

Miami-Dade County JULY 6, 2015

Young Miami women fly 1966 Piper Cherokee in Air Race Classic, finish in 28th place



Odanys "Odi" Velazquez, 21, and Sandy Gonzalez, 20, pose for a photo on the way to Everett-Stewart Regional Airport in Union City, Tennessee, during the 2015 Air Classic Race.

BY EMILY COCHRANE

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For more than 20 hours, Sandy Gonzalez and Odanys Velazquez flew.

As one of 53 teams competing in the 39th annual Air Race Classic last week, the two women flew more than 2,500 miles across the eastern half of the country in their 1966 Piper Cherokee plane, finishing the final leg in first place and the entire race in 28th place.

“We were first-timers and we beat a lot more experienced people,” Velazquez, 21, said. “So it was like ‘Yeah, we did something great.’”

It was the first time the two women, who had met as pilots on the Miami Dade College Flight Team, had flown outside of Florida and encountered different elevation and short runways. After their departure from Fredericksburg, Virginia, on June 22, they flew nine legs through nine states and landed in Fairhope, Alabama, on June 25.

“Florida left us a little spoiled,” Velazquez said. “We went through conditions that we’re used to, but never really tested.”

Gonzalez, 20, said the hardest part was going through bumpy weather from Tennessee to Alabama, where they pushed through rough winds without a GPS in order to finish the leg and avoid disqualification.

“We pretty much went over everything that was remotely mentioned in our first course,” she said. “We did feel that because we were the slowest plane, we had to push through.”

For both women, the competition was one more step toward their dreams of becoming professional pilots.

“Oh my gosh, I feel so much more confident in my piloting skills,” Velazquez said. “I would love to do this experience again. It’s so cool.”

While the two women initially saw this year’s race as their only chance to compete because of its proximity to Florida, they now hope to compete again.

“I’m already looking at next year’s course,” Gonzalez said. “It’s one of the best experiences by far that a pilot could ever have.”




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