

'It's a bird; it's a plane; it's . . . an ad?



Gary West, owner of Gary's Banners, unfurls one of 40 or so banners that flew over the University of Michigan stadium during a recent football game.

By William Coutant
staff writer

If the advertising maxims "target your audience" and "air it out" ring true, some magnificent men in their flying machines are certainly in the right business.

You might think about that the next time you go to a football game. Why a ball game? When you can barely find room to stand up because you're packed between fans and the quarter has ended — so there's nothing much happening down on the field — look up. You'll see anything from a marriage proposal to a sign extolling the virtues of a brand of beer — all flying behind an airplane about 200 feet above.

It may seem like a sideshow, a curiosity of sorts to see a plane dragging a sign across the sky saying "Beverly, will you marry me?" But there are people making a living at it.

"When you consider how much it costs to put an ad on TV or in a newspaper, this is a lot less," said Stewart Hayes, owner of Aerial Advertising in Troy. "You have a captive audience of over 100,000

people at a football game (at Michigan home games), and they're all going to see what you're flying."

HAYES SHOULD know. He runs seven-day-a-week aerial advertising business from April to November, has four airplanes and keeps several pilots and ground crew workers busy. Although most of his advertising is done in the metro area, he's flown as far as Mackinac Island to show a personal message.

But a love of flying isn't enough. This is not the easiest way to make a living.

"Making a living by flying is a tough nut to crack," Hayes said. "This year we had 15 out of 17 weekends where it rained. That just kills your business. If it's bad weather and you can't fly, you can't get your sign up."

Then there is the problem of finding qualified pilots to fly the planes, which are necessarily small, but with big engines needed to pull the long string of letters or signs (up to 30 by 70 feet). Many have not trained before on the L-19 "Bird dog," used in Vietnam for reconnaissance or for crop dusting, which are the type aerial advertisers use.

"It's not flying by the numbers," said Gary West, owner of Gary's Banners and Aerial Ads, Inc. "It's seat-of-the-pants barnstorming."

And when they do fly, most pilots are doing it to get enough flying

hours to qualify for a commercial license, not to make a career in advertising.

BUT AS the signs have become bigger and the planes that pull them more powerful, advertisers have seen their advantage.

Dave Thomas, of the Detroit public relations firm Thomas International, said that for certain products, putting your message up in the air may take advertising to a higher plane.

"We were introducing the Mercury Tracer and we wanted to do something unique and different for the Detroit Grand Prix," Thomas said. "It's cost-effective because you have a large amount of people who will see it."

In fact, any sporting event, even in a domed stadium such as the Silverdome, Joe Louis Arena or The Palace can provide a large, receptive audience, Thomas said. Thousands will see the ads on the way in and out of the stadiums, he said.

Still, weather puts limits on aerial advertising and the seven-day-a-week grind during the warm months can also become discouraging, as it did for Roger Zahm of Temperance.

Zahm now flies part-time and works full time as an air traffic controller.

"It's (aerial advertising) a hard

job to do full-time," he said. "The weather is unforgiving. If it snows or rains, you don't fly and you don't get paid."

Zahm also wanted to spend more time with his family, something he can now do even on those days when he flies.

"We take the whole family to the airport on football game days and have a picnic and make an outing out of it," he said.

THE MONEY he makes advertising helps support his love of flying, but Zahm relies on his day job for security.

For Hayes, winters are taken up with working at a family ski resort business in northern Michigan, but he still finds time to spend with his family. A few years ago, Hayes was offered a full-time job as a first officer with Northwest Airlines, but turned it down.

"I talked it over with my wife," he said. "But I knew I'd be away from home for three to four days a week. I didn't want to be away from my family that long. I didn't want to miss my children growing up."

West continues flying through the winter in warmer climates, such as Florida.

Aerial advertisers shy away from anything derogatory, but, with the aid of letters up to 12 feet high, they can get almost any message across to the right audience.

