

When airline passengers think of “hometown” airlines, several obvious names come to mind: Chicago is synonymous with United Airlines, Seattle with Alaska, Honolulu with Hawaiian. But which airline is now the hometown carrier for Minneapolis? The answer is Sun Country Airlines.

Sun Country

Minneapolis’ Hometown Airline

By Rusty Ayers, ALPA Senior Communication Specialist



Sun Country’s Capt. Ross Johnson and F/O Mark Wolter in the cockpit.

With Northwest Airlines completing its merger with Delta, Sun Country is now the only transcontinental carrier based in Minnesota, flying to the east and west coasts as well as Mexico and the Caribbean from its home base in MSP.

Sun Country’s fate could not have been more uncertain a year ago. The airline’s former owner, Tom Petters, had been arrested and charged with orchestrating a massive Ponzi scheme that duped billions of dollars from investors. Faced with a cash crunch and a great deal of uncertainty about its ownership situation, Sun Country declared bankruptcy and briefly imposed 50 percent pay cuts on all employees.

Since then, Petters has been convicted of fraud and will no longer be involved with the airline. SCA management is repaying employees with interest for the temporary pay cuts, and the airline is profitable.

“We hope to see the company come out of bankruptcy in the first part of 2010,” says Capt. Buddy Scroggins, the pilots’ Master Executive Council chairman. “Our airline continues to enjoy a great deal of brand loyalty in our hometown market as well as in our regular scheduled service destinations. Of course, Minneapolis/St. Paul is a large market and competition will always exist, but we remain *the* hometown airline and continue to rely upon our superior service to maintain our customer loyalty.”

Though SCA once was known as a winter airline that flew icebound Midwesterners to sunny beaches, new CEO Stan Gadek has promised to diversify the carrier and strengthen its revenue base. A major goal is to make the airline profitable year-round, not just during the busy winter vacation season.

“During the last year and a half,

the airline has trimmed excesses on the expense side and has expanded its focus on ad hoc charter flying while still preserving the healthier parts of our existing business,” Scroggins says. “The company is also just completing development of an ETOPS program that will enable the airline to extend its route structure and offer services to more distant destinations.”

But things haven’t been easy. Last year management proposed sweeping concessions that would have essentially gutted meaningful elements of the Sun Country pilots’ contract. While those changes were not implemented, the pilots have worked successfully with management to provide appropriate relief when sensible and necessary.

As Sun Country enters 2010 stronger both financially and operationally, it still remains to be seen who will own the operation in the coming year. While news media outlets are reporting the existence of potential buyers for the carrier, the current management is prepared to take the airline out of bankruptcy as a stand-alone airline.

Scroggins says the Sun Country pilots remain focused on helping their airline to grow, controlling rumors, and preparing for upcoming contract negotiations.

“Although there have been a number of rumors about potential buyers, we have no solid information about any deals. We don’t know of a single corner of the airline industry that isn’t under stress at this time, but the climate at Sun Country, including the pilots, remains upbeat and generally optimistic,” he reports. ☺

SCA at a Glance

Pilots Joined ALPA: 1995

Contract Amendable: 2010

Number of Pilots: 125 (32 on furlough)

Services: Based in Mendota Heights, Minn., Sun Country flies to 33 destinations throughout the Caribbean, the United States, and Mexico. Of these destinations, eight cities are served year-round. Known primarily as a vacation getaway airline, Sun Country is expanding its charter business.

Fleet: 9 B-737-700s and -800s, with additional -800s leased during the winter flying season