



STEVE KROG
COMMENTARY / THE CLASSIC INSTRUCTOR

Poor Training, Lost Skill, or Lax Attitude

When good enough isn't

BY STEVE KROG



HERE AT CUB AIR FLIGHT, we've had the pleasure of working with a number of pilots from all over the United States this summer who came to us for a tailwheel endorsement. Some are fairly new and have low time while others have logged thousands of hours in more complex aircraft. I've made a few observations while flying with these individuals. Here are some examples of what I've seen.

Taxiing from the ramp to the departure end of the runway is a challenge for some. Steering a nosewheel airplane is simple because rudder pedal response is nearly instant. However, learning how to deal with the lead and lag time when depressing a rudder pedal for changing direction in a tailwheel aircraft can be comical.

Pushing the right pedal, for example, requires a second or two of lag time before the airplane begins to turn. Then when wanting to stop the turn, the opposite or left pedal pressure is applied. But it takes a few seconds before anything happens, causing the turn to go well beyond the desired heading. One or two trips back and forth across the ramp, and that issue is usually resolved.

I'm not sure why but some people have a habit of gunning the power, throttling back, and then constantly riding the brakes. Some refer to this issue as jackrabbit running. It's hard on the engine, burns excess fuel, wears out the brakes, and drives instructors crazy.

Add enough power to get the airplane moving and then adjust the power for safe, steady taxiing without having to constantly move the throttle. I sometimes play a game with a student and challenge them to move from



the ramp to the departure end of the runway without ever touching the brakes or the throttle. This is thinking ahead and staying ahead of the airplane, all while saving wear and tear.

It's amazing to me, and all of the instructors here, how many pilots have been taught to fly strictly by the numbers rather than feeling and flying the airplane. Many ask the question, "What airspeed should I use to rotate and lift off?" Once aligned with the runway centerline and power is added, the pilot becomes fixated on the airspeed indicator.

We teach feeling the airplane. It's always talking to you so listen to it. Start with the stick or yoke full aft, smoothly apply power while adding slight right rudder, and when the stick feels heavy, slowly advance it slightly, raising the tail but maintaining a tail-low attitude. The airplane is now in an ideal attitude and angle of attack and will fly itself off the ground if you feel it and let it.

Unfortunately, some tailwheel pilots fixate on the airspeed. When it moves, they ram the stick forward, raising the tail high and putting the aircraft in a negative angle-of-attack position. I believe they do this because forward visibility is impaired when in the three-point attitude.

However, the tail-high attitude certainly adds to the takeoff roll. Then upon reaching an indicated 60-70 mph, they yank the stick back, forcing the airplane into the air. This isn't flying; it's driving, and if they were to transition to something like a Decathlon, they would probably have a serious prop strike.

Once in the air the vertical S-climb becomes the norm by the airspeed-fixated pilot. Striving for 60 mph for the best angle of climb, the pilot levels when the needle touches 60 only to find they're now at 55. Then the nose is pitched slightly downward, and when the

needle again touches 60, the pilot attempts to level the aircraft only to find the airspeed is now at 65.

The vertical S-turns continue until reaching the desired cruise altitude. But, frequently, the vertical S-turns don't end here. While chasing the airspeed the altitude is now anywhere from plus 200 feet to minus 200 feet of the desired altitude. If a weak-stomached passenger is on board, it may be time to find the barf bag.

We preach attitude flying. By that I mean place the aircraft nose on the horizon and hold it there, letting the airspeed stabilize. If the airspeed is showing something slightly less than desired, lower the nose a quarter inch on the horizon and stabilize, again letting the airspeed settle on the desired indicated airspeed. Then trim and let the airplane do the work.

Have you ever flown with a pilot who is constantly moving or even "stirring" the control stick or yoke? Sometimes when I see this happening, I'll position my hands to prevent the stick or yoke from moving. For an instant the pilot shows panic but then observes what I am doing. Usually, they will then relax and let the airplane fly

— only to return to constantly moving the stick a few minutes later.

After a few more attempts to prevent the stick from moving, the pilot usually gets the idea, relaxes, and lets the airplane do the flying that it was intended to do. I

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frequently tell students the airplane was designed to fly, so quit fighting it and let it do its job.

Always looking to clear the area when demonstrating a turn is another habit many pilots were either never taught or have long since forgotten after completing their flight training. "There's probably no other airplanes out there anyway, right?" But sometimes there may well be. I've mentioned this trick previously, but what I like to do if I have a student who continually forgets to clear the area is recruit a friend of mine.

We arrange for him to take off after I take off with a student. At a predetermined altitude and heading, my friend forms up just behind the left wing of the airplane the student and I are flying. When in position, I ask for a left turn. As the student initiates the turn, they see my friend, express surprise, and generally never again forget to look for traffic.

Returning to the airport and entering the traffic pattern can sometimes be an adventure. Though most of the pattern traffic announced their respective positions, the student is oblivious to the chatter. The opposite situation sometimes occurs, too. We operate in a geographic area where at least six other airports use the same common traffic advisory frequency/UNICOM.

On a good VFR day, the radio chatter is heavy and confusing. The student I'm flying with seldom hears the name of the airport being announced and immediately becomes a bobblehead doll looking for traffic miles away at another airport. Distracted, the student overlooks the pre-landing checklist, reduced power settings, proper altitudes, and the list goes on.

At this point it would be wise for the student to scrap the approach and execute a go-around. A poor landing is already a given under these circumstances. A long deep breath followed by concentrated listening can go a long way in reducing these pattern problems.

Lack of understanding and performing crosswind landings is another area showing weakness. Why does it seem so hard to execute in a pilot's mind? Fear of a mistake? Fear of what might happen? I think this frame of mind is the result of previous weak instruction, or lack of practice to remain proficient.

I mentioned in a previous article that we recently had a tailwheel student come to us for additional training. He had received a full tailwheel endorsement, yet he was apprehensive about flying a tailwheel aircraft. He came to us requesting additional training to build self-confidence.

While discussing his previous training he shared that he had never done a wheel landing, nor had he done any type of landing on a hard surface. And finally, he admitted that he had never been taught to do any type of crosswind landing, yet the instructor signed his tailwheel endorsement. Sadly, we've encountered similar situations from other students wanting additional tailwheel training.

I commend the individuals who have sought us out to request additional tailwheel training. These are the pilots striving for proficiency and thus safe flying. There are other pilots who haven't done as much flying as they might have wanted to do. Recognizing this, a number of these pilots have come forward also requesting several hours of dual instruction to get back to their desired proficiency.

But there are also pilots who have the lax attitude of "that's good enough." Don't be one of them. Be a pilot striving to be the best and most proficient you can be. Be your own toughest critic whenever you go flying. *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.

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