

# Race Around the Sun

by Richard Elam

Steve Gordon stared out of the forward port of the *Condon Comet*, which was streaking toward the sun. A dense filter protected his eyes from the searing brilliance of the star, looming ever larger by the day and hour as the rocket devoured the miles at a speed never before equaled by a space flyer.

“We’ll whip Dennis easily if we can keep up this pace!” exclaimed Steve’s older brother, Bart, in his clipped way.

Steve saw a gloating, almost fanatical, expression on Bart’s face. Bart’s one passion in life was to beat a Dennis ship with a Condon craft. The rivalry extended back eighteen years to 2003, when the youths’ fathers had first started their competing light-space-craft companies.

“Take a look out back, Steve, and see if we’re still gaining,” Bart said.

Steve left his seat and at the rear of the compartment searched the TV screen, which showed the star-filled darkness behind the ship. A small silvery mote, the *Dennis Meteor*, moved against the immobile stars.

“We’re well ahead,” Steve reported, turning back. “Why don’t you let up, Bart? We’ll burn out our jets at this speed!”

Bart’s expression was grimly set. “This is the moment Dad wished for all his life, Steve. A Condon ship has always played second best to a Dennis. Now that we seem to have broken through, do you think I’m going to let up?”

Steve realized that an eventual victory for Bart would not settle anything, for then Jim Dennis would strike back with an even better ship next year, and the fight would continue. On and on it would go until one of them took a foolhardy chance. Then disaster would be the final victor in the feud.

“We’re going a hundred miles a second!” Steve protested. “We’re already ahead of Jim’s last year’s record!”

“I’m going to set a record around the sun that no Dennis ship will ever top!” Bart asserted stubbornly.

Steve had come along as Bart’s assistant mainly in the hope of somehow calming his brother’s hotly competitive spirit and restraining him from over-stepping the bounds of common caution in this race that held the interest of the entire world.

Steve looked over the strain dials on the control panel. The needle was wavering toward the danger point.

“Bart, slow down!” Steve burst out. “We’ll shake ourselves to pieces! This refrigerator gauge has been acting funny too!”

Bart checked the panel dials. “I guess we can afford to coast a little,” he admitted.

They pushed levers, and Steve felt the little ship bucking gently as her forward jets braked to slower speed.

“Why do you and Jim have to keep going on like this year after year?” Steve asked. “A Dennis-Condon merger would make for a terrific space ship.”

Bart grinned tolerantly. “Still trying, aren’t you, Steve?” Then he frowned. “If Jim Dennis wants peace, let him come to us. Then we’ll incorporate his best points in our machines and call them Condons.”

“It would have to be a fifty-fifty proposition, Bart,” Steve reminded him. “Jim has as much pride as we do.”

The younger man studied the slowly enlarging yolk of Sol in front of them. In spite of the heavy filter over the port, it seemed as though the terrific light and heat were burning through his eyes.

This was Steve’s first trip, but he had been told by Bart that the celestial furnace had an aura about it that seemed to penetrate clear to one’s bones. Their refrigerating unit and heat-repulsing hull would be taxed hard to keep them from bursting into flame.

“Better check on Jim again,” Bart said impatiently.

“He’s holding back; I know he is. He won’t try to overtake us yet,” Steve replied. Nevertheless, he got up to take another look at the screen. He was glad to see that his assumption was correct.

He returned to his seat at the panel and carefully kept tab on the readings, covering first one dial and then another. Some minutes later the refrigerator-gauge needle unexpectedly soared above the subzero mark. Almost at the same moment, Steve felt encroaching heat pressing in on him from all sides. The sweat popped out. The heat filled his nostrils, burned his lungs.

“The refrigerator has broken down!” Steve gasped.

His gaze shifted to Bart, who was rubbing a moist hand over his crimsoning face. Bart’s fingers jerked instinctively from the levers that had quickly grown too hot to handle. In the motion, Bart’s arm carelessly brushed against one of the side jet levers. The ship veered on its gyroscopic balance and plunged out of control.

Steve bumped against the far corner of the compartment, feeling bruises all over him, but he was not really hurt, although it seemed as though he were breathing fire. Bart’s head had struck the fire drill, a big welding machine for repairing breaks in the hull, stupefying him.

