

# "We Don't Know From Nothin'"

By WALTER H. SETZ

*EDITOR'S NOTE: Wally Setz spent most of 1937 in Europe primarily on soaring matters. That same year he represented the U.S. at the International Meeting. Later visits to Europe and South America enabled him to become further familiar with soaring activities and contests in those areas. He was an official at the American Opens of '38, '39 and '40, and is now International Meet Adviser of the Records Committee.*

PRIOR to the war, and to a slightly lesser degree today, it was generally assumed by members of the Soaring Society that we were considerably under the performance ability of the Europeans. This was, and is, true if we compete in European meets in the same manner we fly our Nationals here. Or, conversely, a serious European team entered in our meets would have little trouble showing us up.

Ten years ago, on exactly the same dates as the 14th National this year, the only authentic International Soaring contest ever held took place in Germany. Representatives took part from all active soaring countries save two. The best pilots and sailplanes in the world were gathered together for the highest performance competitive soaring ever achieved. One week after the conclusion of the International, the German National opened. The writer was fortunate in attending these two contests.

A close analysis will concede the point that the average high performance European team possesses a somewhat better ship than the U. S. counterpart. But investigate the teams' flying equipment under the Minimoa or Sperber class and they still look better than we do. However, flight for flight, there is little difference on either side of the Atlantic. Once in the air, the match is very close. On only one point have we been backward and that has been the reluctance of contestants to part with slope soaring. Confidence in catching strong valley thermals without airplane tow at Elmira has not been general. At the Wasserkuppe, even though all launching was by shock cord, all serious contestants consistently stayed away from the ridge. Needless to say, the 14th National will not experience difficulties of this sort.

Assuming aircraft and air work were equal, Europeans could still best us without difficulty. This is all the more shocking when one realizes they surpass us in what we consider our own particular God-given, national specialty—teamwork. By this, I mean ground crewing. At only a couple of our Nationals have I seen crews approaching the minimum deemed necessary in Europe. Frankly, an average Silver C flying a Midwest or equivalent could take any of our large meets if he had a good crew and was coached by a good crew captain. Several times in Germany, an unknown pilot flying a school sailplane proved this point.

We have the common impression that a pilot and a sailplane make a contest team. Many has been the time an individual has arrived at a meet with his sailplane, picked up a couple of boys for "crew", flown all day and driven all night for the better part of 15 cycles, and placed in the final standings. This procedure is common-place. Yet, this same man and ship, supported by

good crewing, could win the meet with considerably less effort. Not a contest goes by that we don't hear the above expressed by at least one chap who "almost made it". Although the subject of much "hangar flying", practically nothing is done about it.

Certain factors are fundamental in the proper organization of a contest team. First and foremost, the pilot flies the sailplane and that's where his work stops. No car driving; no assembling (dismantling only when required by storms, etc.); no ship or car repairing; no weather conferences; no wrangling over rules, point award system, take-off order, etc.; and no pilots' meetings. The latter point may arouse debate among readers but since the early Nationals this daily feature has far outlived its usefulness for pilots. The crew captain assumes all ground responsibilities, and, a good experienced man may not only brief the weather but prescribe the day's activities for his pilot. Thus, the pilot would get recommendations on arising as to whether it should be altitude, distance, goal (if so, where), or whatever. Logically, the crew captain should be some old contest pilot, long on "know-how" but short on physical endurance. This combination has been proven repeatedly in Germany. Many an old "burned out" sailplane pilot has placed a newcomer near the top by virtue of his broad experience. Actually, in a highly competitive meet, it is very nearly impossible for an entrant to handle all aspects required of him without inviting physical and mental exhaustion.

In this country, we have a dearth of "burned out" contest pilots,—or, more accurately, an emphatic denial by many of the boys that they're past the point of peak efficiency. Actually, they still have a good chance because competition isn't that keen at our Nationals. Regardless of availability of coaches or crew captains, our standards of crewing are so low that many benefits could be derived by the application of a little common sense. Our indifference to efficient crewing is even reflected in contest rules when we limit contest flights to one per day per man. We "plow under" efficiency and initiative. Then, in contrast, we turn around and hand a pilot many points for not flying just because he made a good flight the previous day. It sums up to a condition of rewarding contestants for inaction. The same idea may have had merit in the various agriculture relief programs of a few years back but it certainly has no place in an event where maximum performance is supposed to be rewarded.

The biggest single improvement to contest performance would come from some rational action on retrieving. Needless to say, we appreciate the virtues of good towcars and trailers but beyond that practically nothing is done. It is still common practice for a crew to stand by at headquarters awaiting the landing report of their