



STEVE KROG

COMMENTARY / THE CLASSIC INSTRUCTOR



Spring and the New Flying Season

Getting safely back into the air

BY STEVE KROG

SPRING IS BUT A WISHFUL DREAM as I write this article. Winter is still with us here in the Upper Midwest. It has been a very long, tough winter, but by the time you read this, spring will be here — I hope!

As the warmer spring breezes begin to blow, many of the local airport folks will begin to come out of hibernation. The itch to get back in the air and do some fun flying will have begun. But where does one start to safely and proficiently get back in the air?

PERSONAL CHECKLIST

First things first. If you fly as a private pilot, is your FAA third-class medical current? I can tell you I've run into many individuals who thought their medical was current, but it had expired. Remember, if you are under the age of 40, the third-class medical is good for 60 calendar months (five years). After age 40, it is good for 24 calendar months (two years).

For those of you flying under the BasicMed rules, are you sure you're current? It might be time to check that out as there is still a lot of confusion concerning BasicMed. I would recommend visiting the FAA website and reviewing AC 68-1A. You'll find the link at www.EAA.org/extras.

Light-sport pilots, as well as all active pilots, need to conduct a self-assessment of one's own health. Have any new medical or physical issues developed that could possibly influence your ability to fly safely and legally? Has your doctor changed any of your prescription medications? If uncertain, it would be a good idea to visit the FAA website and check out the list of meds that are, or are not, approved for flight. Once again, you can find the link at www.EAA.org/extras.

Once you've determined yourself fit to fly, it's time to get to the airport and begin checking out your prized airplane. Other than occasional hangar visits during the harsh winter (at least here in the Midwest), your aircraft has likely sat neglected since the last flight of 2018, probably in late November.

AIRCRAFT CHECKLIST

After getting the door(s) open and allowing sunlight and fresh spring air into the dark stale hangar, it's time to do a slow but thorough walk-around. What are you looking for? Fuel stains where there shouldn't be stains, probably indicating a leaking fuel line quick drain or the fuel shut-off valve. Is there fuel in the tank? Is it 100LL or auto fuel? If auto fuel, it would be a good idea to drain it and use it in your lawn mower since it breaks down over a storage period.

Take ample fuel samples from all quick drains to ensure there's no water or particle contamination. I've experienced situations where the fuel sample appeared to be clear, and I was thinking all was okay. But it turned out that there was nearly a half-pint of water that had collected in the bottom of the fuel tank. It took three or four fuel sampler fills to finally get to the fuel. Use caution and don't assume the first sample is fine.



Even if the oil looks clean but has been sitting in the engine all winter, I recommend changing it after an hour or so of operation and normal operating temperatures. In the grand scheme of aviation-related expenses, four quarts of oil are far less expensive than an engine overhaul!

Check the oil and look closely at the color. Is it dark and dirty? Somewhat milky in color? Or, is there a good caramel tint? If it is milky, the oil is contaminated with a lot of trapped moisture and should be changed.



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If dark and dirty, you could run the engine up to normal operating temperature to get all dirt and carbon contaminants in the solution and then dump and change the oil. Even if the oil looks clean but has been sitting in the engine all winter, I recommend changing it after an hour or so of operation and normal operating temperatures. In the grand scheme of aviation-related expenses, four quarts of oil are far less expensive than an engine overhaul!

Tires may look properly inflated, but after sitting for months and undergoing 80- to 100-degree Fahrenheit temperature changes, the tire pressure is probably not what it should be. While checking and adding air, look closely for sidewall weather checking or cracking. How old are those tires anyway? It may be time for a tire upgrade to ensure a safe flying season. If your airplane has hydraulic brakes, visually check the brake fluid level and then tap the brake pedals a few times to ensure they feel solid and the brake system functions as it was designed to do.

Next, do a slow, thorough inspection of the entire engine and airframe. Open the cowling all the way up to expose rodent nests on top of the engine or around the engine accessory case. Open several inspection rings in each wing and look for rodent nests using a bright light and mirror. Mice love to chew on rib stitching in fabric-covered wings, and mouse urine does a nasty job on aluminum and causes corrosion. Also, use a bright light and check the fuselage aft of the cabin. And finally, using a light and mirror, check out the back side of the instrument panel. I've found bare wires and mouse nests in that area.

Don't forget, if you are using a wood propeller on your aircraft, the propeller hub bolts need to be re-torqued. Here in the Midwest, this practice is recommended seasonally. Temperature and moisture create quite a fluctuation in expanding and contracting the wood plies. The correct method for re-torquing the propeller hub bolts is to cut the safety wire, loosen the bolts by two or three turns, let stand for an hour, and then re-tighten to the proper torque value.

If your airplane has an electrical system, the battery is next. Acid batteries need to be checked for proper levels of acids and refilled with distilled water to proper levels.

Battery posts should undergo a thorough visual inspection for corrosion and tightness. Clean with water and baking soda if corrosion is found. Whether you have an acid or sealed battery, put a trickle charger on the battery to bring it up to a full charge before that first start. Check what your battery manufacturer recommends for battery charging. Gel cell batteries sometimes require a particular type of charger if the warranty is to be honored.



You may be a bit rusty during the first flight of the year, so don't overload yourself with weather challenges when you don't have to. Make that first flight on a sunny, warm, and calm wind type of day.

With all systems checked and no rodent damage encountered, it's time to roll your bird out of the hangar and let it breathe some spring air and sunshine. Once parked on the ramp in front of your hangar, the windows need cleaning. Months of dust have accumulated since it last flew. Here is where extreme caution is needed. Carefully remove the first several layers of dust. Don't squirt window cleaner and then rub hard with a paper towel. You'll make a lot of scratches that won't show up until the first landing looking toward the sun and sunset. I like to use ample amounts of warm water sprayed on the windows, first loosening and then rinsing a lot of the dirt away. Then I'll use a good quality window cleaner approved for Plexiglas and microfiber cleaning cloths to reduce the possibility of scratches.

A good bath for the entire aircraft should also be done, but you may want to wait until after the first flight of spring and after warming, and then changing, the engine oil.

FIRST FLIGHT OF THE SEASON CHECKLIST

Physically, your airplane is ready for the first flight of the season, but is it legal? Did you happen to remove all aircraft documents after the last flight and take them home for "safe keeping"? If so, are they now back in the airplane? It is a remote possibility that

you'll ever encounter an FAA ramp check, but what if? Why take the risk?

Do you have a current map on board? If you depend on your iPad and an electronic flight program, did you update it and ensure that it is current? It might be time to conduct a familiarization with your iPad or whatever glass panel type system you have installed in the panel. When not using the electronic magic boxes regularly, it is easy to forget some of the program features and

procedures. Better to get familiarized on the ground than trying to depend on it in the air and forgetting how to use it.

After getting a fresh batch of fuel, clear the area and start the engine. Check to ensure all systems are functioning and in the green. It's time to taxi to the active runway, gently testing the brakes a time or two while doing so.

Did you check on current winds and weather? Or were you so excited to make that first flight you overlooked this task? You may be a bit rusty during the first flight of the year, so don't overload yourself with weather challenges when you don't have to. Make that first flight on a sunny, warm, and calm wind type of day.

I won't be redundant here by providing a step-by-step procedure for regaining flight proficiency. Rather, I'll refer you to the August 2018 issue of *EAA Sport Aviation*, Page 28, "I Want to Be a Better Pilot," and September 2018 *EAA Sport Aviation*, Page 26, "Getting Back in the Saddle."

Follow the guidelines provided and have a safe, enjoyable 2019 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.