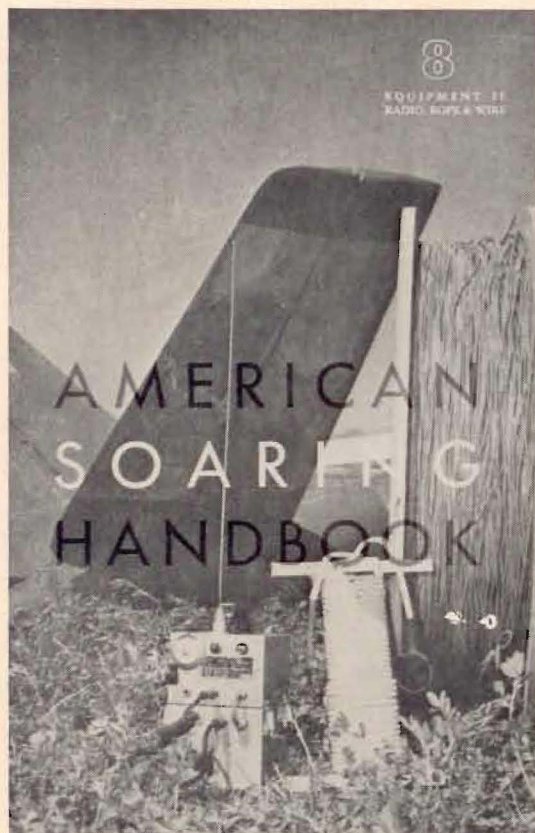


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seldom does, as one can easily be either high or low on the list for all three of the distance days, having the opposite positions on the speed days when starting time is of less importance.

A possible way of cutting down this luck element would be to prohibit the starting of any sailplane until at least half the ships had been launched, a legal start requiring identification of a ground panel which would not be displayed until that time. Arguments against this idea include the undeniable fact that it would increase congestion near the start.

Reno made clear once again that free distance as a task entails a high degree of luck, proves little, and costs a lot. One wonders how much longer we are to be saddled with this holdover from the Thirties, when sheer distance seemed so remarkable. In what other sport is ability measured by having all the contestants set off in any direction they please over little-known territory? Imagine the Indianapolis Race with all cars free to leave the stadium and go as far as possible before sundown in any direction. Increase the similarity to gliding by equipping the contestants with maps giving only the vaguest information as to road conditions, detours, bridges out, etc. In Reno the task committee wisely chose to have free distance on a day with rather weak and broken thermals on which a wind gusting to 50 knots pretty well indicated the direction to take. As it happened, the day put a premium on not going too fast. Only two of the top 10 made flights of over 375 miles, most being on the ground by six o'clock. I was three hours late due to a relight and had to leave a cloud street, stretching out on course as far as the eye could see, abandon 600 f.p.m. lift and 130-m.p.h. cruise speed (at 18,000 ft.) in order to land before dark. Of course the condition hadn't been there when earlier pilots reached the same place. As usual on free-distance days a number of pilots who never seem to do much when flying the same course as the others suddenly showed unprecedented skill, one, who never scored better than 38th on any other task, finishing in the first ten. Free distance is supposed to measure a pilot's ability to read and interpret the weather, but the results for the last several years make it painfully clear that luck is more of a factor than meteorological ability. Weather information is too skimpy and too often just plain wrong. In Reno the cloudless sky that prevailed for most of the free-distance day offered little to read.

One factor that contestants often lose sight of is the cost of a free-distance task. At Reno most of the leaders went 350 miles or more. Car miles varied from about 800 up. Only the hardest got back to Reno without holing up at a motel. With car costs at a conservative 10 cents a mile and a motel for four at, say, \$20, we have a \$100 tab for a task that seems to prove little. Deleting the free-distance day at Reno does not affect the position of the first four in the contest and makes little change among the first 10. An added factor to consider is the danger element. If a ship is unaccounted for over the wild and generally uninhabited areas characteristic of Reno and Marfa on a fixed-course day, at least the searchers have some idea of where to look. On a free-distance day, there isn't a clue. At a recent Canadian Nationals it took two days to find a ship which crashed within 25 miles of take-off. The pilot had been killed instantly, but