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Framingham grad to pilot Goodyear blimp over Sox-Angels game tonight

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Framingham native Nathan Brooks, who will fly the Goodyear blimp over tonight's Boston Red Sox west coast playoff game versus the Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim, gives a thumbs up from the blimp's cockpit. (Courtesy: Bob Urhausen, Goodyear's Airship P.R. Manager)

By Matt Rocheleau, Globe Correspondent

As a young boy growing up in Framingham, Nathan Brooks would imagine that if he were to sprint fast enough with both arms outstretched, he might take off into the sky. Tonight, he will fly over the Red Sox-Angels game in Anaheim -- aboard a flying ship that few have ever piloted.

The 29-year-old graduate of Framingham High School and Framingham State College recently became Goodyear's newest blimp pilot -- one of 146 people nationwide with the lighter-than-air aircraft certification needed to pilot a blimp, according to registration data provided by Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) spokesman Roland Herwig.

"It's the next best thing to flying over Fenway Park," Brooks said.

Throughout about a year's worth of training onboard the California-based "Spirit of America" airship -- one of 72 blimps in the country registered with the FAA -- Brooks has flown the commercial advertising blimp above area festivities, including the New Year's Day Rose Parade, and above major sporting events.

"You have those moments where you think 'I can't believe I'm getting paid for this,'" Brooks said in an interview. "And you just can't help but smile."

Among the highlights so far have been soaring over home games during the Los Angeles Lakers' NBA championship-winning season as well as over home games for the MLB postseason-qualifying Los Angeles Dodgers and Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim. Additionally, he's circled the skies above area NASCAR races and dozens of college football games.

Despite being around 1,500 feet above the action, he said the view from the cockpit is not bad, in part because blimps generally cruise around 30 miles per hour with a max speed of around 50 mph.

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feet, with a max speed of around 30 mph.

“It’s fairly majestic. It’s almost like being on a cruise ship. You can relax and take everything in,” he said.

“We’ve never been accused of speeding,” he added, jokingly.

The Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company announced Brooks’ addition as a blimp pilot after he passed a “check flight” on September 24 to earn a commercial lighter-than-air aircraft pilot’s rating at the company’s Airship Operations facility in Carson, Calif.

While at Framingham High School, Brooks joined the National Guard. Following graduation, he attended Framingham State College, graduating Magna Cum Laude in 2003, with a bachelor’s in geography and a concentration in environmental studies.

After college, he decided to enlist in the National Guard’s aviations training despite being told by others that he would likely not have much success in becoming a pilot because he wears prescription glasses.

However, Brooks received a license to fly a helicopter, and “once I became a pilot, I thought the sky’s the limit,” he said.

While living in East Falmouth and flying helicopters for the National Guard Brooks began searching for jobs piloting aircraft with a particular interest in moving to the west coast. He typed “pilots in L.A.” into Google, the online search engine, and among the results were an opening to fly a Goodyear blimp.

Brooks said he almost didn’t apply because he had no training flying anything other than helicopters and he knew obtaining a license to pilot a blimp can only be done through on-the-job training – there’s no signing up for classes or lessons on your own because of the rarity of blimps and, as a result, a low demand for people to fly them.

So when Brooks was given the job, he was psyched, but tried to keep things in perspective.

“It’s pretty uplifting [to be one of 146 blimp pilots in the U.S. licensed with the FAA],” he said. “But you always try to stay grounded and not think about that too much. But it does put a smile on my face.”

According to Goodyear, there are fewer blimp pilots than there are astronauts.

He added that flying for Goodyear, “a huge corporate icon,” often above thousands of spectators and millions more watching live on nationally-televised TV is both humbling and fearful.

“There’s a huge responsibility on your shoulders,” Brooks said.

What’s more, Brooks said he’s had to grow accustomed to spending hours at a time over a quarter of a mile above ground.

“I’m not afraid of heights, but I am afraid of the potential to fall,” he said.

