

# Bring on the Newbies!



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Airplane photo by Robert Bismuth, photo illustration by Phil Norton

*Are there rumblings of dissatisfaction out there in the hinterland? Are there signs of distress at the gates that indicate all is not avgas and roses in acroland? Of course there are. It's impossible to spend time with any aviation group and not hear negative comments about attitudes being ascribed to aerobatic pilots and, by association, to the IAC. We appear to have an image problem that is largely our own fault. Read on and let us know your thoughts and comments.—BD.*

By Budd Davisson

**I**t goes without saying that everyone starts somewhere. From Kirby Chambliss to Chuck Yeager, from Patty Wagstaff to Charles Lindbergh, there was a period of time in each of their lives where none of them could find their butts with both hands in a cockpit. Everyone starts out knowing nothing. The next time someone at the airport starts asking what to us are embarrassingly naive questions about airplanes and aerobatics, we need to remember that at one point that was us.

The reason we bring up this rather controversial subject is that too often we're hearing sentiments like the following, which, by the way, is an actual e-mail.

"I decided I wanted to get into aerobatics and maybe even compete, so I went to the contest at (name is withheld to avoid embarrassment), and I was totally turned off. Everyone treated me as if I was an idiot. I don't need that kind of [stuff]. So, I've gone another direction and bought a bush plane."

If this were an isolated incident, it could be written off as sour grapes, but it's not. What's more, we, the aerobatic community, are fully aware that this kind of thing is happening much more often than we wished it did. We know there are a small number of our friends in the sport who are guilty not so much of rudeness, but of a shortness of memory: they forget how they felt the first time they approached someone who is established in the sport and what kind of reception they were hoping to get.

Aerobatics is a tiny community. Think about it: Outside of your closest aviation friends, how many other pilots do you know who have even ridden through a roll, much less become adept at perverting gravity to do their will? Not many, right? In fact, IAC membership only accounts for about one out of 100 certificated pilots. Does that mean that only one out of 100 pilots wants to do aerobatics? Not if air show attendance is any way to measure interest. Of course, of the people who will pay to watch aerobatics, only a tiny fraction will take the first step toward actually getting involved. That tiny fraction, however, is critical to the survival of the sport. Each one represents a spark of interest that, if we fan it just right, will burst into flame and another acrobat is born. If, on the other hand, we inadvertently brush it aside and ignore it, the spark dies out and we miss the chance to broaden our sport.

We don't have droves of people wanting to jump into aerobatics. So, when someone does show an interest,

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Aviation writer and flight instructor Budd Davisson. Photo courtesy of Budd Davisson.

it benefits the entire community if we reach out and drag them in. But, what's the best way to do that?

First, we need to develop empathy for the newbie: picture ourselves as a raw beginner innocently stepping through the front door of the sport. It's the "do unto others" thing in action: Treat them as you'd like to be treated.

People usually come into aerobatics in one of two ways. Either they get a flight with a friend, or they pick an aerobatic school out of the yellow pages. In either case, that first flight is a make-it-or-break-it event. Depending on how that flight is conducted, the newbie can easily be converted into a raving "acroholic" who can't get enough or a green-around-the-gills, never-do-it-again individual who we've lost forever. When we strap them in, the spark of interest is very much alive, and it's up to us to fan it into a roaring flame. Unfortunately, it's on the first flight that we often fall down as salespeople for our sport.

Instructor and enthusiast alike should try hard to remember their own first aerobatic ride. The concept of "upside down" is so foreign and mind-boggling to the average pilot that nothing more than seeing the horizon rotate in the windshield is enough to sell someone on the concept of aerobatics. Unfortunately, we often go a number of notches past that. In our zeal to show how much we know and what great

pilots we are, we toss our empathy overboard and go for the gusto. We're having a terrific time as we pull and push. The newbie isn't. Even if you're an experienced aerobatic pilot, you know that riding through anything more than just the basic maneuvers with someone else at the controls can be painful. For a newbie it is both terrifying and nauseating. The real irony is that while we are showing off our incredible skill, the newbie can't tell whether we are good or bad because he or she has nothing to judge us by. They're newbies, remember? A painless and pretty aileron roll and a loop is all that's necessary to cinch the sale. Do anything more demanding than that and you're showing off, not selling.