Steve shook his head to clear it and scrambled to his seat, righting the ship again and putting it on automatic pilot. Then he got up and hurried down the corridor to the garb room. His magnetic shoes clacked along the metal floor. Hurriedly, Steve donned space suit, oxygen tank, and helmet.

The insulated gear momentarily cut out the oppressive heat. But in another few minutes he and Bart would be sizzling like steaks on a griddle, for even the insulation of their suits could not withstand raw heat for long. The only way out, as Steve saw it, was to call on Jim Dennis.

Steve carried another set of gear down the corridor and shook Bart. “Put this on, Bart,” he said. “It’ll protect you from the heat.”

Bart was gasping in the hot air of the compartment, his face scarlet and shining, but he took the gear. Next, Steve went outside onto the skin of the *Condon Comet*. The vault of starlight closed in all about him, and the deep web of midnight space seemed to extend endlessly. There was the sweeping veil of the Milky Way galaxy and here closer the pulsing, blinding sphere of Sol. There was another startling light, a driving streak of firestreams and silvery glow—the *Dennis Meteor*.

Jim and his co-pilot, Pete Rogers, could hardly miss seeing them. Quickly the *Dennis Meteor* drew abreast of the *Condon Comet*, but then it swept on past overhead!

Steve felt bitterness and disappointment well up in him. He had always thought Jim to be a “right guy.” Could it be that the winning of the race was more important to him than two persons’ lives?

The only hope now was a hasty repair of the refrigerator unit. Steve hustled back into the ship and made his way to the rear where the cooling machinery was located. He found Bart working there, his helmet off. Steve removed his own helmet, for apparently Bart had repaired the trouble. The customary blandness of the atmosphere had been restored.

“What happened to it?” Steve asked.

“The dynamo burned out,” Bart answered. “I just coupled in the spare one. Where have you been?”

“Out on the skin,” Steve said. “I was trying to signal Jim Dennis.”

Bart’s face went red again, and he muttered to himself.

“I didn’t think there was any chance of repairing the trouble,” Steve went on.

“I’d rather burn than take help from Jim Dennis!” Bart snapped. “Did Dennis see you?”

“He must have. He went right overhead.”

“Obviously he didn’t stop, though.”

“No, he didn’t,” Steve said frankly.

“I wouldn’t have believed that of Dennis,” Bart murmured. “I thought he was a better man than that.”

“He may not have seen me, Bart. Let’s give him the benefit of the doubt.”

“I’ll give him nothing!” Bart rapped. “If Jim Dennis wants a fight to the finish, we’ll give it to him!”

Bart began immediately to battle to regain their lead. It was a frenzied, closely fought contest for many hours, the lead seesawing back and forth. It took the top speed Bart’s craft was capable of to gain the lead he was finally able to maintain.

Only when Jim Dennis appeared content to linger behind again did Bart cut their driving velocity. Once

more Steve felt he could breathe easier—for a while at least.

In the days that followed, there were no changes in position. Steve and Bart took turns at the controls during the sleeping periods. They could see the planet Venus at a distance. Their flight had been planned to avoid close proximity with Earth's twin because of the retarding effect of her gravity.

The sun steadily dominated the sky, an enormous cottony ball of atomic fury with a surface temperature of 6000 degrees centigrade and an interior heat around 20,000,000 degrees. The red leaping flames of the chromosphere were like the mountainous waves of a gigantic cosmic ocean as they lapped millions of miles out into surrounding space. Magnetic storms—sunspots—all of them large enough to swallow the Earth, were seen as whirling dark cyclones in the sea of gas.

As the *Condon Comet* moved around and behind the star, it began to close in on the planet Mercury. The ship was actually overtaking the miniature world even though it was circling the sun at a rapid thirty miles a second.

On the fifth day away from Earth, the *Condon Comet* reached its apogee, the farthest point of its orbit from the mother planet. It was “behind” the sun now, the dominant ball eclipsing the Earth. By now Mercury had grown hugely, a big pebbly world that literally shimmered with the frightening heat that poured down upon it. It was a startling sight, halved into hemispheres of darkness and extreme brilliance. The closer side was so hot that streams of molten tin and lead flowed, while that side away from the sun approached the arctic cold of absolute zero.

