

MEETS vs MEETINGS

As I sit writing these words in a house trailer headquarters on the wind-swept Odessa, Texas, airport, my thoughts turn to the difference between "meets" and "meetings." This Odessa, Texas, Soaring Camp is in the latter category. Organized by volunteers from the Texas Soaring Association, facilities have been provided for soaring pilots to come for two weeks and break records, earn FAI awards, or just plain fly and be sociable. It is not my purpose to argue that meets or contests should be superseded by meetings and camps, but merely to point out some of the virtues of the latter that may have been overlooked.

One who has been associated in any way with soaring competitions will immediately be struck by the absence of pressure and strain in the informal atmosphere of the meeting type of gathering. Except on the morning of what looks like a big day, when everyone wants to get his barograph sealed, goals and tasks declared and recorded all at once, things proceed at a rather leisurely pace. Everyone sets his own pace and flies when and where he wishes.

At a camp, the lack of competition over set, mandatory tasks doesn't push the pilots as in a contest, so there is not so much learned about what can be accomplished with sailplanes under unfavorable weather conditions. There is no substitute for a contest as a means to show up a pilot's weak points.

On the other hand, there is still much to be learned at the soaring meeting. With the absence of pressure, pilots are more inclined to take time to coach the beginner and to reveal the various tricks of the trade which mean so much in soaring. This exchange of ideas of flying techniques, gadgetry, etc., is one of the most important virtues of getting together with pilots from other clubs in other parts of the country. All this in addition to the usual bull sessions that go on far into the night and the general air of good-fellowship which prevails at such gatherings.

A formal contest always presents a personnel problem for the organizers. There are just too many non-flying jobs that must be filled. The informal meeting or camp requires much less manpower and is thus easier to operate.

The soaring camp or meeting also affords an opportunity for the beginner to practice his techniques without cluttering up the lists of an important contest. The tasks of a contest are frequently too difficult for him and in his early stages he would do well to set his own. There will probably be enough informal competition to keep him moving his sights ahead, and there are sure to be plenty of people to make suggestions and comments.

We would like to encourage the holding of such soaring meetings and camps by clubs in all parts of the country. There is already talk of one at Bishop next spring or summer. Not many of us can get more than one vacation a year, but even if we didn't spend it soaring, we could probably make good use of some of the weekends by attending flying meetings at nearby club sites. There already are a large number of local contests scheduled to be held over long weekends such as Labor Day and the Fourth of July, but it's not necessary to have a contest with formal rules in order to have a good time soaring. We would like to urge that local clubs invite their nearest neighbors to visit them more often on specific dates.

The European soaring groups have regularly made good use of soaring camps of several weeks for instructional purposes. It is admittedly much better to teach a student to fly with daily lessons for a couple of weeks than to stretch it out over many months at the rate of an hour a weekend. The instructional camp has been tried once or twice in the past in the U.S., and it might be a good idea to think about it again. It would be a valuable supplement to the handful of commercial operators who are now set up to give daily instruction throughout the soaring season.

—H. S.