

Distance With Return

by Richard C. du Pont

(This is the first of a series of articles which will appear each month in this magazine describing actual soaring flights.)

The Seventh Annual National Soaring Contest was drawing to a close—only three days left before prizes would be handed out, and contestants would load their planes on trailers and head toward their homes. Each participant's point position toward the grand prize had been displayed on a bulletin board each morning after the past day's flight performances had been recorded. In the past eleven days I had piled up nearly thirty-five hours of soaring time, and, physically, I felt that my name should certainly be at the top of the list. I had spent more hours in the air in eleven days than I generally spent in three months, and my tired body and nerves were beginning to protest.

On glancing at the point list this particular morning, I noticed that my name had changed position from second to fourth place. A new name that had heretofore been well down on the sheet had suddenly jumped into the running for the grand prize. I had made a good flight the previous day, reaching an altitude exceeding 5,000 feet, and landing nearly forty miles from my point of departure. True, I had seen other planes soaring at altitudes nearly as high as mine, but certainly not higher. As for distance—I had heard no reports on any new distance flights, but what about this name Mehlhose, that had suddenly taken such a rise?

I inquired at the Meteorology shack, where the barograph had been calibrated, and asked the results of Mehlhose's flights, and to my surprise found that his last barograph record showed that he had reached an altitude of nearly 6,500 feet. Why that was even higher than the National altitude record! Not enough higher to officially establish a new record, but still enough above any previous altitude flights of the contest to give him a tremendous number of points. Yes—altitude accounted for more points than either distance or duration, while distance with return gave the greatest number. That explained everything. I reflected a few minutes—only three more days, and no telling what kind of flying weather they might hold for us. The day appeared to be excellent, and planes were already preparing to take off. My own little sailplane was only waiting for its pilot. How to acquire the greatest number of points? Today might be my last chance! Distance with return seemed the best bet! The existing record was low—only sixteen miles round trip established a few days before by Chester Decker, placing him at the top of the list.

As prescribed by the committee, the distance with return course today was to be to Watkins Glen and return—a round trip distance of 36 miles. The distance was inviting—it should not be so difficult after having made several flights of over one hundred miles point to point. True—it would be tedious work, making the first half of the flight against the wind, but, after all, that

distance was only 18 miles, and the trip back would be a cinch. Yes—I would try it! After expressing my intention to Dr. Lange, Chairman of the Contest Committee, I received my barograph and prepared to take off.

As I waited my turn to be launched, I noticed that several planes were already circling for altitude. They seemed to be climbing rapidly, too, and several appeared to be close to the 3,000 foot mark. As I watched their progress, I noticed one of the planes cease circling, and then direct its course to the South. With a strong wind helping its progress, I watched it fade to a speck against the horizon with the realization that ideal conditions prevailed for straight distance flight. Perhaps that pilot was at that very moment setting a new national or international record, thereby placing the title of National Soaring Championship, and the famous Evans Trophy, still further out of my reach. I had captured this Trophy the past two consecutive years and if I could only get it once more it would be mine for keeps. My reflections were interrupted by noticing that it was my turn to take off. My sailplane was quickly trundled into position. I seated myself snugly in the cockpit, and fastened parachute harness and safety belt, while someone placed the snug-fitting cockpit cover around me. Only my head, lodged behind a small pyralin wind-shield, was visible outside of the small streamlined fuselage.

The tow rope was attached, and at a signal from me the tow car shot into action. As the sailplane gathered speed, I pulled back on the stick to lift her into the air and a few moments later I was climbing speedily above the top of Harris Hill. When I had climbed about 150 feet, I released the tow line and glided into the rising current in front of the slope. My climb indicator registered a strong slope wind, indicating a climb of nearly four feet per second. I guided my plane down the slope, steadily gaining altitude. Yes—the slope current was good. It would not take long to get altitude at this rate.

A very large, long span sailplane passed over me about 1,000 feet higher, and I recognized it to be Jay Buxton's "Transporter", the only two place plane in the Contest. At this moment a small ground thermal caught my ship, causing my climb indicator to jump momentarily to six feet per second. The current was so small, however, that I had passed through it like a flash, and my instrument dropped back to its normal position of climb. Experience had taught me that it was no use fooling with these low altitude thermals, since they are generally too small in which to circle. The slope wind was still carrying me higher, and I felt that it would not be very long before I would be nearly as high as the big two-seater.

As I made a slow, lazy turn at the west end of the ridge and started back toward the take-off site, I again caught sight of the Buxton plane, only this time she was even higher above me than when I had first noticed her. She was circling gracefully, and as I watched I saw