Brooks said the most challenging aspects of flying an airship are taking off and landing. However, he can’t do either alone.

Goodyear staffs at least 16 ground crew members to a blimp, including aircraft mechanics, electronic technicians and riggers, who ride in three specially equipped ground-support vehicles by highway as the blimp flies from one event to another.

An empty GZ-20 model blimp weighs about 12,840 pounds. Inflated with helium it weighs only 100 to 200 pounds, depending on the amount of fuel, payload and ballast aboard.

Inside the blimp, there are no flight attendants to serve mid-flight meals or snacks. When he’s planning to be in the air for several hours, Brooks packs a

... cooler with some drinks and sandwiches.

But the airship can seat another six passengers – often another pilot and a cameraman – besides the pilot.

Passenger rides on the Goodyear blimps last about a half hour to an hour and are available by company invitation only. Most riders are customers, winners of local charity auctions, local dignitaries, or members of the press.

Brooks joins Goodyear's three other pilots based in California – Pilot-in-Charge Jon Conrad, Assistant Pilot-in-Charge Matthew St. John, and Senior Pilot Kristen Davis.

The tire company has eight additional blimp pilots and operating two other blimps – the "Spirit of Goodyear" in Akron, Ohio, and the "Spirit of Innovation" in Pompano Beach, Florida.

The tiremaker's blimp tradition began in 1925 when it built its first airship, the "Pilgrim," and airships in the company's fleet were used by the American military during World War I and II.

"The Goodyear blimp has a lot of history," said Brooks. "I think I've really landed where I want to be ... I just want to keep flying and getting better and more experienced."

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12 COMMENTS SO FAR...

1. I've known Nathan since sophomore year in high school. He's gone through a lot in his life and has worked hard to get where he is at. He inspires us all to be better and to (no pun intended) reach for the skies. Congrats and best of luck Captain Brooks.

Posted by [Tony W](#) October 9, 09 12:00 PM

2. Very proud of you Nate. You are a great kid and it couldn't happen to a better guy!

Posted by [Luke Callahan](#) October 9, 09 01:18 PM

3. Determined and hard working are two characteristics that Nathan personifies. He's an inspiration and a fine young man. Congrats.

Posted by [Aaron St. Lawrence](#) October 9, 09 01:42 PM

4. Good for you Nathan!

Posted by [Tanya B. Williams](#) October 9, 09 01:46 PM

5. Congratulations, Nathan, on reaching your goal and taking our alma mater to greater heights!

Posted by [FSC '74 alum](#) October 9, 09 03:40 PM

6. Good for him! I did have one question though, do blimp pilots get free Goodyear tires as a fringe benefit? ;)

Posted by [Jim](#) October 9, 09 03:44 PM

7. I live in Framingham, good for this kid- sounds like a pretty sweet job.

Posted by [josh](#) October 9, 09 03:48 PM

8. Cool! A good story about young people, of which there are so many. I wish we could hear more about people like this. Not every young person is out killing.

Posted by [local](#) October 9, 09 03:50 PM

9. It's an interesting employment opportunity, but I have just one question, "Do you get foodstamps with that paycheck?"

Posted by alan October 9, 09 03:56 PM

10. Congratulations Nathan! Always glad to hear happy news and am hoping you will be our good luck charm. GoSox! BTW Nathan, I hope the Boston Globe will put your name, not the name Jason, under your photo here so that you can keep it for your future grandchildren. Boston Globe, please change the caption under the photo.

Posted by Sharon October 9, 09 04:00 PM

11. Nathan...enjoy...hope your presence brings the Sox some luck!

Posted by QuigLewis October 9, 09 04:28 PM

12. Nate is a stand-up guy and someone everyone from his hometown should be proud of. Congrats ma, you deserve everything you have worked so hard for!

Posted by Dave Halbert October 9, 09 04:37 PM

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