



## Introducing a new instructional series

**Editor's Note:** It is human nature to work harder when there is a specific goal to be achieved. This year, *Sport Aerobatics* is working with renowned master aerobatic instructor Rich Stowell to provide a series of articles designed to assist aerobatic pilots in preparing to fly for their Smooth Achievement Awards (formerly referred to as the "Smooth patch"). Earning this award is a tangible way to work toward and display your aerobatic wings. Preparation provides structure for aerobatic flights and practice sessions while building skills.

If you are planning to fly for your Smooth Achievement Award in 2008, I would like to hear from you. Whether you are a competitor or a recreational aerobatic pilot (or perhaps you love to fly aerobatics but find it hard to spend four days at a contest due to a 4-month-old baby and her 2-1/2-year-old brother—hypothetically of course!), the journey toward earning your award will be full of lessons and insights that I would like to include in a future issue of *Sport Aerobatics*. If this article inspires you to make earning your Primary Smooth Achievement Award a personal goal, please e-mail me at [tookyflyer@tds.net](mailto:tookyflyer@tds.net). We will discuss how you might be able to share your experience with other IAC members as a guest contributor to this magazine. I look forward to hearing from you, and I would like to personally thank Rich for once again offering his expertise. —SW.

Rich Stowell, MCFI-A

What could a physician, a derivatives trader, a sales executive, an architect, a chief pilot for a state division of aeronautics, and an engineer possibly have in common? Okay, they're all pilots. But look at the following apparent disparities in their flying experience. Most are recreational fliers. One used to be a corporate pilot before switching careers, while another is a NAFI Master Instructor. Certifications run the gamut from private pilot through airline transport pilot. One pilot was certificated back in 1973; another, as recently as 2004. Total times range from 250 hours to 7,500 hours, with the pilots currently averaging 50 to 250 hours of flying per year. The youngest age when first exposed to formal aerobatic training was 27; the oldest, more than twice that. And their total aerobatic times vary from 12 to 200 hours.

In spite of such broad diversity, these six people from New Jersey, Montana, and California are representative of the more than 1,100 pilots who have earned an International Aerobatic Club (IAC) Primary Smooth Achievement Award. The first such award was granted nearly four decades ago in what was then the Basic (now Primary) category. Long referred to simply as "patches," the IAC updated the tangible awards in 2006. Applicants can now choose any or all of the following accessories to accompany their paper achievement certificates: traditional cloth patches (while supplies last), distinctive lapel pins, and peel-and-stick decals.

### No Pressure to Participate

Salivating like hungry wolves stalking fresh meat, some aerobatic pilots—well-intentioned though they may be—have been known to devour anyone who expresses even the slightest interest in aerobatics. Yet neither recreational aerobatics nor the Achievement Awards program should overwhelm those who may be interested. The soft-sell approach seems to work best here. None of our six representative pilots, for example, ever felt that they were under any obligation whatsoever to go for a Primary Smooth Award. In fact, the



Rich Stowell



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UPPER: Cary B. shares his post-award joy with Judge Judy, Instructor Rich, and wife Max. LOWER: A beaming Ron V. after earning his Primary Smooth award.

Achievement Awards concept was mentioned only casually, and only after the pilots already had some emergency maneuver/aerobatic training under their belts.

When these pilots were asked what drew them to aerobatics in the first place, "to improve my flying skills" was the most common refrain. Other reasons included being inspired by watching someone else perform aerobatics, boredom with conventional aircraft, and the desire to fly like a bird.

Common descriptions repeatedly appeared when asked what aerobatics has meant to their overall flying, including safer, more confident, and more fun. In addition to these benefits, Bill G. added that it was "an opportunity for my wife and me to study a new aspect of aviation together." Jay T. said, "Aerobatics gives me more reason to fly." And without aerobatics, Ron V. "likely would have dropped out of flying."



The pilots had various reactions to the idea of training for the Achievement Award. Rick M. thought the proposal “good encouragement,” whereas Jeanne M. confessed to being nervous about it. Bill G. said it was “perfect for my current state of accomplishment, and my goals.” “I knew I was not accurate enough to fly the maneuvers to the appropriate standard,” said Ron V., “[but] I did know that with sufficient practice I could meet the standard.” Cary B. thought it “a wonderful way to be a part of the aerobatic community... without having the pressure of going out and competing right away.” “I wasn’t aware of the IAC Achievement Awards program,” said Jay T., “[but] once I researched it online...I was excited.”