“I hope we don't have to land there, Bart,” Steve spoke uncomfortably, looking out the port.

They began to feel the gravitational attraction of the miniature world, and they had to bolster rocket fire to combat it. Unlike Venus, Mercury could not be avoided in this flight.

Steve watched the gauges, especially the refrigerator dial. The latter was holding up well under this maximum barrage of heat from Sol, but there was still an oppressive hotness that reached through the laboring artificial coolness and penetrated Steve's pores like insidious rays.

“If the *Comet* isn't superior to Dennis's in any other way, it's made of better heat-resistant alloy,” Bart had said with self-assurance before leaving Earth. Steve wondered now if the proof of this assertion would be settled before both ships were beyond the sun's reach.

Hours later, when the *Condon Comet* had passed Mercury, Steve was impelled to check on their rivals behind. For a moment he couldn't find the ship on the TV screen. When he spotted it at last, by changing the direction of the movable screen, he was amazed to find the craft far below, hovering over the planet.

“Bart!” Steve called. “It looks as if Jim and Pete are in trouble! They're diving for Mercury and seem to be heading for the terminator line between the dark half and the light!”

Steve wished there were some kind of radio communication between the ships, but electrical interference from the sun made radio impossible on these round-the-sun races.

“We've got to go down there, Bart,” Steve said.

“We haven't won yet, Steve. There's still the record to beat.”

“Will you stop thinking about records!” Steve retorted. “There are a couple of men down there in trouble!”

“Did they stop for us?” Bart bit out. “It’s probably only a trick to lure us down so that Dennis can make a quick getaway!”

But Steve knew that his brother was not as cold-hearted as he pretended to be. Bart proved it in the next few minutes when he reluctantly turned the *Comet’s* nose downward with a savage thrust of the upper tail jets.

“You’ll never regret this,” Steve said.

“I wonder,” Bart grunted, without satisfaction.

As the ship moved strongly into Mercury’s gravitation field, Bart lined the automatic pilot up with the tiny speck on the rocky world below that was the *Dennis Meteor*. Then he and Steve strapped down on their protective couches for the grueling landing.

Steve felt as though his chest were crushed under the rapid deceleration. It was the effect of a swiftly dropping elevator multiplied hundreds of times as the *Comet’s* forward jets thrust against Mercury’s crust to brake the hurtling speed. Steve finally blacked out; he always did. When he came to, they had landed, and through blurry eyes Steve saw his brother struggling to release himself from his straps.

They went to the port. The *Dennis Meteor* was in bad shape, its prow crumpled into a huge face of rock. Its occupants could have been killed by the concussion, although there was a good chance that they were still alive if they had had time to strap down.

Steve noted their rugged surroundings, where strange rock pillars thrust into the black sky from a shimmering, white-hot plain. Snaky rifts of incalculable depth split the torrid landscape.

“The ship landed on its side,” Bart observed, speaking over his short-range helmet radio. “The escape port is underneath!”

There was no point of exit from the ship for the trapped occupants if they were still alive, Steve observed. Even the rocket tubes had been crushed flat. Actually the *Dennis Meteor* was a complete ruin, its entire glossy surface warped and corrugated.

“You can see the ship broke down under the heat,” Bart said. “That’s why they had to crash-land.”

“Look here on the other side!” Steve’s voice suddenly crackled in alarm over his helmet radio.

Bart joined him. Only now did they see that the craft had nearly rolled down a precipitous incline into a canyon stream of molten lead far below. The ship was balanced precariously on the ledge. It seemed as if the slightest jar would send it hurtling down the slope.

“We’ve got to get them out of there before the ship falls!” Steve said. “The precipice looks so crumbly it may give way at any minute!”

“I don’t see how we can get them out,” Bart commented.

Steve thought a moment. “The fire drill! We can cut a hole in the top of the ship!”

Bart frowned. “The force of the drill or even our weight on top of it may cause the ship to go. But if you’re game, I am.”

They brought the fire drill out of the *Condon Comet*, and as they climbed up onto the warped hull of the other ship with it, Bart smiled wryly. “I never thought I’d see the day that I’d risk my neck for a Dennis,” he remarked.

