



The AMA History Project Presents: History of the JORDAN MARSH – BOSTON TRAVELER JUNIOR AVIATION LEAGUE 1929 to 1945



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The following information on the Jordan-Traveler Junior Aviation League was derived from newspaper clippings from the Boston Traveler, Boston Herald, and New York Times in the period 1929-1943. Newspaper clippings are stored in the National Model Aviation Museum Archives.

The Jordan-Traveler Junior Aviation League (hereon referred to as the JTJAL) was one of New England's earliest model airplane clubs. The name reflects its two sponsors, the *Boston Traveler* newspaper and the Jordan Marsh Company of Boston. Though the club never had an exceedingly large membership, it did sponsor numerous guest speakers, and many of the club's membership competed at the national level. Often the club would sponsor many contests and invite non-members to compete. Field trips to local air bases were common. Through the *Traveler*, the club boasted the "greatest junior model air show" of its time.

The JTJAL was founded in 1929 under the supervision of Edward R. Mitton, Vice President of Merchandising at Jordan Marsh and Joe Toye, Chief Editorial Writer for the *Traveler*. U.S. Army Captain Willis C. Brown acted as instructor of and director for the JTJAL. The club met weekly through most of the 1930s. Activities of the JTJAL were very closely monitored by the *Traveler*, which wrote of meetings, competitions, and even commented on individual designs.

While acting as the head of the club, Brown was able to invite a number of dignified guest speakers including aeronautical engineers George Shairer and Dr. Kendrick of M.I.T. Famous aviator Wiley Post and the club attended a speech given by famous war aviator Jimmy Doolittle, presumably in 1943. The club often took weekends to view films that had an aviation theme, popular during the 1930s. Examples of those films were "West Point of the Air" (1935), "Thunderbirds" (1942), and the club often viewed instructional films that aided them in their modeling.

Competition appeared to be the focus of the JTJAL. They competed at contests in Akron, OH in 1934, competed in Nationals in St. Louis, MO in 1935, sent several members to the AMLA Nationals in Detroit in 1936, and competed regularly in a scale model contest in the Boston area and the eastern U.S. We do know a good deal about this contest, called one of the finest scale model contests in the eastern United States.

Early in JTJAL history, around 1932, the Jordan Marsh Company, along with G.M. Bellanca Company, hosted a scale model contest that often attracted the members of JTJAL to compete for 18 different cups and trophies offered by those companies. That contest featured a class A designation for experts under age 21, class B for beginners over 14 and class C for beginners 14 years of age or younger.

Also around 1932, the club became involved with Pitcairn Aircraft Company, an early autogiro pioneer. Members could work on a scale model tandem autogiro, though airplanes were the club's main interest.

A June 28, 1933 article mentions Wilbur Tyler, a club member from Boston setting a new world's record. He flew his plane for 322 seconds at Nationals in New York, topping all the older competitors. The same contest saw JTJAL member John Bartol win indoor stick with a model that stayed aloft for 17 minutes, 47 seconds. This was a world record and Bartol received the Scout Trophy. Both Tyler and Bartol were also offered a trip to the Chicago World's Fair soon after.

A February 7, 1934 article in the *Traveler* mentions member Bruno Marchi, braving the cold, a "handicap to model airplane fliers." In doing so, he flew his class B rise-off ground model to an unofficial world's record. His time was 7 minutes, 3 ½ seconds, beating the old record of 6 minutes, 24 seconds. The plane was described as having a weightless film covering the wings and body and a nearly weightless tubular motor stick.

On April 6, 1934, Marchi was touted as the Boston area's best hope of defending John Bartol's previous Nationals record at that year's contest in Akron, Ohio. Marchi had missed a record in class A by 9 seconds in glider event at the Jordan Junior Model Plane Contest.

The *Traveler* also mentioned the May 26-27, 1934 New England Championship contest (see Assistant Historian for copies of entry form), with indoor events in the famous Boston Garden and outdoor events at Harvard practice field. The paper claims this will be the largest model airplane contest held in the Boston area to date. It also states that JTJAL has in 5 years gained a membership of nearly 3500, but that non-members under age 21 are welcome to enter planes in the contest if they would like.

Three members of the JTJAL who competed in the New England championship were invited to the Eastern States outdoor contest in Newark, New Jersey based on their previous performances. Those members included Bruno Marchi, John Bartol, and Torrey Capo. Each of the young men was required to submit three planes: a single pusher, twin pusher, and commercial. With a time of 6 minutes, 39 seconds, JTJAL member Hewitt Phillips broke the world record in class A stick. Phillips also broke the record for glider duration with 21.6 seconds.

Competing in the 1934 Akron Nationals were Bruno Marchi, Wilbur Tyler, Captain Willis Brown, Harold Mitchell and a J.T. Kelliher. We do not know the results of that contest with regard to the JTJAL.

A July 8, 1934 piece in the *Traveler* covers the Junior Birdmen of America model meet in nearby Franklin Park. JTJAL member Torrey Capo won with a twin pusher, leading the field with a time of 1 minute, 48 seconds. Bruno Marchi was right behind Capo, with a time of 1 minute, 33 seconds. Marchi won in single-propeller, sustaining a flight of 1 minute, 40.25 seconds.

Scoring competitive victories in 1935, the JTJAL sent competitors to the national meet at Lakehurst, New Jersey. A piece dated August 20, 1935 describes the two new world's records achieved by Wilbur Tyler and Bruno Marchi.

In class B hand-launched indoor, Tyler flew for 20 minutes, 50 seconds. This was a full three minutes more than the previous record-holder who, we are told, was from St. Louis. Marchi flew a class A hydroplane for a record of 6 minutes, 22 seconds. This particular record is of note, because the previous record for class A hydroplane was only 1 minute, 21 seconds!

An intriguing column appeared in a May 1935 *Traveler*. The story is about a young Harvard freshman who built and flew a 17-pound radio-controlled (RC) gas model. The wingspan was a full 15 feet and is powered by a 2.5 lb Brown Jr. engine. French is quoted as being “optimistic” that gas-powered RC planes will be the next big item in airplane modeling. At that time, the duration record for that type of plane was 54 miles in a straight line, held by Maxwell Bassett of Philadelphia. Bassett flew from Camden, New Jersey to Armstrong Corners, Delaware.

The year 1936 saw record numbers of people attend the annual Jordan-Traveler aviation contest. Though no records were shattered as in previous years, a number of awards were handed out to members new and old. Bruno Marchi placed in hand-launched stick again, and young Robert Shea and Levy Walba also placed.

Information on JTJAL from the period 1937-1940 is sketchy. Records do pick up again in 1940, when longtime member Ralph Brown of Arlington, Massachusetts won the Ames Trophy, given to the winner in duration. The previous record was held by a Robert Abrahamson of the same community, scoring 8 minutes and 45 seconds. The Brown record was over 13 minutes. The year 1940 marked the ninth year that Brown had been a top competitor in the JTJAL.

Over 200 contestants were present for the 1941 New England Outdoor Model Airplane Contest, the twelfth such contest. Numerous girls were cited in the contest, a reflection of the increasing popularity of model airplanes in the pre-World War II era. Ralph Brown and Robert Abrahamson were once again amongst the top winners.

Success would belie many members of the JTJAL in the years following their membership in the club. Former champion John Bartol would go on to attend the U.S. Naval Academy in 1935. Captain Willis C. Brown would go on to serve as the first AMA President in 1936, leaving the club to a G. Bancroft Hall that year. JTJAL’s first member ever, Bernard Whitman, became a successful industrial aircraft engineer, a graduate of M.I.T.

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