

**MEDIA RELEASE**

**13 May 2023**

## **Ed Saunders takes out top billing in Australia's top hot air ballooning competition**



*Northam, WA played host to the 23<sup>rd</sup> National Ballooning Championships this week.*

**Victoria's Ed Saunders has been declared the winner of the 23<sup>rd</sup> National Ballooning Championships following a week of sensational flying in Northam, WA.**

Since last Saturday (6 May 2023), 21 pilots from across Australia have lit up the skies with a technicolour of hot air balloons – fighting tough weather early in the week to separate the winner from the rest.

It was Ed's first time competing in Northam and the National Championships, which took place over spectacular Avon Valley rolling hills and farmland. Amongst the pilots Ed competed against were his brother Paterson who came in fourth and his sister Scarlett who placed sixth.

Ed said he came into the week with a desire to win but didn't necessarily think he would do it.

"At the beginning of the week the main goal was top four, which would get me to the World Championships in Hungary next year. But winning is the cherry on top.

"I had a really good season last year in Europe and placed 12<sup>th</sup> out of 105 in Slovenia at the World Championships, but we are aircraft relying on the wind so anything can happen.

"It was a good start to the week for me, which does give you confidence going forwards. Any lead is a good lead, and I managed to maintain it."

Ed said he owed much to the people around him. "I feel extremely humbled. It's been a dream of mine to get a National Championships win.

“One hundred percent having my family around me has made a difference in this competition. There were four of us in the team this year – my brother Pato and sister Scarlett, plus my girlfriend was navigating for her brother, pilot Harry Fraser. It was lovely having close family and friends around as it wasn’t an easy week – strategizing with the weather.

“I also have Jacob Brown who is my close friend and navigator. He does all my tech and logging, and he saved me on every front. I fly the balloon but he’s the brains of the basket.

And I’ve also got to recognise my dad who taught me to fly balloons. It’s nice to get one on the board.”

NSW pilots Matthew Scaife and reigning champion Sean Kavanagh placed second and third respectively and will also head to the World Championships along with Paterson Saunders to represent Australia.

National Championships Director Gary Lacey said it was a fairly challenging week with difficult meteorological conditions.

“Given the difficult weather conditions, there was excellent flying,” he said.

“It was clear the best pilots rose to the top but it was pretty close right to the end.

“The only way you can win a ballooning competition is consistency throughout the week and Ed achieved this.”

Tens of thousands of spectators descended on Northam for the event, watching in delight as the pilots – aged between 22 and 80 - flew overhead early in the morning and late in the afternoon.

Practice flights ahead of the championships were cancelled due to weather conditions, forcing pilots to only experience the flying area during the first competition flight on Monday morning.

Tuesday afternoon saw better flying conditions and near-perfect Avon Valley weather on Thursday and Friday saw many pilots improving their scores by manoeuvring their balloons to achieve goals, targets, scoring areas, time, and distance limits.

Spectators who missed out on the opportunity to witness the skies full of colour have a second chance this year when competitive ballooning returns to Northam from September 2 to 9 for the 5<sup>th</sup> Women’s World Hot Air Ballooning Championships – the first time the event has ever been held outside Europe. Four women who were in Northam for the Nationals will return to compete for Australia: Nicola Scaife (NSW), Scarlett Saunders (Vic), Alana Kahl (ACT) and Georgia Croft (Vic).

For full results from the 23<sup>rd</sup> National Ballooning Championships visit <https://northamballooningevents.com/> and click through to the event and ‘pilots and balloons’.

The National Ballooning Championships is organised by Northam Ballooning Events and supported by Tourism WA and The Shire of Northam.

For more information on the Australian National Ballooning Championships, visit [Northam Ballooning Events](#) or [www.facebook.com/northamballooningevents](http://www.facebook.com/northamballooningevents)

**Media information:** Janine Pittaway [jpittaway@brightcommunications.com.au](mailto:jpittaway@brightcommunications.com.au) 0418911796

[PHOTOS from this week’s competition are available here.](#)  
[VISION from this week is available here.](#)