



Who's flying in the SpaceX Crew Dragon? Meet astronauts Bob Behnken and Doug Hurley

By Antonia Jaramillo, Florida Today

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Bob Behnken and Doug Hurley will break the nine-year drought on crewed flights from Kennedy Space Center on May 27.

It's not every day that you get to see your husband fly to space. And it's even more unusual when you can relate to that experience, as well.

But that's what's in store for NASA astronauts Megan McArthur and Karen Nyberg when their spouses, Bob Behnken and Doug Hurley, break the nine-year drought on crewed flights from Kennedy Space Center on May 27.

From the safe confines of KSC, McArthur and Nyberg, along with their sons, will watch as Behnken, 49, and Hurley, 53, blast off from pad 39A on a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket and Dragon capsule for a historic mission to the International Space Station that will place them in the Astronaut Hall of Fame.

They will know the excitement running through Behnken's and Hurley's veins as they become the first astronauts to fly to space from U.S. soil since the shuttle program ended in 2011 and the first to command an entirely new spacecraft since the debut of the shuttle in 1981.

SpaceX's next launch will officially have astronauts on board

And yes, McArthur and Nyberg will know the dangers that come along with human spaceflight, too.

For Behnken and Hurley, the flight is a career-capping opportunity that's even more special because of their long-time friendship, which began when they joined the astronaut class in 2000.

In the past two decades, Behnken, who is from Missouri and Hurley, who is from New York, have developed a close bond. Not only were they military test pilots before becoming astronauts, they also met their future spouses in the same astronaut class and even attended each other's weddings. Hurley was Behnken's best man.

"A man named Duane Ross was the lead for the astronaut selection process. In some sense, he picked my spouse for me; he picked my friends for me," Behnken told The Atlantic in 2019.

The close-knit astronaut couples, who currently reside in Houston, have learned to balance work and family while simultaneously dealing with the occasional spaceflight.

"That's one of the things that is unique in our relationships: We have spouses that have the same job. If you even just look at our wedding planning, my wife and I were balancing space flights and a lot of stuff going on back here in Houston. Her flight got delayed a little bit and we found a window where we could get out to San Diego and have our wedding," Behnken told the magazine.

"Doug and Karen have to work their personal life around their space flights. And same thing for us. I know what he's going through. We both have sons in elementary school; we're balancing the same challenges. That lets us predict how to best support each other as we work through pulling off our next space flight."

They are not the only astronaut couples. Others like Rhea Seddon and Hoot Gibson, Bill and Anna Fisher, and Steve Hawley and Sally Ride, who were all part of the first shuttle astronaut class to include women, also got together when they were in the space program, according to Air & Space Magazine.

Even the first woman in space, Russian Valentina Tereshkova, married fellow cosmonaut Andriyan Nikolayev, who became the third Russian to fly to space. They later divorced in 1980.

"It makes it easier to get along (with other astronauts) because you come from similar backgrounds ... and when you arrive as a brand new astronaut, you know a little bit about the astronauts who are already there," former space shuttle astronaut Winston Scott told FLORIDA TODAY.

This will be Behnken and Hurley's first spaceflight together, and it will be unlike past trips.

They'll be in a capsule rather than a shuttle. They won't be wearing the traditional orange shuttle suits. And they won't head to the launch pad in the famous silver astronaut transfer van, or "Astrovan."

Instead, on the day of launch, they'll don SpaceX's white-and-gray futuristic spacesuits and ride in Teslas — SpaceX CEO Elon Musk's other company — to the pad where they will pave the way for a new type of spaceflight: one where astronauts fly on commercial vehicles.

Under NASA's Commercial Crew Program, SpaceX beat Boeing to be the first contender to fly astronauts to the station. This mission, dubbed Demonstration Mission 2 or Demo-2, is a historic milestone aimed at proving SpaceX can send humans safely to space.

Behnken and Hurley say it helps that both are seasoned astronauts familiar with launching from KSC. Behnken's last flight was in 2010 aboard Space Shuttle Endeavour. Hurley's was more recent: he piloted the final shuttle mission on Atlantis, taking off from pad 39A on July 8, 2011.

"I think for both Doug and I, with our careers with the shuttles launching off the Florida coast, that's probably the thing that's very different from a mission perspective," Behnken told reporters during a video teleconference from Houston. "When we launched on our first flight, it was kind of repeated to fly from the Florida coast, that was the normal thing, that's what we grew up with."

