First Solo to CFI

A challenging path

BY STEVE KROG



AS A YOUNG PERSON, like many I dreamt of becoming an airplane pilot. I watched airplanes fly overhead while growing up on a farm in southwestern Minnesota, and I dreamt of one day flying that airplane. After my first airplane ride, I knew that I had to become a pilot!

Like many others who earned a private pilot license, I wanted more. My dream was to become an airline pilot and fly all over the globe. I worked nearly seven days a week at an airport earning all the required advanced ratings. Then I taught people to fly seven days a week, building the necessary flight time to even be considered by any of the airlines of that time.

Global economics ended that dream. Rather than give up, I opted to help others learn to fly rather than walk away from flying. For the next several decades, I taught people who had the dream of flight on evenings and weekends at the local airport. I've met and trained many young men and women who had and still have the dream of becoming a professional pilot.

One of the requirements for most young pilots is that of becoming a certificated flight instructor (CFI). There are few other opportunities for building quality flight time to meet the minimum requirements of the airlines or charter services.

Two years ago, I met a student named Lauren Stettbacher, EAA 1342923, who instantly demonstrated her love of flight and a tenacious drive to succeed. She comes from a competitive athletic family and excelled in three sports while in high school. However, none of the family members expressed interest in flying.



Lauren's first solo flight.

Despite that, Lauren was born with a desire to fly. From the age of 3, all she wanted to do with her life was fly airplanes. Now, at the age of 19, she has achieved all the necessary ratings to advance her aviation career except for building quality flight time. The road to success was not easy. Frustration, disappointment, and financial strains made the goal challenging. Rather than give up, she went to work looking for opportunities to support her goal.

In 2022, she joined EAA Chapter 572, volunteering to do whatever was necessary to eventually be considered for a Ray Aviation Scholarship. Demonstrating work ethic and desire, Lauren was awarded the scholarship. In early September 2023, she earned her private pilot certificate, the first step in pursuing an aviation career.



Lauren earning her private pilot certificate.

For the next nine months, she took a flying lesson whenever she had earned enough money to buy an hour of flight time. Although frustrated by not being able to fly as often as she would have liked, she was able to earn a complex endorsement.

Her next step was to take out a loan and enroll in a flight training program to pursue the instrument rating. Four months and thousands of dollars later, Lauren withdrew from the program for lack of advancement. She was not to be denied at this point, though.

Lauren began researching all forms of flight training scholarships, applied to many of them, and was rewarded for being persistent. Large or small, each scholarship helped in her goal of becoming a professional pilot.

The next step in her pursuit was obtaining a tailwheel endorsement, completing those requirements in early June 2025. She then contacted the CFI and the flying club where she earned her private

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pilot certificate. Knowing Lauren was an exceptional student, the CFI was willing to find time to work with her. Less than two months later, the instrument rating was comfortably earned.

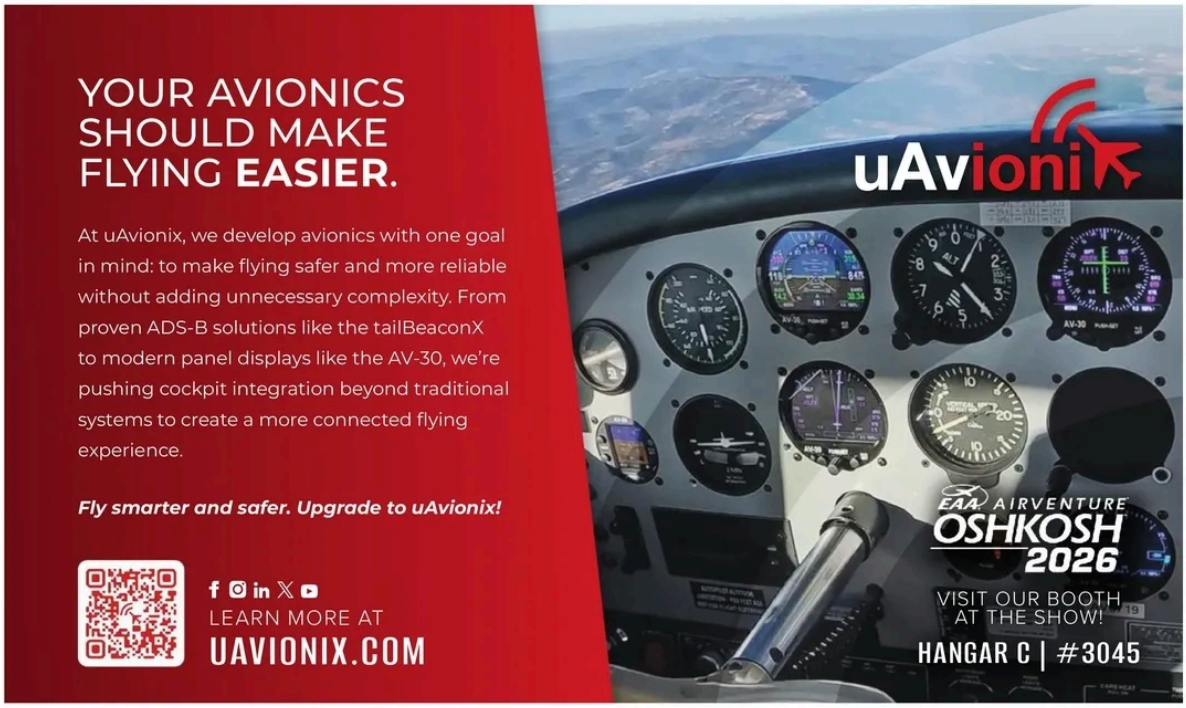
Now it was time to focus on the commercial pilot certificate. First, she needed to build some serious solo flight time. Having fallen in love with the Piper J-3 Cub during her tailwheel training, she selected the Cub for the majority of the commercial certificate requirements.