A moment later, when Bart was about to start the drill, he asked, “Ever try swimming through molten metal, Steve? You’d better think about it. We may be doing it in a second.”

Steve felt weak in the knees as he looked down into the plunging gulf where the metallic river tossed against blackened rocks. A person flung into that stream would be a cinder in scant moments.

Steve gritted his teeth. “Start it up, Bart.”

The machine whined into action, pouring a thin stream of blue-hot biting energy against the heat-resistant alloy. The rocket shuddered under the drill’s action, and Steve felt waves of fear course through him. The drill moved in an arc that was to be a circle barely large enough for the two men inside to squeeze through in their space suits.

When the job was halfway done, the ship ground forward several feet. Steve saw Bart’s face drain whitely. Steve could almost feel the scorching bite of liquid metal against his body. Yet the ship somehow clung stubbornly to its precarious support.

They renewed their efforts, and the arc grew. Finally the circle was full round. Bart stood up and jammed a foot against the isolated ring, and it dropped inside. Steve held his breath as he looked in, afraid of what he might see. He felt immeasurable relief as Jim and Pete came up to the opening attired in space gear. They shoved a ladder into place and started up. Steve gave Pete a hand, for he seemed to be shaken up. Suddenly the ship rumbled a foot or two. It was going any instant. The four of them carefully walked the length of the craft and made their way down the flattened rocket tubes.

Bart was the last to jump to the ground. His movement affected the delicate balance of the ship, and it slid forward, its stern arching straight up as it dipped over the gulf. The ground shook, and a moment later the *Dennis Meteor* had thundered to oblivion into the river of lead.

After Jim and Pete had expressed gratitude for their rescue, the four fell into silence as they trooped back to the *Condon Comet*. Although no one spoke, Steve felt that the others, like himself, must be thinking many things. Would this mark the end of the long feud, or would it be only a temporary truce?

Jim Dennis walking with a limp, studied the Condon ship. He circled the rocket completely and closely examined the smooth hull, still undamaged by the abnormal heat bombardment it was taking.

When they were inside, Jim was the first to speak. “This ship is terrific,” he said simply.

“You admit that?” Bart asked incredulously.

“I’ve never seen a craft stand up so perfectly under extreme heat,” Jim continued. “I think you’ve done it, Bart. It’s the finest light space ship ever built.”

“An engineer who started out with Dad made this alloy,” Bart declared. “He told me he thought he had finally come up with the ideal metal.”

“The *Meteor* rattled like an old freighter the whole way!” Jim complained. “We spent a lot of time in the rear checking on the rocket tubes. We were afraid they’d shake loose. I guess we must have been back there when we passed you, for the last time I looked out you were ahead of us.”

That explained why they hadn’t seen his wave, Steve thought.

“It sure was a lucky break for us that you brought your drill along,” Jim went on. “I had so much confidence in the *Meteor* I was sure we wouldn’t need it.”

“I felt the same way,” Bart admitted, “but Steve insisted we bring it. That kid brother of mine always did have more practical sense than I.”

“I’ve been doing a lot of thinking since we crash-landed, Bart,” Jim said. “I’ve been thinking that maybe this feud has gone on long enough and that you must be as sick of it as I am. Together, we could turn out ships that would be just about perfect. What do you say, Bart?”

Bart’s face grew stern and thoughtful. Finally he answered, “I’ll have to think it over first, Dennis.”

“While you’re thinking, we may as well have a look-see,” Jim said. He went over to the panel and checked the readings. “You seem to be way ahead of my old record, Bart. You’re still going to try to beat it, aren’t you?”

Steve knew this remark had broken down the last of Bart’s stubborn pride and reserve. His brother smiled and thrust out his hand to Jim Dennis. “You’re a good loser, Jim,” he said.

“I’m no loser,” Jim answered, grinning. “I’m a winner—we both are.”

Young Steve Condon sighed contentedly. He glanced at Pete Rogers, who winked at him. Jim and Bart sat down side by side at the control panel of the *Condon Comet*. Steve didn’t doubt for a moment that the long feud was finally at an end. He was satisfied that his father would have liked it this way.

Source:

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