

For the Sport of It



Safe Flying is Fun Flying

HELEN WOODS

When people ask what I do for a living, I usually tell them that I am a flight instructor. I mention that I run a flight school specializing in sport pilot training and light-sport aircraft. I could reasonably say that I sell flight training. But when I think about what people are looking for when they come through the door of my school, I realize that they don't necessarily think about buying "flight training." They come because they want to have *fun*, and they see flight training as a means to that particular end. And so it is! Sadly, too many potential pilots drift away from flying — and sometimes *run* away — in part because of techniques used by some instructors to present the very important topic of aviation safety. Let's face it. The GA safety record leaves a lot to be desired, and that fact has created a pervasive

public perception that "those little airplanes are just not safe." People who want to fly for fun thus have to overcome any personal or family investment in that perception before they even drive to the flight school parking lot. Having made that effort, though, our would-be pilots are too frequently discouraged by gloom and doom presentations that frighten, or rule-heavy academic presentations that bore them and send them searching elsewhere for fun.

Here's my philosophy: fun flying means flying safely, and safe flying is the key to having fun. It seems like an obvious point: in flying, as in other areas, the fun factor is inversely proportional to the fear factor. Flying ceases to be fun when fear creeps

Flying ceases to be fun when fear creeps into the cockpit.

into the cockpit. Using safe practices — which means having the right knowledge and skills — is the best way to maximize the fun and minimize the fear. Safe flying affords the opportunity for fun flying.

Whether you are a potential pilot looking for fun through flying, or an instructor who wants to help reverse both the poor public perception and pilot population decline, here are some thoughts on elements that contribute to a happy marriage of safety and fun in flight training.

Fun Follows Safety

What I've seen from many years of flight training on both sides (i.e., both as a student and as an instructor), is that it all starts with instructors who teach conservative and good judgment not merely by lecture, but primarily by example. Not everyone will agree with me on this next point, but I strongly believe that

some of the instructor's ability to do so is tied to his or her motivation for teaching. Is the instructor's *primary* motivation a desire to teach and transmit a

love of aviation, or a desire to build hours towards a "real" flying job? I've seen plenty of both. At least in my experience, instructors who do not consider flight instruction to be a "real" flying job often lack the ability to convey the fun-flying-is-safe-flying message to aspiring sport and recreational pilots.

When I am looking to hire an instructor, I want one who will lead by example. That means, for example, that he or she must be willing to forgo a flight if it does not align with conservative safety minimums. The core point is that the instructor must realize that the student will emulate not words, but his or her decision making processes and actual decisions. Here's another example, an all too common practice that makes me cringe every time I see it (but not at my school!): the instructor thinks the student is

ready to solo, endorses the logbook accordingly ... and climbs out of the airplane while the propeller is in motion. I always take the time speak to instructors I see using this practice. They almost always tell me that they explained to the student that he or she should never allow a passenger to deplane while the prop is turning. As you might well imagine, the "do as I say, not as I do" approach does not work in flight instruction any more than in any other field of instruction. If you need proof, just take a look at accident statistics to see how many prop strike accidents happen every year.

Weather provides another great example of how instructors must teach by example. Are the flight conditions on the day of a proposed flight such that the instructor believes the student would be comfortable - not frightened - with dual instruction? Yes, pushing beyond a fledgling flyer's comfort level is part of learning, but it needs to be an appropriate and incremental push. For instance, I don't expose pre-solo students to certain gusty crosswinds they are not ready to handle. But it is both valuable and essential to teach them to safely handle such conditions.

Another question: are these conditions that the instructor would want see the student attempt as a newly-certificated pilot? The concept of safely pushing the envelope leads to another important tool for communicating the fun-flying-is-safe-flying message: personal minimums. I encourage introducing this concept at an early stage in flight training. It helps the student understand the safety value of making certain decisions in advance, and it also provides a great indicator of progress as the student's skills develop (i.e., progressing from a 3-knot crosswind endorsement to a 7-knot crosswind component). Personal minimums are also a

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Photos by Karen Helfert



great tool for helping the student strengthen skills in judgment and decision making beyond direct emulation of the instructor.

The bottom line: I encourage instructors to remember that the student comes to us to have fun. Learning to fly an airplane is a secondary goal to “having fun” for the student pilot seeking to fly for personal recreation. No matter how well an instructor teaches a skill or a concept, the recreational student will not be motivated to return for another lesson if he or she did not have fun. Fear in flying is the mortal enemy of fun in flying, so a flight instructor must provide a learning environment in which the student feels comfortable, which means teaching, demonstrating, exemplifying, and demanding safe and conservative flying practices.

Safety Banishes Fear

There is an unfortunate cliché that “safety doesn’t sell” (i.e., it conjures up dark pictures of gloom and doom). The good news is that we don’t have to see safety as something to sell. On the contrary, since I am selling fun, safety has to be a given. The good news is that it is not at all hard to build safety into fun flying. When you are flying for sport and personal recreation, after all, there is never a “must-go” situation. Pilots that fly recreationally are flying for such great “causes” as eating hamburgers (or crab cakes if you happen to be in Maryland), not transporting human organs to sick patients, searching for overdue aircraft, or trying to make it to an important business meeting. As such, I try to convey that “get-there-itis” should have no hold on the pilot who flies for fun. Some of the fun-means-safety concepts I teach include the following:

Preflight: If there is any doubt about the condition of the airplane, have a mechanic look at it. If there is no mechanic available, cancel the flight. Could the flight have been done with the discrepancy? Perhaps...but why take the risk? Fear is never fun.

