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COMMENTARY / THE CLASSIC INSTRUCTOR

Aborted Landings and Go-Arounds

Being prepared for when and how

BY STEVE KROG

WHEN WAS THE LAST time you needed to abort a landing and execute a go-around?

What are your personal limitations for deciding to abort an approach and landing? If you answered honestly, you likely admitted that you had no pre-determined personal limitations.

You may ask why bother with establishing limitations? After all, you're a good pilot and seldom need to abort a landing and go-around. That thinking, my pilot friends, is the reason to practice this maneuver from time to time.

What is the proper method for executing a go-around? The procedure is generally the same, whether flying a complex airplane or a simple, fixed-gear, single-engine pleasure aircraft. This is what I teach my primary students to do once they've determined that a go-around is necessary. Assume in this example that a fixed-gear aircraft is being used.

ALWAYS FLY THE AIRPLANE

First and foremost, when executing a go-around, always fly the airplane. Don't lose focus on the situation that is developing. Smoothly apply full power and stabilize. If a lot of trim has been applied, anticipate the nose wanting to rise rapidly. Close the carb heat and establish the best angle of climb attitude. If your aircraft is equipped with flaps and they are extended for landing, slowly retract the flaps a few degrees, or one notch at a time, until fully retracted. Now the trim can be adjusted to relieve the required forward control pressure. Continue a stable climb and fly the traffic pattern in preparation for another approach.

When conducting a flight review, I'll call out a simulated obstruction on the runway, requiring the pilot to demonstrate a go-around. Most of the time the execution is smooth and uneventful, especially in the type of general aviation aircraft that most of us fly. However, occasionally the maneuver presents an interesting situation.

In one instance, I asked an experienced pilot flying a flap-equipped airplane to demonstrate a full-flap, short-field landing. The approach and landing should have been routine, as this individual flew several times a week. At midpoint on downwind he applied carb heat and then reduced power to 1700 rpm and applied one notch of flaps.

PERFORMING A GO-AROUND



Apply full power and adjust pitch to increase airspeed.



Assume a climb attitude and retract the flaps a few degrees, or one notch at a time, until they are fully retracted.



Adjust the trim and continue a stable climb.

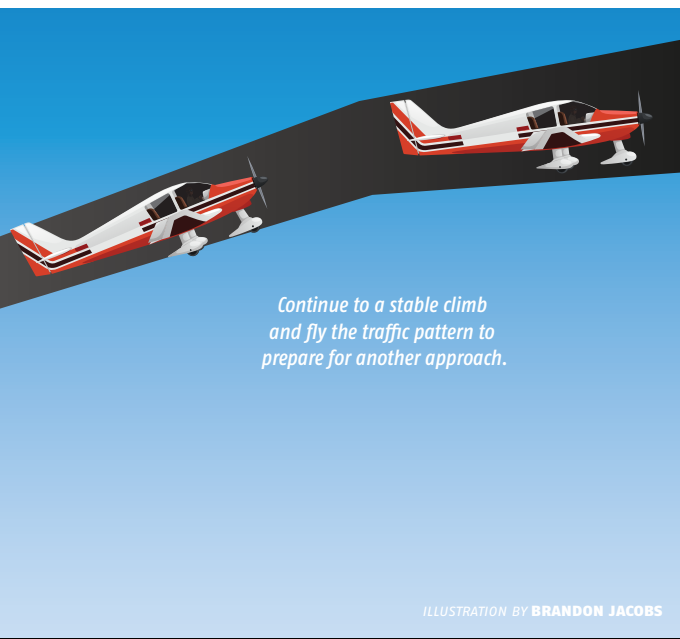


The turn to base was normal, and he added a second notch of flaps. It appeared we were on the desired approach angle and correct airspeed. After turning final, he applied the third notch of flaps. The descending approach was stable, and everything appeared routine. Just as power was being reduced to idle, I called out an obstruction and asked for an immediate go-around.

For an instant, the pilot hesitated, and then he simultaneously applied power and fully retracted the flaps. Immediately, the airplane began shuddering and sinking. I pushed the control stick forward to lower the nose and requested in an abnormally loud voice to reapply flaps, which he did. Together, we stabilized the aircraft and then slowly retracted the flaps, one notch at a time. The pilot, quite shaken by what had transpired, stated he knew better but admitted he had experienced an instant of what we sometimes refer to as “vapor lock between the ears.” He hadn’t performed a go-around in years. I’m quite certain that he’ll never again do this in all his years of future flying.