We've been talking about getting people into the sport, but what about the gulf within the sport between competition pilots and fun pilots?

It's truly sad and frustrating to hear the grouching in both the competition and the fly-for-fun camps about how the other side is wrong. Or at least overbearing. Here we have two groups of people who are wildly in love with the concept of true three-dimensional flight. Even though both sides know the outside world is threatening their existence, they are fighting with other factions within the sport with the goal of attaining their own selfish interests rather than forming a unified front. This doesn't seem like a healthy thing to be doing, does it?

Very few pilots want to compete. Most want to enjoy the flying and improve their skills, while many just want to share the camaraderie of those with like interests. They have no interest in even attending contests and prefer to go out on a Sunday afternoon and enjoy their sport. This doesn't make them bad people, and conversely being a competition pilot doesn't make that individual a better person. There's even some question as to whether competing makes a person a "better" pilot because "better" is open to definition. Does knowing how to do a vertical roll make a person a better pilot than one who can fly an uncoupled approach to minimums with one engine burning? Pilots become good at what they practice, and that is hardly a God-given skill. Burn a lot of gasoline in an intelligent manner and you're going to get better, that's just a fact of life. Still, there's a gulf between those who compete and those who don't that really shouldn't exist.

This gulf is irritating to some pilots and highly controversial with others. Everyone who likes aerobatics should be kindred souls. Plus, this is a sport, not brain surgery. We're not going to rewrite the history of the world, and our population is small enough that we should be banding together rather than standing around in cliques talking about one another. Sometimes this is easier said than done.

Pilots, as a breed, are a little more confident and more willing to take a risk than their ground-bound brethren. Those who move into aerobatics, at any level, generally (not always) raise those traits to an even higher level. Then, those who decide to compete ratchet things up even higher, because they've decided to step out into the street and put their skills on the line in a mano-a-mano shootout.

So, what do we have here? Among other things, within the aerobatic community we have a group of strong personalities with varying skill levels, all of whom possess a higher than normal level of both self-confidence and testosterone (you ladies, too). A subsegment of that group occasionally lets their confidence get the better of them in the way they interface with newbies.

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We're obviously trying to tread lightly because no one likes to think we do anything other than reach out and put a warm, welcoming arm around newbies and invite them in for a cup of hot cocoa. The vast majority of the time, that's exactly the way it is. We enthusiastically offer rides and advice to any and all who ask. Then why do we keep hearing that aerobatic pilots are cliquish or arrogant and prone to look down on mere mortals, e.g., those who don't compete or, God forbid, actually don't do aerobatics? We keep hearing

stories like that because it happens often enough that word of an incident spreads like a wind-borne wildfire, effectively coloring the public's image of aerobatics. We can give a thousand rides and put smiles on a thousand faces, but all we have to do is be rude or condescending to one individual, and in a matter of minutes it has made its way through the Internet to become a cyber-legend.

Regardless of where our head is at concerning competition versus non-competition and regardless of how god-like we may or may not regard ourselves, the simple fact is that for us to survive as a sport and as an organization, we need the newbies. We, the sport, need the Sunday afternoon, personal-amazement fliers. We need to spread the aerobatic gospel and convert as many people as possible into "acronauts," and we won't do that by exposing them to a caste system where some pilots are more exalted than others. We won't do that by convincing them that they aren't true pilots or worthy of our respect unless they push negative six on every flight. And we are definitely not going to instill warm fuzzy feelings toward the sport if we routinely send

them home after their first flight with their breakfast in a bag. The way we'll expand our sport is for us to be the "good guys," and the basic definition of "good guy" includes doing more than is necessary to reach out to the uninformed, the timid, and the curious. We'll expand our sport by opening our doors to the newbie.

Incidentally, to those few arrogant souls amongst us who think that being capable of doing more vertical rolls or tumbles than anyone else elevates them in the eyes of the world, think about this: In the big scheme of things, aerobatics serves no purpose. Not only are most of our airplanes so mission-specific that it's nearly impossible to consider them transportation, but also there is no way we can rationalize flopping around like sea otters as anything other than having a good time—basically, we're just showing off in a very high profile, vaguely artistic sort of way. So, next time one of us thinks about climbing up on a pedestal and talking down to someone, think again. We haven't done anything to deserve the shortest pedestal, and those we may be talking to are our future. ✈



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