

Birth of a blimp

This is the fourth installment of Blimp Garage, an occasional series chronicling the people and milestones involved in building Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co.'s new blimp at Wingfoot Lake.

Last Sunday: Crew members finished patching the 192-foot-long envelope.

Thursday: The envelope was inflated with helium for the first time.

Friday: The gondola, or car, was attached to the underneath of the envelope.

Today: Meet some of the people who are building the new blimp.



Scott Babbo

Age: 47

Hometown: Hartsville

Job: Airship base superintendent

Years with Goodyear blimp program: 19

What is it like building a blimp? There are a lot of different aspects to it. It's exciting. It's got its challenges. Every rig-build brings on different challenges, and then we move on to the next. It's fulfilling. First flight is always a good feeling.

What's the best part about working with the blimp? It's the way the people smile. It usually brings a smile to someone's face.

Scott Babbo opens a valve, releasing helium to inflate the new Goodyear blimp being built at Wingfoot Lake in Suffield Township.

PAUL TOPLE/Akron Beacon Journal photos

New blimp starts with 'rebuild' team

A Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co. blimp isn't made in just a few months.

The process that leads to a new airship taking to the sky typically can be traced back years. That's how far in advance the crew at "Blimp Garage" starts working.

It takes that long to strip down parts from retired airships and rebuild them to like-new condition at Goodyear's Wingfoot Lake hangar.

A core group of 23 people is involved in what they call the "rebuild" or assembly of the latest airship, which succeeds the Stars & Stripes blimp that crashed last summer in Florida.

Here are six members of the team working on the new blimp. In the coming months, readers will meet other workers at Blimp Garage as they ready the airship for its maiden voyage this spring.



Rob Delagrange

Age: 42

Hometown: Stow

Job: Rigger (works with cables and fabric)

Years with Goodyear blimp program: 3

What is it like building a blimp?

Sometimes tedious, like preparing the floor for the envelope by putting tape down on imperfections and cracks. Peeling old decals off, even with two shifts, can take a month. But once it gets rolling, it's fun.

What's the best part about working with the blimp? When we're done with it, and it flies. To jump in it and see different sights.



Tim Cartell

Age: 41

Hometown: Brimfield Township

Job: Rigger (works with cables and fabric)

Years with Goodyear blimp program: 5

What is it like building a blimp?

It's pretty unique. Very few people get to work on a blimp. It's not your ordinary job.

What's the best part about working with the blimp? To see the enjoyment when people take rides. To see them smile when they return.



Jared Haren

Age: 50

Hometown: Louisville

Job: Airship construction supervisor

Years with Goodyear blimp program: 20

What is it like building a blimp?

It can be really frustrating, but it can also be a rewarding experience. It's a good job if you like working with your hands and your mind. It's good when you turn it over to the crew. We're always refining the machines. We still innovate.

What's the best part about working with the blimp? A lot of the people I work with. We're like a family. This whole thing is a group effort. There's a lot of reward for the group, who are specialists. There's a lot of pride in one's craftsmanship.



Ron Dunay

Age: 49

Hometown: Canton

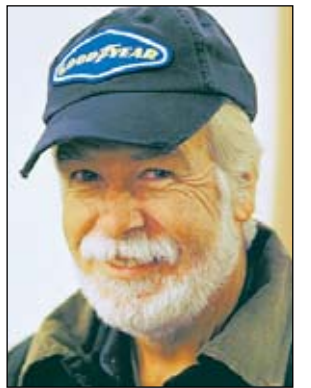
Job: Airship repair station manager

Years with Goodyear blimp program: 25

What is it like building a blimp?

It's like a giant erector set. This is the final assembly, per se. So much work goes on for two years. The last three months is really the final assembly.

What's the best part about working with the blimp? There's no other job like it. It's that uniqueness. Everybody is interested in what you do. I never thought I'd be working on blimps. People's eyes light up when you say what you do.



Tim Hopkins

Age: 50

Hometown: Suffield Township

Job: Chief mechanic

Years with Goodyear blimp program: 22

What is it like building a blimp?

I guess it would be a unique job. It's something that just a handful of people are involved in.

What's the best part about working with the blimp? Kids. Kids are infatuated with the thing.

Ohio.com: For previous articles from Blimp Garage, plus photos and videos, go to the Newsroom Projects page.

Make sure gifts include many happy returns

Know store's return policy when you buy, do what's necessary for easy return of gift



Everyone hopes the gift they spent time and energy – not to mention money – picking out for another person is perfect. They hope there is no chance of it being returned.

But if you've ever stood in the long lines that snake around store aisles on Dec. 26 to return or exchange an item, you know that returns happen.

As you do your holiday shopping, now's the time to make sure your gift recipient isn't the one who is flustered and mad after

standing in line for what seems like an eternity, only to be told the item is not returnable.

Return policies are all over the map. Some stores will only give you a store credit instead of a refund – no matter what – while others are very lenient and will take back practically anything (within reason). A store could require you to do back flips with your receipt in hand to get a refund.

"A store can have any return policy it wants, as long as it is clearly and conspicuously posted,"

said Ohio Attorney General spokeswoman Michelle Gatchell.

So make sure you enclose a gift receipt – which doesn't show the amount you paid, but has some codes on it that allow the store clerks to figure out how much you did pay – if one is available. And be familiar with the store's return policy.

Reader Mark Welu of Sagamore Hills Township makes another good point about returns – especially of gifts that will not be used right away. You may be out of luck if you

take it back beyond the window in the return policy.

A few years ago, Welu's wife bought him an outdoor patio fireplace for Christmas. Welu obviously didn't get around to trying out his present until the next summer – at which time he found out that the fireplace was broken and poorly made.

He took it back to Target with the receipt, but was told that he was beyond Target's 90-day return period. He could not get a refund, nor exchange the item for something else. He was given the manufacturer's phone number, but

Welu said he didn't want a replacement.

Welu isn't your average consumer. He's a veteran retail buyer for Kmart and OfficeMax who now has his own recycling consulting business.

"I thought for sure I'd know every button to push" to get a refund, he said.

No such luck. Welu was so angry he wrote a letter to the corporate headquarters of Target. Welu explained in the letter that he did not have time in the 90 days after Christmas to try

Please see Gift, D3

COMING MONDAY: Reporter Gary Estwick shows guys how to shop for diamonds.