



Home race in Perth could be tonic Hall needs

PERTH – Matt Hall will be counting on a big home crowd and the familiar surroundings of Australia to help put his Red Bull Air Race world championship season back on track in Perth at the second race of 2010 in Perth on April 17/18.

The former RAAF fighter pilot, who lived in Perth for 2-1/2 years when he began his military flying career two decades ago, is focused and determined to make a big move up in the championship standings after sorting out a technical malfunction in the season-opener in Abu Dhabi that left him back in a disappointing eighth place.

“There is something to be said about home advantage,” said Hall, who admits he has a soft spot in his heart for Perth because it is where the early stages of his military his flying career began. “I’m hoping there will be record-breaking crowds in Perth this year.”

Hall, who set a new standard for rookies by taking third overall in 2009, has never flown an air race in front of his compatriots before but is looking forward to the special challenges of his home race even though many pilots, including 2009 champion Paul Bonhomme of Britain, have struggled at home. The reasons are complex but it seems to be due in part to heavy demands from media and the intangible yet unintentional pressures associated with the crush of fans, friends and well-wishers.

“Often it can be a disadvantage flying at home,” said Hall, a decorated RAAF fighter pilot before switching to the race last year. “The only person who can put pressure on me is me. Having the support of family, friends and fans should only be positive and it is up to me to make sure I take this as positive – and not pressure.”

Hall has already had experience dealing with pressure in Perth. He was a top candidate to join the Red Bull Air Race the last time it took place here in Western Australia in 2008, the third time Perth hosted a race. He flew in the pre-race entertainment before that 2008 season finale and remembers the pressure then was already growing as hopes of his winning a cockpit in the race were swirling around in the Australian media.

“I knew then I was in with a shot to race the following year though nothing had yet been confirmed,” said Hall, 38. “It was quite stressful in the end as the hype was being built up and the fallout if I did not get in was going to be shattering. As it turned out everything went in my favour.”

Hall and his team have worked hard to sort out the technical problems that knocked him out in Abu Dhabi last month. He was flying well, showing solid improvements in each training session, and was poised for the second podium of his career after posting

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the second fastest net time in the Top 12 round. But Hall's new MXS-R plane failed to start for the Super 8 round and he was stuck on the tarmac with a DNS (Did Not Start).

"Finishing with a DNS was disappointing but we know we're on the right track," Hall said.

"We're running so much equipment in the aircraft that our battery just couldn't keep up. This seems to be a combination of a number of factors, one of which was our battery being out of power. We have dug down deep to find out what caused the battery to be flat, why we could not start with external power and how to avoid it in the future. And we are on track to have everything back on track for Perth."

Adding to the team's optimism for Perth – on top of the enthusiastic home crowd and being surrounded by the comforting sounds of Australian English 24/7 — is the fact that Hall will also be flying with a new and more powerful engine. That the team has been able to spend nearly two weeks in Perth extensively testing the plane and the set-up has helped boost confidence further.

"The first race was obviously disappointing," Hall said. "The bottom line is that this is a motor sport and sometimes things like this happen. It's not devastating but may still be a dent in the year's final result. If we stick to our goals of safety and improvement, the first race was not that bad on the longevity of improvement, just in the one-off specific race."

Hall knows the Perth track has been one of the most challenging in the past with lots of upsets at the top. But those races were held in November, when the "Fremantle Doctor" often brings in strong and cool sea breezes. Hall points out that most of his rivals have more experience flying the track over the Swan River.

"There are a few difficult gates in Perth but the Fremantle Doctor will not be as much of an influence in this race as in the past due to the time of the year," Hall said. "I'm playing it as an advantage but in reality I have never raced here so it's a brand new location for me."

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