Flight time and ground school training passed quickly, and on September 9, 2025, Lauren earned a commercial pilot certificate, gaining exceptional kudos from the designated pilot examiner.



Commercial certificate successfully done.

While working on her commercial certificate, Lauren continued searching for and applying for additional scholarships, and thanks to her persistence, it paid off. Many scholarships go unawarded.



During the commercial training we began talking about becoming a CFI. At first, she was hesitant, uncertain if she could actually do a good job instructing. To overcome this self-doubt, I began having her teach me commercial maneuvers during our dual flights. Awkward at first, we had a lot of laughs at her explanations. But this practice was truly rewarded.

Lauren was finally convinced that she had the ability to be a great teacher. We began working on the CFI rating. As a longtime CFI myself, I think this is the most fun rating on which to work, at least for me. But probably not so much for the CFI candidate. Every training flight is accompanied by three or four hours of ground school diagnosing and explaining all aspects of flight. Role-playing is key to making this happen. I can attest that I am the worst student pilot candidate when doing so.

I've been known to make the CFI candidate ill while performing maneuvers. But in so doing, the candidate quickly realizes the importance of not only being a good pilot but also being a great teacher and concisely explaining every control movement required for the successful completion of a flight maneuver. Lauren was a great CFI student and soon learned to be brief but explicit in every explanation.

Finally, the day arrived for the CFI checkride. The early morning weather was questionable, but we knew it would improve, so she traveled to Oshkosh by auto to begin the oral portion. When the ceiling improved, I flew the aircraft to Oshkosh for the flight portion. By mid-afternoon on November 24, 2025, Lauren was awarded her CFI certificate. It was a grand day for her and one that all of us at Kylie's Cub Air Flight celebrated.



CFI checkride successfully accomplished.

All the hard work flying, studying, taking written tests, and applying for scholarships had finally paid a huge dividend. She was now a CFI and began providing instruction several days later.

Lauren was not yet done. It is important to obtain the multiengine rating. However, that takes a fair amount of cash to complete. Together we searched for additional scholarship opportunities and found success. The Kylie Murray family had just launched a scholarship in Kylie's name together with ATP Flight School for rewarding a multiengine rating. She quickly applied and was the runner-up. But luck was on her side. The other recipient had received two multiengine scholarships and graciously selected the other scholarship so Lauren could accept the Kylie scholarship.

Two years ago, I met a student named Lauren Stettbacher, EAA 1342923, who instantly demonstrated her love of flight and a tenacious drive to succeed.

March 2026 found Lauren attending the ATP multiengine school. Seven days later, I received a phone call from her. She was so excited I could barely understand what she was saying. But after a minute or two and several deep breaths she shared that she had just completed and passed the checkride.



Lauren had the opportunity to meet Kylie's parents, Lisa and Geoff Murray.

Lauren is now employed full time at Kylie's Cub Air Flight teaching new students the love and passion for flying airplanes safely and confidently. She has never lost sight of her flight path and is actively paying it forward by flying EAA Young Eagles at every opportunity.

My advice to students wanting to pursue an aviation career is to never give up on the dream and remain persistent. When one door closes another will open, but it will take effort.

I am so proud of what Lauren accomplished in one year. But I'm also proud of several other young people who have that drive. They began their careers earning a private certificate with us and then chose a different path to become a CFI, and they accomplished their goals. They, too, are now full-time CFIs, all teaching at Kylie's Cub Air Flight. EAA

Steve Krog, EAA 173799, has been flying for more than five decades and giving tailwheel instruction for nearly as long. In 2006, he launched what is now Kylie's Cub Air Flight, a flight training school using tailwheel aircraft for all primary training.

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