



STEVE KROG

COMMENTARY / THE CLASSIC INSTRUCTOR

How Old Is Too Old?

It depends

BY STEVE KROG

"I ALWAYS WANTED to learn to fly, but I think I'm too old to learn," a new acquaintance said at a recent gathering. "Life kind of got in the way," he added. I encounter conversations of this nature regularly.

The most common reason for not learning to fly at an earlier age is that life does get in the way. Individuals had a desire to learn but delayed doing so after getting married, building a career, raising a family, and then financially assisting sons and daughters with higher education. Flying, always on their mind, was postponed while taking care of these other needs.

Some had the desire to learn to fly, but it was not a high priority at the time. Work, hobbies, sports, and other activities came first. Now, a few years older, they're hesitant to start flying and claiming age as the reason.

Another comment I hear more frequently is, "It's on my bucket list. I've always wanted to learn to fly, and now I'm going to do it!"

The important thing to remember and focus on is the desire to learn to fly. Forget about the reasons for postponing learning to fly. Decades ago we used to think that 60 or 70 was old, but not so much anymore.

Over the past 10-12 years I've had the pleasure of teaching many older individuals ranging in age from the early 60s to 83. My 83-year-old student was the most positive-thinking person I've ever encountered. He was a widower and had defeated cancer — twice! He was now living each day of life as it should be, enjoying life and flying to the fullest. Sadly, cancer won in the end, but he was able to live his dream of flying for several years.

Some observations I've made regarding older pilots include:

- Older individuals wanting to learn to fly take their health more seriously and are careful about what they eat and how they exercise.
- Older student pilots are much more serious about their flight training. They read their assignments and prepare for each lesson.
- Older pilots work harder at remaining proficient and safe. My older student pilots frequently come to me with questions resulting from reading a lot of aviation-related articles.
- Older pilots are past the point in life where they believe they are immortal. Risk-taking is minimal.



Today, if you have a valid driver's license and are in otherwise good health, you can qualify for flight training as a sport pilot and can enjoy the pleasure and the challenge of learning to fly.

If you are motivated to learn, can understand the flight-training material, can follow direction, and have good situational awareness, flight training will be a fun, safe, and positive challenge.

AGE IS SOMETIMES A STATE OF MIND

Age is really not a limiting factor when learning to fly. It more so depends on an individual's physical and mental ability. Sure, it may take longer to master a skill at age 70 versus when you were 20, but that is to be expected. Senior pilots are more willing to put in the hours, I've found.

Motivation is the driving force for older individuals learning to fly. If you are motivated to learn, can understand the flight-training material, can follow direction, and have good situational awareness, flight training will be a fun, safe, and positive challenge.

The introduction of the sport pilot certificate has opened the eyes of and the door to many mid-life and older individuals wanting to fly. No longer is there a need to obtain an FAA third-class medical certificate to fly legally. Today, if you have a valid driver's license and are in otherwise good health, you can qualify for flight training as a sport pilot and can enjoy the pleasure and the challenge of learning to fly.



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Here are several examples of students over age 60 who have learned or are now learning to fly.

Dave was an EAA member long before he was old enough to drive. “I saw an ad in the Sunday paper that I could be a junior EAA member for I believe \$3.50, and I got the monthly magazine. I spent hours devouring every word in each magazine. My EAA number is only four digits,” Dave said.

Life went on, but he remained interested in everything about airplanes and flying but never could quite find the time to learn to fly. Then one day while attending the funeral of a friend the thought occurred to him, “I’m not getting any younger. If I’m going to do something, I’m going to go do it rather than saying I’ll do it later.” He wanted to learn to fly, and he wanted to do it in the traditional way by learning in a tailwheel airplane. He ended up at Cub Air and has been flying two or three times a week since EAA AirVenture Oshkosh 2017 concluded.

The challenge of accomplishing flight is something that many talk about, or think about, but few act on. It’s out there, just take the next step and give it a try.

“I’m not sure what I’ll do yet, but another friend has already told me he has a hangar for me. I’ve begun looking for a fun light-sport airplane like a Cub or something similar. I hope by late spring I have a license and an airplane,” he said.

Ron got his start by being an airport bum at the age of 15, hanging around the local airport. The mechanic took pity on him and let him “help” with things, but mostly Ron was just in the way. He persisted, though, and was finally asked if he wanted to learn to fly. The mechanic was not a flight instructor but did own a Cub so he taught him a few things. At the age of 17 Ron enlisted in the military followed by marriage, family, and a working career. It wasn’t until reaching his early 60s that he finally got back to aviation by becoming involved with the Civil Air Patrol (CAP), an organization he continues to be a part of.

“When I turned 80 I thought to myself, you’re not getting any younger. It’s time to pursue some of the things on my bucket list,” Ron said. Learning to fly was high on the list. Some minor medical maladies have prevented Ron from obtaining a third-class medical without incurring significant expense so he chose to pursue the light-sport path for learning to fly.

Ron now flies two or three times per week depending on the weather and hopes to get most of the requirements out of the way before cold weather sets in, then finish up in early spring.

John, who is in his late 60s, had a private pilot certificate but hadn’t been doing any flying for nearly 20 years. Though the flying bug remained firmly implanted in his mind, building a business and raising a family consumed his time. Now he is semi-retired and has grandchildren who want an airplane ride with grandpa.



and bought an airplane. A true believer in challenging himself, Sandy then took some aerobatic training and now owns not only a Piper J-3 Cub but also a beautiful recently restored Stearman. To remain proficient and safe, Sandy and I still fly together a couple of times per month to challenge him with different maneuvers and situations. He truly loves to fly and loves each new challenge.

I've had the distinct pleasure of flying with each of these individuals, and I consider it a privilege to have done so. Each has demonstrated a passion for flying, a bond we share. The challenge of accomplishing flight is something that many talk about, or think about, but few act on. It's out there, just take the next step and give it a try. You may surprise yourself with how much fun this challenge can be. *EAA*

Steve Krog, EAA 173799, has been flying for more than four decades and giving tailwheel instruction for nearly as long. In 2006 he launched Cub Air Flight, a flight-training school using tailwheel aircraft for all primary training.

As the bug to fly moved to the forefront of his mind, John and his brother decided to get back into flying by building and flying a light-sport kit airplane. Two years and a lot of fun later, it is nearly ready for certification and flight testing.

John is very safety-conscious so he decided to get back into flying by taking dual instruction, getting current and more importantly proficient, and completing a flight review before doing anything more

than a slow taxi in his newly completed aircraft. By the time you read this article, John should have a number of hours flown off his airplane.

Sandy, now another new private pilot, decided he wanted to learn to fly when he was in his mid-60s. Located more than two driving hours away from the airport, his dedication drove him to the airport at least twice each week. He worked hard at his training, earned his private pilot certificate,

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