"I think we have a different perspective of the importance of coming to Florida, launching again on an American rocket from the Florida coast and generations of people who maybe didn't get a chance to see a space shuttle launch, getting a chance again to see human spaceflight in our own backyard is pretty exciting to be a part of," he said.

The Dragon spacecraft is a capsule, more like the Russian Soyuz spacecraft and NASA's Mercury, Gemini and Apollo capsules from the '60s and '70s.

Class of 2020: SpaceX, NASA want your photos. They'll fly them to International Space Station

And when they maneuver the capsule, the astronauts won't be pulling a lever — they'll be working with a touchscreen. That's a first for Behnken and Hurley who are used to using a stick to fly a vehicle.

“Growing up as a pilot my whole career, having a certain way to control the vehicles, this is currently different, but you know we went into it with a very open mind,” Hurley said during the teleconference. “The difference is that you've got to be very deliberate when you're putting an input with a touchscreen relative to what you would do with a stick because when you're flying an airplane, for example, by pushing (the stick) forward, it's going to go down, (but now) I actually have to make a concerted effort to do that with a touchscreen.”

The prospect of putting Dragon through its paces as its first occupants is, in some ways, an astronaut's dream.

“If you told us when we were students at test pilot school that we would get an opportunity not only to fly a new developmental aircraft, which we both were able to do while we were test pilots but then get to fly the first flight of a spaceship, I think we would have told you you were crazy,” Hurley said.

Scott, who was a naval aviator before joining the astronaut class in 1992, admitted he wouldn't mind flying on SpaceX's vehicle if the opportunity arose.

“So as pilots, as test pilots, you always like to do something new. So these guys are going to be the first ones that pilot a brand new spaceship into space and dock with the International Space Station so I know they're very excited about that,” he said.

In typical astronaut fashion, neither Hurley nor Behnken got too personal during NASA's meet the crew virtual news conference. Their astronaut spouses didn't come up.

But you don't have to look far to see excitement is building among those who know them best. Hurley's wife, Nyberg, retweeted her husband's tweet of a drawing their young son Jack did of the capsule that will take his father to space. It included a fiery tail propelling the Dragon onward and a brightly colored Earth.

When the date for the Demo-2 launch was announced, Nyberg wrote on Twitter, “It is fantastic to see a launch date for Crew Dragon Demo-2! Jack and I are so proud of (Doug) and are excited to support him through this historic mission.”

Nyberg flew to space twice, including a long stay on the ISS in 2013 while Behnken’s wife, McArthur, flew on the final Hubble servicing mission in 2009.

Once Behnken and Hurley arrive at the space station, which is scheduled to occur within 24 hours after liftoff, they will be greeted by NASA astronaut Chris Cassidy, who flew to the space station last month and is currently the only American on board.

“I’ll be excited to see Bob and Doug,” Cassidy told reporters last month. “I’ve known them for many years, we’ve worked together, they’re friends and with their families as well, so it’ll be really special to have such a historic moment for our nation and such a cool personal event for me greeting them at the hatch.”

Cassidy flew with Hurley on STS-127 in 2009 and then flew with Nyberg on their long-duration mission in 2013. As Nyberg said via Twitter, “Flying with Chris is a family affair for us.”

This historic launch doesn’t come without a caveat, however.

Previously, the expectation had been nearly half a million people descending into Brevard County to watch this special occasion, but the coronavirus pandemic has changed plans.

“Personally, the disappointing aspect of all of this pandemic is the fact that we don’t have the luxury of our family and friends being there at Kennedy to watch the launch. But obviously, it’s the right thing to do in the current environment,” Hurley said.

“I guess I would also say that the last five years for Bob and I working on commercial crew and then the last two specifically with SpaceX, it’s been a long road to get here and I don’t think either one of us would have predicted that when we were ready to go fly this mission that we would be dealing with this as well.”

NASA has urged people to stay and watch the launch from home and will not provide the public access to KSC in an attempt to reduce crowds. But officials say they’ll do everything else to ensure Americans recognize the importance of the

moment of returning crewed spaceflight to U.S. soil.

“I certainly didn’t expect to fly again (and) I certainly didn’t necessarily have a plan to fly again,” Hurley said. “Once again, I think Bob and I are very humbled to be in this position.”

Contact Jaramillo at 321-242-3668 or antoniaj@floridatoday.com. Follow her on Twitter at [@AntoniaJ_11](https://twitter.com/AntoniaJ_11).

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