

Some Facts of Life Concerning Soaring Contests and Contest Soaring

by E. J. Reeves

My acquaintance with tournament soaring is not of long standing, dating back only to the year 1946. But during this short period I have been intensely interested in the activity and studied it quite closely. I have assisted in the organization of two national and two regional contests, participated as a contestant in three national and four regional meets. This experience does not necessarily make me an authority on the subject, but I do feel that I have gleaned an idea here and there. Some of my learning came the hard way. I enjoyed every minute of it, liked everybody, and expect to be even more active in the future. Therefore my remarks here are not made out of bitterness toward anybody or anything. I simply have a piece I want to speak, and free speech being what it is in this country, I feel at liberty to let go with it.

Should anyone disagree, they may meet me behind the hanger at sunrise and we will have it out with short lengths of thick-wall tubing or other suitable weapons.

First off I should like to initiate a "Be kind to contest sponsors week". They are entirely too little appreciated. The very best way to appreciate them is to be one yourself.

During my short and uneventful career in the art, sport and science of motorless flight, I have become quite familiar with different kinds of complaints, squawks, and criticisms of the contest management. They run almost exclusively to his failure to provide bigger and better cash awards and other monetary remuneration for the competing pilots.

The thinking of many people seems to be that it is a pleasure and a privilege to organize and operate a soaring contest, and I might add, profitable as well. The first two "pleasure and privilege" I will go along with, but the last, I regret to say, must be debated with me taking the negative for the time being at least.

It is this well-meaning but ill informed group, that I should like to see become appraised of some of the facts of life as regards the subject of my 'piece' here.

Soaring in this country is primarily an amateur sport, perhaps not so pure by A. A. A. standards, but all the same amateur. This I think is all to the credit of the sport. I for one and many others, I am sure, would have no part of it if it were otherwise. Fortunately, I think, is the fact that soaring has to be an amateur sport, for the very good reason that no way has been found so far to get really important money around it. Ours is simply not one of the great spectator sports. It is absurd, therefore, for a participant in a soaring tournament to imagine that he should be highly rewarded for his participation as for instance, a race driver at Indianapolis or the winner of the Thompson at Cleveland; albeit the skills involved are equally great or greater. This to me is in nowise a lamentable fact, for many of our greatest and most enjoyable sports are similarly situated.

Now, the financial angle being what it is, just how would one presume a contest sponsor would see his way clear to award solid gold kitchen sinks plus take-home pay to the top placers in his soaring contest. If you are in this sport for profit, gentle reader, please permit me to suggest that you switch immediately to

prize fighting or any other of the many activities that will get you a cut of the gate. How is it, do you suppose that hundreds of cities in this fair land are not clamouring for the sponsorship of our contests?

I think perhaps we could do with a limited governmental subsidy for soaring in this country, but most certainly we would do well to look even that "gift horse" very closely in the mouth. Even if such subsidy should come and be found to be acceptable, it most likely would not be in the direction of rewards for tournament winners. So there is little surcease in the offing for a contestants financial woes from that source. It would seem therefore that we had best face the problem squarely, accepting things as they are and not necessarily as we might wish them to be.

The average soaring pilot participating in one of our large contests has never troubled himself to look behind the scenes to see just what makes one of the things tick. He sees the cake only after it is baked, he little realizes all the work, all the kneading of the dough (I use this term advisedly) that was necessary before it was served up to him. He sees the flag waving, hears the music playing, the contest management gaily greeting all comers as if never a care had he, field crews joyfully putting things in order for the take-off, tug pilots happily buzzing off into the wild blue yonder with practice tow. Ah happy and gay is the life of the contest operator! Alas my friends, all is not gold that glitters. These people have given up their vacations to work—not play, so we contestants may enjoy to the fullest the sport of soaring. Therefore, say I, hurl not a gripe at yon fair heads, for without them and their willingness to sacrifice this time you and I would not be breathing the rarified air at the top of a high thermal.

Another thing—summer vacation is a permanent institution in America, great morale and physical benefits come as a result of it. It costs a bit of our earnings and the time is generally donated by our employers. Resort hotels, hunting and fishing lodges, dude ranches, and all such beckon by the score "inviting us" to come be their "guests"—all at our expense, all of which is fine and good. But the soaring devotee, it seems to me, gets a much better value.

He spends his vacation time and money enjoying a soaring contest and at no greater expense than other vacation pursuits. For this very reason, soaring, and especially contest soaring, continues to increase in this country. So long as we are free and independent to carry on, unfettered by money considerations and other controls, then just that long soaring will continue to progress in America. I am sure that our soaring greats and the founders of this Society, men like Eaton, Du Pont, Barringer et al., would have it no other way.

The real sportsman after all is one who is devoted to his sport for its pure joy, thrill, and zest and the contribution he can make toward its advancement, not for any bag of filthy lucre.

A new CAA regulation (Amendment 43-2) requires flight instructors to demonstrate their proficiency as a flight instructor in the "category" of aircraft in which they wish to give instruction. Category, here, means airplane, glider, helicopter, etc.