

Beketov by Balloon 2026 - In Siberia

During my preview of the race, I noticed the preliminary routings always ended up north of the finish at the 16th day when running out of winds. I also noticed prevailing winds were very often from the south and getting south would be difficult. I didn't want to gamble that sometime after getting north of the line the winds might change to allow southbound flight. My plan was to head south as much as possible from the start. The finish line could easily be approached from the south. The north route might work but it seemed unlikely. I set overnight DC's to go south.

In the morning, I was able to make a midmorning check in. Very few balloons were attempting to go south. Notably CriticalHippo was heading a bit further SW, and WRmirekd was heading a bit more SE and I was in between. A couple other balloons were with us. Not more than 4 or 5. Notably I saw Freyja leaving late and also heading south.

We were going to be forced east in a day or so and our progress was minimal, but I just kept routing a mark to the south to see what the best guess was at how far south I could feasibly get and how much south did I need to head east and approach the finish. My wind negotiations were not going favorably. The winds were stubborn and no amount of pleading changed their minds. Eventually, I was able to formulate a plan and began enforcing my own version of stubbornness in my wind diplomacy. There were several times where I just had to wait for the winds to change enough to allow my approximate desired course to work out.

All the while I kept an eye on the fleet. Hippo passed me one night opting for more east and a bit north. Mirek deserted me almost the second or third day and headed a bit NE to join garent and perhaps it was Kipper. I was really shocked to see Mirek desert the south so quickly. Perhaps his wind diplomacy had gone poorly, or had he seen something I hadn't. It left me pondering for days. Freyja continued and got closer as the slowdowns allowed a lot of compression to occur. It progressed this way for several days.

Notably there was a sudden shift in the fleet about mid race when suddenly traffic in the south got very busy. Many balloons joining Renegade. Hippo was back and with friends this time, and was again to my SW, Freyja to the NE and even Wetwing, northern most balloon early in the race had shifted and zoomed south to become one of the most southern balloons. I believe he said he was heading to Nepal but must have eventually changed his mind as I detected he had headed back NE into the fleet. So, south had become vogue and I was not happy about it because I knew what it meant to have a lot of traffic around. Life was keeping me minimally attentive to steering but I was still maximally focused on strategy.

As time passed the finish was approaching and winds were shifting to favor a dash to the line. With about 1/3rd the distance to go I noticed ITA210 and garent had bolted overnight. I was with Freyja and BS1. I ran routes and found that perhaps they were heading to the north of the line because there was a front predicted with nearly N to S winds for a few days. If you

missed it, you could be stuck. I wasn't sure if I should try that. They had gained a lot of distance, and I had to decide on changing my plan or continue drifting along my desired route of approaching the line from the south. Hmm. Time passed, I waited to decide at my end of day WX, before signing out. End of day came and I still noticed the front. Had just enough time to get in position north of the line if I wanted to. I decided to go for it and opened her up TWA 179-180 to hold a line south of ITA210 and garent.

The next morning disaster had struck. ITA & garent were further east and south. The predicted front was no longer in the forecast. I had been suckered. Slamming on the breaks I drifted SE slowly at TWA +/- 63.4 to correct some of the damage and assess a new plan. Luckily both ITA and garent continued further north and I thought there might be a good chance with the new forecast to pass south of them arching toward the finish. It was still in sight. I had almost gone too far north. As winds eased, I was able to head east to the line at max speed TWA 180. I noticed, as originally predicted, that balloons to the south would be better positioned. Both Freyja and BS1 blew past me and ms0689 looked likely to do so as well. I thought it will be close and set overnight DCs to switch from TWA 180 to COG at the Wx to best approximate max speed while ensuring I don't fly past the line if the winds should change again overnight. I had abandoned wind diplomacy a week earlier and didn't want to take any chances. Luck held, in the morning I found Renegade had just managed to hold P3 on the podium by 35 seconds over ms0689. That was close.

I wondered what happened to Hippo? Where was Wetwing now? North, South, Nepal??? I had noticed Mirek positioned to follow Renegade in along with Sadlersailing, CollegeFund and Dikkehenk, all of whom passed garent on their way to the finish. It was dangerous to be north. That was close. Oh, I said that before. I thought it originally. Next time I'll have to stick to the plan.

All in all, this was a fun, very strategic race.

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