

Travel the Benelux

Giants roam free at Ath Ducasse in Belgium

by **Tim Clark**

USAG Benelux Public Affairs Office

Giants have danced at the festival in Ath since the 15th century.

The ducasse originated as a celebration of the consecration of the local St. Julien Church. This weekend is your chance to see the famous giants. The festival runs for four days from Aug. 21 to 24.

On Friday, the festival kicks off with an archery contest on the town square at 4 p.m., followed by a band concert at 7 p.m. The highlight on Friday, the burning of the giant Goliath's pants, takes place at 10 p.m. It is a Belgian tradition that friends of a groom burn a pair of his pants and host a huge party before his wedding.

Saturday starts with a wedding and ends with a fight. Goliath takes his fiancée from city hall to the St. Julien Church to be married at 3 p.m.

The newlyweds return to city hall where Goliath is confronted by David

who is always played by a young boy. The two recite a dialog called the Bonimée. David then hurls a stone, from a sling, at the giant, if David hits the giant, David has won the battle and the city will have good luck for the next year.

Sunday, the big parade starts at 9:45 a.m. from the train station and proceeds through the city.

Can't make it that early? Don't worry. The parade moves very slowly, and, when the procession gets to the end of the route, it turns around and go back down the same route in reverse. If you watch the whole thing in both directions, expect it to last until around 5 p.m.

The parade features seven giants, floats, marching bands and historical groups. Onlookers throw coins at the giants as they pass for good luck.

Monday, the giants roam the city

in the morning with their carriers and receive thanks and coins from the population. Weather permitting hot-air balloons will lift off from the town square at 5 p.m.

The Christian Bible story of David and Goliath was influential to this festival along with a mix of fairy tales and folklore. Giants in folklore are huge mythical beings, usually humanlike in form. Battles between giants and men are interpreted as a symbol of the triumph of good over evil.

In folklore from all over Europe, giants are believed to have built what remains of previous civilizations. Stonehenge and other megalithic sites are often cited as proof that giants once lived on earth.

Ath, the city of giants, is located just a few miles northwest of Chièvres Air Base on highway N56.

Outside the gate



Mr. and Mrs. Goliath, the stars of the Ath Ducasse, dance in last year's parade.



(Above) Ambiorix, the giant archer, is more than 12 feet tall and a crowd favorite. • (At left) No parade would be complete without a marching band. The Moulbaix Majorettes have participated in the Ducasse of Ath for more than 40 years.