Crosswinds: If you have any doubt about recency or proficiency on a gusty crosswind day, seek refresher training with an instructor, or stay on the ground.

Fuel: Fear of fuel exhaustion is especially not fun! Never plan to arrive at your destination with just the minimum 30 minutes of fuel. Plan to have an hour or more in reserve, and remember that the extra fuel stop can be fun – it might add a new airport to your logbook, or turn out to offer the best \$100 hamburger you’ve ever eaten.

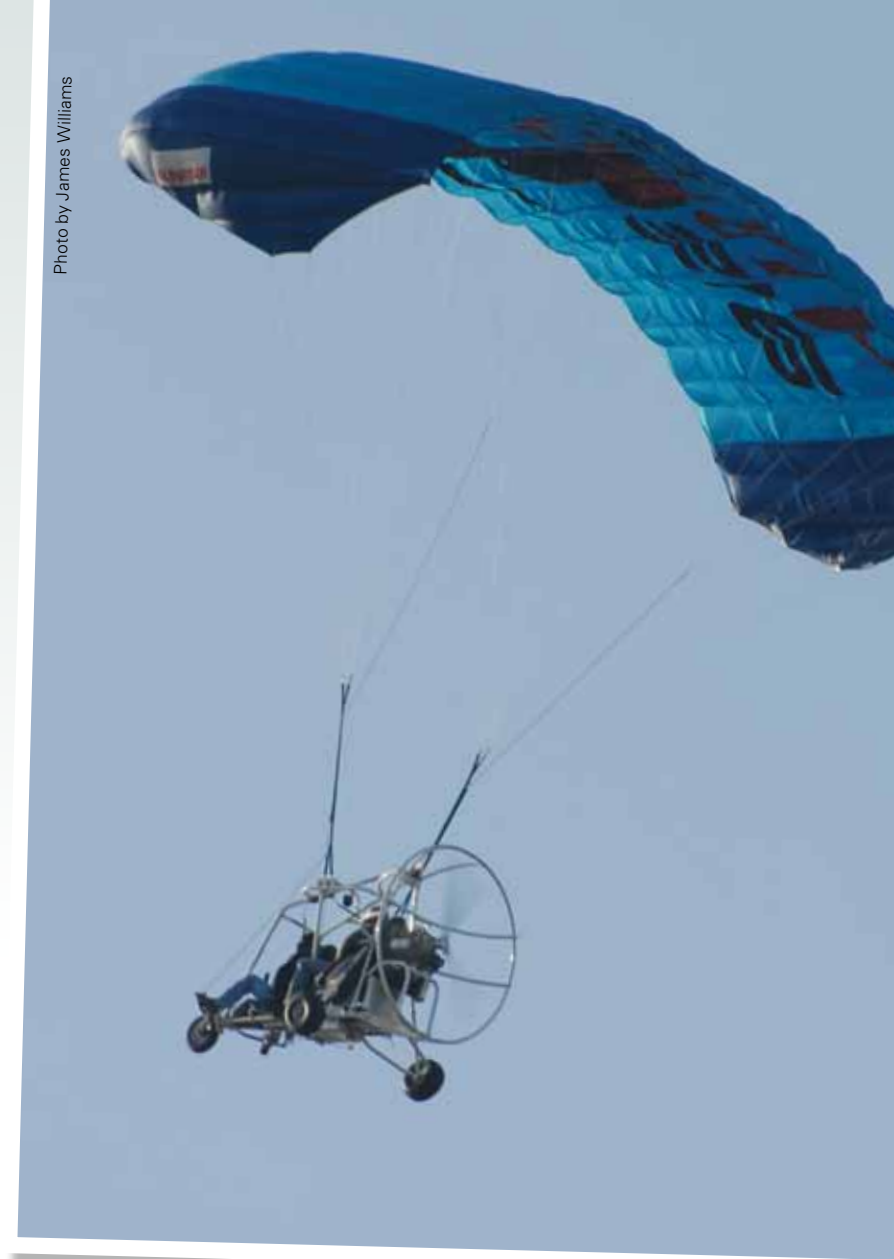


Photo by James Williams

Night: If you are a sport pilot, plan to arrive at sunset, or even earlier, to leave some margin if the flight does not go as expected.

Proficiency: If you have not flown a particular aircraft model in a while, if you do not meet personal minimums for proficiency, or if you in any way feel “rusty,” have fun flying with your favorite instructor to brush up.

Like I said, fear is never fun – and fun is what flying is all about, especially when you are flying for sport and personal recreation. Let good aviation safety practices protect you from fear, and lead the way to the kind of flying fun that attracted you to aviation in the first place. ✈️

Helen Woods is manager and head flight instructor of Chesapeake Sport Pilot, LLC, the nation’s largest light-sport flight school, located at the Bay Bridge Airport (KW29) in Stevensville, MD.