

His title: **Champion**

Renton employee named top crane operator for '07



JIM ANDERSON PHOTO

Steve Earl, a Renton, Wash., overhead-crane operator who won a world championship late last year for his crane-related skills, prepares for his shift. In addition to a trophy, Earl earned accolades from management.

BY ELLEN WHITFORD

He paced. And from time to time, he wiped his sweaty palms on his pant legs.

Steve Earl, who's been an overhead-crane operator at Boeing's Renton, Wash., plant for 13 years, was waiting for his turn to compete for the title of the world's best crane operator. And he was nervous. He'd made it through three competitions and was now head-to-head with another Renton operator for the title of world champion. Everyone was watching.

Earl slid into a mockup of a cab, clasped the controls of the simulator, and with eyes intent on the video screen lifted a virtual load and ran the course. His time was good. His score was perfect. But when the last contender took his seat, Earl had to turn away. "I was just too nervous to watch," he said.

Bob McKay, a first-level supervisor in Commercial Airplanes' crane operations in Renton, chuckles at the irony. "Every day, these guys lift airplane parts worth millions of dollars," McKay said. "They

have just inches of room for error, yet they don't bat an eye or miss a beat. But in a little friendly competition on a simulator, they're so nervous they get sweaty palms and cotton mouth."

The contest—dubbed a "crane rodeo"—held late last year in Las Vegas, is part of an annual training forum on crane safety and procedures that draws several hundred operators from across the United States and other countries. It's hosted by the North American Crane Bureau (NACB), which provides training programs and products and services to the industry.

At the conference, participants refresh their skills and learn about equipment relevant to their work. The competition gives them a chance to test their mettle against colleagues.

To Earl's surprise, he won the title, beating out runner-up Bruce Weston, a Renton operator with 33 years of experience and a flawless work record.

"Normally," McKay said, "Earl's a serious kind of guy. He rarely cracks a smile. But that night, he wore a grin from ear to ear."

Boeing sent 11 operators to the event—

six from Renton and five from the Everett, Wash., plant. They stole the show. "What impressed me was the caliber of Boeing's operators," said Joe Crispell, NACB executive vice president and rodeo moderator.

Ron Karnes, a senior manager in Renton's crane operations, was pleased but not surprised at the showing. He knows the safety and incident record at the site. Every month, Renton operators lift roughly 3,500 to 4,000 pieces—wings, stabilizers, fuselage assemblies, landing gears, spars and other parts. In the four years he's been senior manager, Karnes said, there's never been a major incident.

The competition included four rounds, each a little longer and more difficult than the preceding. More than 50 operators competed in the first round, and the 10 with the highest scores advanced to the second round. Seven were from Boeing.

They competed again, and the four contestants with the best scores moved to the semifinals. All were Boeing employees: Earl and Weston from Renton, and David Chaires and Dane Johnson from Everett.

Renton versus Everett. The rivalry between the operators was good-natured, but fierce. Everett had participated in the 2006 conference and one of its operators, Todd Campbell, was named world champion that year. Everett hoped to defend the title.

But Renton had other plans.

"We told them we were going to steal the trophy from them," said Scott De Lappe, a crane supervisor in Renton. "A little healthy competition is good, and it was fun joking with them."

Will they attend this year's conference for further knowledge-building and competition? They hope to, Everett and Renton operators said. But Johnson, in Everett, pledged that next time, the outcome would be different: "We want those Renton guys to know that Everett is coming for the trophy." ■

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