So the next time you go to a game, concert or race, look up and you'll probably see an ad for a hotel, beverage, pizzeria or political candidate. And it's a good bet that Beverly said yes.



Gary West mans a portable radio, using it to let his pilot know when the next banner is ready for pickup.



After a successful hook-up, the banner is lifted skyward on its trip to the stadium.

Aerial ad advice

There are some tricks to the trade of aerial advertising.

To accommodate as many customers as possible, advertisers will fly a banner, head back to the airport, drop it off and hook on another without touching down.

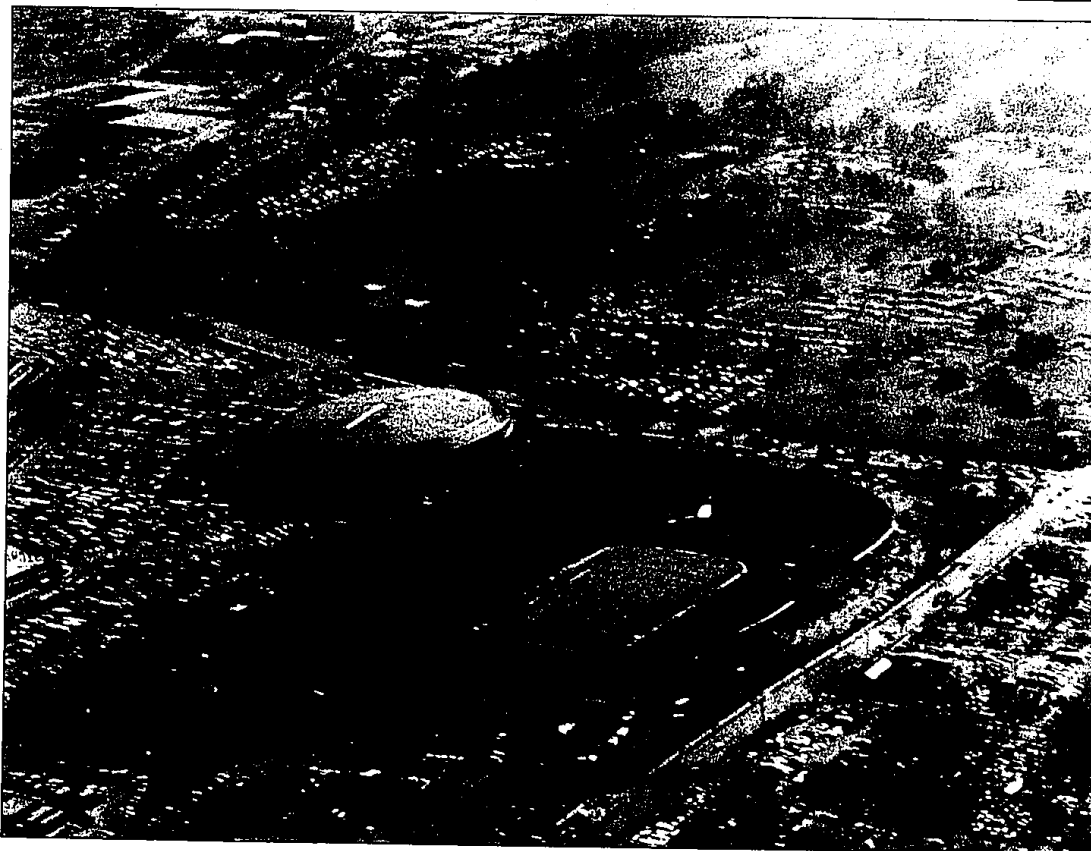
In that way, one plane can fly several banners during an event or game.

Aerial advertisers who fly in this area include:

☐ Aerial Advertising of Troy at 435-8122.

☐ Gary's Banners at 1-800-766-4279.

☐ R & M Aerial Advertising at 1-856-8088.



PHOTOS BY BILL HANSEN

From the air, it's hard to spot the three banners being flown over U-M Stadium, but for the 100,000 plus crowd, they stand out clearly against the clear autumn sky.