Examiners who I’ve had the pleasure of working with in the past 14 years all clearly stated that they will never fail a student pilot for opting to perform a go-around rather than attempting to save the approach and make a landing. As one stated, “If a student makes an unstable and unsafe approach but opts to land, and even makes a perfect landing, I will fail him or her. It’s clearly a failure of recognizing a compromising situation and making a bad decision.”

I completely agree with this philosophy and try to instill this in all my students. If an approach doesn’t look or feel right, go around. Ego should never be a factor in this situation!



He had some battle damage, so we gave him our very best because he gave us his.

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A bad-bounce initial touchdown usually leads to more bounces with less control of the airplane. This is another good situation in which to establish personal limitations. If a bad bounce occurs on landing, go around.

WHEN IS A GO-AROUND NEEDED?

There are several situations that may cause a pilot to abort a landing. Potential conflicting traffic is one such situation, especially at a busy but small airport serving up a Sunday pancake breakfast. One common occurrence is when you are on final approach and overtaking an aircraft in front of you. Rather than deciding to abort the landing at this point, many pilots will attempt to further slow their aircraft, make S-turns, and not remain focused on flying the airplane. Not only do we now have an unstable approach at hand, but also we have an aircraft hovering near stall speed making turns, sometimes in an uncoordinated manner. We all know what can potentially occur at this point. In this situation, it would be wise to go around.

Fighting a gusty crosswind is another situation that might require an aborted landing. I've flown into a number of airports that have only one runway, or have only one active runway available because of an event. The landing may require handling a stiff crosswind. In this situation, you have two options: head for another airport with a more favorable runway or set up for a crosswind landing and be acutely aware of potential gusts and the possibility of an aborted landing and go-around.

Several years ago, while returning to Wisconsin from a Pennsylvania fly-in, my wife and I encountered such a situation. The Ohio airport we were trying to reach had one runway. Checking on local weather and surface winds, we knew crosswind was

going to be a factor. As we were circling over the top of the field and checking the windsock, the crosswind appeared to be steady at about a 60-degree angle to the runway. Just as we were about to touch down, the wind and turbulence seemed to really kick in and began pushing us all over the place. I added power and executed a go-around in preparation for another try.

My situational awareness had been lulled to sleep. A line of tall trees paralleled the runway with approximately 200 to 300 feet of horizontal separation. The crosswind was "boiling" over the top of the trees, creating a great deal of turbulence. On the second approach, we were well prepared for the turbulence, and the landing was a success.

Getting behind the aircraft you are flying is another reason for aborting a landing. There are times when distractions, such as other traffic approaching the airport that you have been unable to spot, can negatively influence your thought process. Chatty passengers can be a distraction. The wind may have expedited your downwind leg causing you to go well beyond the point where you normally make the turn onto the base leg, or the wind at pattern altitude may be a crosswind causing you to over- or undershoot the runway when making the turn to final. Any or all of these situations can cause one to get behind the aircraft and make mistakes, causing a lot of tension. Rather than fight the situation, this might be a good time to abort and give it another try.

SETTING PERSONAL LIMITATIONS

When flying into an unfamiliar airport, especially if you are a low-time pilot, it's easy to misread the surrounding ground reference points, leading to coming in too high on short final. In addition, if the runway is shorter than what one is accustomed to using, pick a reference point about one-third of the way down the runway. If you're not on the ground by that point during the landing, add power and perform a go-around.

For example, imagine you're landing at an unfamiliar airport with trees at both ends of the 3,000-foot runway. As you approach the end of the runway and recognize your excess altitude, the natural action is to lower the nose. This attitude change gets you nearer to the runway surface, but it also adds significantly to your airspeed. As you level off, you realize the airplane doesn't want to quit flying. In the meantime, valuable runway real estate is rapidly passing by as you try to dissipate the excess energy. While you're trying to decide what to do next, another 500 feet of runway has sailed past. Finally, you realize you probably can't get your beautifully restored airplane safely down and stopped before arriving at the trees, so you abort the landing, add full power, and initiate a go-around. Good choice — but one you probably should have made five or six seconds earlier. I'm sure many of you have seen videos of airplanes flying into the trees due to poor decision-making and not initiating a go-around earlier in the landing attempt.

A "bad-bounce" landing is also a situation that is best addressed with the execution of a go-around, rather than attempting to save the landing. A bad-bounce initial touchdown usually leads to more bounces with less control of the airplane. This is another good situation in which to establish personal limitations. If a bad bounce occurs on landing, go around.

The next time you decide to take a pleasure flight, take a few minutes to challenge yourself. Simulate a runway obstruction just as you level off and begin your flare. A properly executed go-around will be a routine, safe maneuver if practiced from time to time. One or two practice go-arounds is all it will take to reinforce the desired corrective action for fun, safe flights the rest of the flying season. *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.