

# VETERAN SHOWMAN BRINGS THRILLS TO SALINAS SKIES

By MARY BROWNFIELD

**MIKE GOULIAN** is so at home in his airplane, he can claim flying death-defying stunts is second nature.

But he doesn't necessarily want it to look that way. When he pilots his Extra 300 SC through a 12-minute routine above the crowd at Salinas Municipal Airport during this weekend's California International Airshow, he wants to captivate his audience.

"We make no bones about it: We want to make a rock show in the sky, and we want everybody to stand up and cheer when it's over," he told *The Pine Cone*. "We don't want it to be beautiful; we want it to be mind blowing."



Mike Goulian

Considering his talent, skill level and passion, that won't be hard. Born and raised in Massachusetts, the son of a flight-school owner, Goulian has been flying since 1984 and bought his first competition aircraft in 1986 at the age of 18. In 1989, he won 13 of 14 regional competitions and was named Advanced National Aerobic Champion in 1990. More championships followed, and he was a three-

time member of the U.S. Aerobatic Team at the Unlimited Level. In 2006, he joined the Red Bull Air Race as Team No. 99 and won the Budapest race last year. He also took highly regarded showmanship awards in 2006 and 2009.

"I don't know if you choose aviation as much as aviation chooses you," he said. "It's like any endeavor that has a lot of passion, not a lot of money and a lot of danger: Do you really want to jump off of this cliff? I'm not sure I really had a choice of doing anything else."

Intensely competitive, Goulian was playing hockey with his brother as soon as they could walk and took up golf — which remains another passion of his — at 9. When the brothers were around 14 years old, they went to work for their father at the flight school, handling tasks like washing airplanes, so they would learn the value of a buck.

There, Goulian turned his competitive eye toward being a pilot.

"Anything in life that I've tried to do, I've tried to do it absolutely well," he said. "I either want to be a scratch golfer, or I don't want to do it at all. It's the same with flying."

He learned quickly and studied hard in Florida at one of the nation's half-dozen specialized flight training schools.

"Competition aerobatic flying is similar to ice skating, where you have a specific set of maneuvers being watched by judges from the ground," he said. Over the course of a dozen years, "that makes you an incredible aviator."

He worked with a coach who critiqued every move, communicating with Goulian via radio as he flew.

"What you see from the airplane looks very different to someone on the ground," he explained. "You always think you're a rockstar when you're in the plane."

After thousands of flights and 5,000 hours in the air and practicing every day, flying has become natural for Goulian. He and his crew plan his routines, drawing from a catalog of skillful maneuvers he has honed during his years as a pilot, and he practices — a lot.

"A lot of it is mental, and that will go away in a week, so you have to do it every day," he said.

That allows him to make sure his flying is exhilarating to watch and spot-on accurate. Among Goulian's favorite maneuvers are those that involve tumbling nose over tail, then stopping in midair.

"The airplane will hang there," he said, until he turns on the smoke, the music starts again and he heads into a dive.

### Why Salinas is tops

Goulian arrived in town last weekend and spent a few days golfing with fellow aerobatic star Sean Tucker at Spanish Bay, Tehama and Spyglass Hill, which he called an "airshow pilot's golf course," because "you can stand up there and hit it like a big boy."

He's also been practicing and surveying the airport grounds. "Salinas is not a very easy place to fly," he said.

But he loves the show and said it's a favorite among aerobatic pilots for its well organized implementation, friendly staff and volunteers, eager spectators and welcoming community. This year is the California International Airshow's 30th, and it's celebrating giving more than \$7 million to local nonprofits since its inception.

"If you have it on your calendar as an airshow performer, it will be one of the highlights of the season, not because of the size or the number of people who attend, but because of who the people are," he said, mentioning media coordinator



PHOTO/COURTESY MIKE GOULIAN

Red Bull air racer and aerobatics star Mike Goulian always seeks to wow the crowd at the Salinas airshow.

Julie Ann Lozano and executive director Harry Wardwell.

"This is a show that's as organized as any in the country, and they're just amazingly good at what they do," said Goulian, who flies in 18 shows per year. "No. 1, it's an honor, and No. 2, it's a joy to come here."

He also praised organizers' ability to mix up the show every year to keep people interested, and their efforts to get the community involved.

"You come here, and there are Salinas Airshow signs on

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