends over Plymouth shortly after dawn Sunday. The 38 balloons were dubbed a “Blueberry Cluster” in honor of the Marshall County Blueberry Festival currently in progress. For more coverage, turn to the Local section.

Jonathan Trappe, 35, talks with spectators and volunteers during his slow-ascent launch from the soccer field at Riverside Intermediate School, 905 Baker St., in Plymouth.

Tribune Photo
ED RONCO



Pilot takes flight tied to balloon cluster

■ Careful planning, good luck make for successful trip.

By **ED RONCO**

Tribune Staff Writer

PLYMOUTH — When most people fly, they count on a lot to be holding them airborne: powerful engines, a bunch of steel and, just in case, a seat cushion that may be used as a flotation device.

When Jonathan Trappe flew on Sunday, he counted on cooperative winds, a sturdy harness and, just in case, an emergency parachute that may be used as, um, an

emergency parachute.

Fortunately that last bit wasn't necessary during Trappe's nearly 10-hour flight over northern Indiana on Sunday attached to cluster balloons — 38 large helium balloons grouped together and attached to a harness holding the 35-year-old North Carolina pilot.

The flight was part of the Marshall County Blueberry Festival and Trappe's "Blueberry Cluster" balloons took off just after sunrise from the soccer field behind Riverside Intermediate School, 905 Baker St., in Plymouth.

His path took him up toward Lake Michigan, down toward Argos, back up toward the lake, and then in a smile-shaped track from

Plymouth, south of Knox, over Bass Lake before curving northwest and touching down south of Valparaiso.

"If you look at the track it's pointed straight toward Chicago," Trappe said by phone after landing. "I thought that I'd be landing on the Sears Tower."

He climbed, trying to find different winds that would change his direction away from Lake Michigan and Chicago, but all the winds were pointing toward the city.

And with the densely populated northwest Indiana region straight ahead, Trappe decided to put himself down, entering a steep descent

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Balloon

before landing around 4:50 p.m. EDT.

Sunday was Trappe's second cluster balloon flight, and he was meticulous during his preparations. But then, if you were suspended from a bunch of balloons at nearly 18,000 feet, you'd probably be a little careful, too.

In the pre-dawn hours before Sunday's launch, Trappe measured water bags to be used as ballast, made sure the balloons were anchored to his harness in the right positions, and still found time to answer questions

from onlookers.

Then, as the 6 a.m. Angelus bells rang out from a nearby church, he called South Bend's air traffic control to check in one last time, launching shortly after 7:10 a.m. in almost perfect silence, punctuated only by clicking cameras and applause.

"When you fly a gas balloon, you fly perfectly with the wind," he said. "It's the most pure form of flight — it connects you to where you're flying."



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