

# A SKYLARK'S VIEW OF THE U. S. NATIONAL CONTEST

by RICHARD H. JOHNSON

My new Skylark 4 arrived in Houston, Texas, via sea freight in May. The next three weeks was spent installing instruments, oxygen and other gear in the Skylark, and at the same time fitting my Ad-astra trailer so that it could carry the Skylark as an alternate load.

Before leaving for Elmira, I found time to make only one aero tow and five auto tow launches. This was not as much practice as I had hoped to accumulate, but the Skylark is remarkably easy to fly and I found I was almost completely at home in it after the first 10 hours of flying.

My wife Alice and I had a hard three-days drive from Texas to Elmira. By seldom stopping to eat enroute, we managed to arrive just in time to attend the prerequisite pilots' briefing the evening before the contest's start.

**2 July**—140.5-mile Triangular Speed Race, 52 miles NW to Danville, 38 miles SSW to Wellsville, and return to Harris Hill, Elmira.

Moist Gulf air was being carried north on light southerly winds, a fairly heavy haze restricted visibility to 3-5 miles, and a Canadian cool front, some 150 miles NW, was approaching at a moderate rate.

I crossed the starting line about noon, as did most of the other 46 entered pilots. All appeared to be going well along the first leg when I caught sight, thru the haze, of a line of cumulo nimbus moving rap-

idly toward the course from a northwesterly direction. It turned out to be a rapidly-moving pre-frontal squall line that steamed over competitors, crews, and all in a violent manner before anyone could exceed the 35-mile minimum contest day mark. I was as far along course as anyone when I reached the fast-moving wall of rain, but elected not to push on thru because I could not maintain the 3-mile minimum visibility required on the airways where we were flying. Instead, I counted sailplanes, both in the air and on the ground, and decided that the required 10 would not exceed 35 miles to make it a contest day. Since I had 6000 feet of altitude and did not relish the thought of trying to secure my Skylark in the rain and heavy winds, I turned tail, landed on Harris Hill 20 minutes later, and put the machine safely in the hangar before the storm's arrival.

**3 July**—Distance Along Fixed Line, 47 miles NE to Courtland, 47 miles back to Harris Hill, then west on 271-degree course as far as possible.

The Canadian cool front had pushed through Elmira during the previous evening, leaving the air cool and relatively dry. The winds were strong, being approximately 30 knots from the NW.

I was the first to take off, taking an 11:00 A.M. start. This was a bit early, but since Harris Hill faces

the NW wind, it would be no problem staying up until adequate thermals developed. I soared the Skylark on combinations of weak, broken thermals and ridge lift until I considered conditions good enough, then went out on course. I cruised conservatively at about 60 knots indicated airspeed between the broken thermals and maintained respectable altitudes. Cumulus clouds formed along the route with bases at 7000 feet and tops near 11,000 feet. It would have been to some advantage to cloud fly here, but the entire course lay on airways and VFR flying only was permitted for the sailplanes when on airways.

On the latter portion of the return leg I began flying with Bernie Carris in the RJ-5. We apparently were in the lead and the race was on. He had a bit better glide ratio and more speed on the straight-away, but I could outclimb him somewhat in the thermals. We passed back over Harris Hill together at about 5000 feet altitude and started on our final westward course. Although it was only 4:00 P.M. conditions began to weaken while the cold NW wind appeared to blow harder. Bernie could not maintain more than a few thousand feet of altitude now, and on several occasions I thought he was about to land. I maintained altitudes of 5000 to 7000 feet but made only slow progress along the course.

By 4:30 P.M. I too was losing altitude but had left the RJ-5 somewhere behind. The strong quartering headwind made it impractical to circle in weak lift. Since I could find no other now, I soon found myself slope soaring on a ridge 38 miles out from Harris Hill. After some 10 minutes here waiting hopefully for a thermal, who should come skimming over the ridge but Bernie Carris in the RJ-5! We slope soared together for a period, then found one last usable thermal to climb in. We both drifted back badly in the wind, but I managed to climb the Skylark 2000 feet while Bernie climbed the RJ-5 about 500 feet less. The home stretch of the race was all that remained, and I wondered if Bernie, though he had less altitude, might not be able to use the RJ-5's superior speed performance to out-distance me on the final glide into the strong quartering headwind.



The author, right, checks an aeronautical chart with his crew chief, John Boone, left, before embarking on the task for the day.

Photo by Jack Baugh