#### Many Ways to Get There

Our six pilots converged on the Primary Smooth Award after having performed aerobatics in a cross-section of aerobatic airplanes: the Christen Eagle II, Zlin 242L, Super Decathlon, Pitts S-2B, and Citabria 7GCBC. Upon making the commitment to shoot for the award, several of the pilots proceeded at a leisurely pace until completing the requirements. Some combined dual instruction with solo practice; others flew with an instructor/safety pilot all the way through. The husband and wife duo, for example, packed their award-specific flying into a five-day “vacation” consisting of two training sessions per day apiece.

Going into their judged flights, performance anxiety (that familiar, human response to being tested) was not only prevalent, but also readily acknowledged. Cary B. said, “There was obviously a little apprehension at first, and then it pretty much went away once we got started.” The competitive spirit emerged as well. Nervous though she was, Jeanne M. still “wanted to peg it.” Bill G. recognized, “I was well-coached, and if I could stay focused, I could accomplish this goal.” Rick M. treated the judged flight as an extension of his instructional flights: “[I] had improved during each training flight; [I] would improve on this flight.”

Each pilot was able to satisfy the award requirements on one flight in front of an IAC judge. Adjectives describing the experience flowed freely afterward: thrilled, exhilarated, relieved, elated, stoked. Jay T. added, “The experience gave me new confidence and the desire to compete.” Earning the patch for Ron V. “became an excellent psychological entry point for me to attempt a competition.” Cary B. is “really looking forward to earning new patches!” He also echoed the sentiments of the other pilots who went through the process: “The support you get from the judges and everyone involved is what makes this so exciting.”

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#### Invite Others to Participate

Sharing your achievement with family, friends, and peers is important not only for the awards program, but also for aerobatics in general. Several of our pilots noted that other aerobatic pilots were congratulatory. Cary B. and Rick M. sent their wives out with the judge during the award flights. The wives thoroughly enjoyed seeing the maneuvers judged from

the ground (and no doubt they now capably and confidently judge all aspects of their husband’s flying!). The husband and wife team in the group shared in each other’s award flights with one in the air knocking out the maneuvers, while the other observed from the ground alongside the judge. Ron V. reported, “My family and friends are still getting used to me flying aerobatics. They are coming around to the idea that aerobatics is precision flying and not a daredevil activity.” (It’s clear we still have some work to do to improve the oft-negative connotation associated with aerobatics.)

As our representative sample reveals, these pilots are not really that different from the rest of us. Four of the six have since gone on to earn their Sportsman Smooth Awards. Two of them competed in the Primary category in 2007 and are looking forward to the 2008 contest season. Others in the group may show up someday either to compete or to help out at a contest. And if they don’t, so what? They’ve already accomplished something special, something just one out of every 500 pilots has ever achieved. More importantly, they will speak well of their award experience to others.

In an attempt to inspire, this article leapfrogged to the happy ending. Let’s now see what must be done to earn the Primary Smooth. Four maneuvers are currently required: a one-turn spin, a loop, a slow roll, and a 270-degree aerobatic turn. While we’ve discussed numerous recreational aerobatic maneuvers in past installments, we’ll devote the next few articles to training specifically for the Primary Smooth Award. Along the way, we’ll morph the previously discussed one-turn, upright spin into a competition spin, and we’ll convert the aileron roll into the required slow roll. Download a Primary Smooth application from [www.IAC.org/programs/primary\\_patch\\_form.pdf](http://www.IAC.org/programs/primary_patch_form.pdf) and start picturing yourself earning that award now. ✈

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## Effectively Marketing

Recreational aerobatics progressing to a Primary Smooth Achievement Award can be a gateway on many levels: into the IAC; into competition aerobatics as competitors, judges, and support personnel; and away from the stunt pilot stereotype. Yet over the course of the Achievement Awards program, IAC has averaged just 30 Primary Smooth Awards per year.

It appears we can do a much better job of encouraging and fostering

the Achievement Awards program, starting at the chapter and flight-school levels. Observations made by two of our six representative pilots, for example, are quite telling, especially since they live thousands of miles apart. One commented, “I know people who have been flying in competitions on and off for years that never won a trophy and didn’t realize how accessible the Patch program was.” The other said, “Not many of

## the Awards Program

my pilot friends were aware of the IAC Achievement Awards program.... Actual competition results are king out here.”

Most of the nearly 600,000 pilots in the USA have at least a Primary Smooth Achievement Award in them waiting to be coaxed out. Let’s encourage and promote this fun and worthwhile program, within and outside the IAC! But remember, soft sell.

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