



NUGGETS FOR THE NEWBIES

performers offer
tips and advice

BY MIKE BERRIOCHOA

I've been preaching safety my entire career and I still do it.

- Bob Hoover, as quoted in past issue of *Air Shows Magazine*



What we do touches people's lives, touches their emotions and sparks their curiosity. That has value.

- Jim Peitz



Playwright and author Oscar Wilde once said, "The only thing to do with good advice is pass it on." And if you ask most veteran performers what advice they would give to pilots trying to break into the air show business, almost to a person they will say, "Don't do it." And while they are joking, they admit they are only half joking. It's not because they fear the competition. Far from it. Just about everyone recognizes that not enough new, young pilots are getting into this industry. But, their tongue-in-cheek advice acknowledges just how difficult it is to get started.

There was a time in the air show community when most of the advice was focused on flying safely. Legendary pilot and air show performer Bob Hoover never hesitated to approach a performer if he thought the performer was doing something dangerous. If the performer didn't listen, Hoover would go to the FAA. He said he was usually successful in getting his point across, but not always. In an article several years ago he told *Air Shows Magazine*: "I saw more people killed in my lifetime than you can ever imagine. I saw people do some of the dumbest things in the world; some even crashed right in front of me as I was waiting to begin my act, and most of them were skilled pilots. I've been preaching safety my entire career and I still do it." It is a testament to Bob Hoover's skill as an aviator and his attention to safety as an air show pilot that he died peacefully in his bed last month at the age of 94.

Military jet teams critique every performance and, during their debriefs, the pilots know to check their egos at the door. If they make a mistake during a performance, they are held accountable, because they all understand safety is their highest priority and their goal is to achieve a performance that is as close to perfect as possible.

New and/or young performers are more open to constructive criticism these days, partly because so many more of them have come to air shows from the competitive ranks where critiques are routine. And whether it is through attending an ICAS

seminar or one-on-one conversations at air shows, pilots are mentoring new performers now more than ever, to help them get better and take their rightful place in this industry.

Having said all that, the guidance most new performers are seeking these days is not how to fly safely. It's how to break into the business, how to get recognized, and -- as silly as it may seem to some -- how to make money doing it.

While safety is paramount, a safe pilot isn't necessarily an entertaining pilot, no matter his or her skill level. "I sought advice from Jimmy Franklin who taught me that I had to be different and be entertaining if I wanted to be successful," said Mark Sorensen, who teamed up with Mark Nowosielski to form the Twin Tiger Aerobatic Team. "Typical stereotype performances are not what people want," he said. "The package isn't just the flying. It has to include narration, sound, and the use of color. It's figuring out what hasn't been done before, or how to do it differently."

Team aerobatics are always popular acts. A few decades ago, they were everywhere. Most have since faded into air show history and their disappearance has created a new niche, as Sorensen and Nowosielski successfully demonstrate every air show season.

Veteran performer, Bill Stein, said his best recommendation for a newcomer is: "Be a woman and fly a Stearman." Hello? Can you say Vicky Benzing? Vicky has been very successful flying her Stearman at air shows all across the country, even though she didn't start out that way. "I started out flying an Extra, got hired to fly a lot of shows; then a friend talked me into bringing my Stearman to a show one time and now most shows want my Stearman act. Shows can find ten monoplanes to fill their card, but it's hard to find a Stearman act." Benzing said she has worked extremely hard to gain acceptance and does not want to be hired just because she is a woman. "If I believed I was hired just because of my gender, it would totally undermine my self-confidence," she said.

Stein likens the air show industry to a circus where there is plenty of room for variety. "An air show is a circus, a diverse set of acts. There is room for more change of pace acts like the Stearman, and a lot of room for more comedy. I like big acts like formation flying, pyro, and jets," he says.

Because the industry is so diverse, veterans urge new performers to link up with a mentor...someone who will offer good advice, and direct, honest criticism. It's an axiom in aviation that pilots don't brag to each other about how good they are. Instead, they share their experiences and tell of their mistakes and what they learned in the process. To borrow from a popular insurance ad campaign, mentors "know a thing or two because they've seen a thing or two."

Former ICAS Board of Directors chairman, Jim Peitz, makes a point to seek out young performers at shows to help them become familiar with the industry and its people. Jim has flown for decades in a variety of airplanes and now performs in a Beech Bonanza. "Gray hair and longevity seem to attract young fliers, so I try to be approachable. I will also seek them out if they appear to be afraid to ask questions. I'll sit down with them and start asking them questions to break the ice, and before long they are asking me questions," he said.

But, no matter the technical aspects of air shows, it's the people side of the business that makes the difference between getting hired and being passed over. Greg Gibson has been in air show marketing for more than 15 years and is currently director of operations and business development for SUN 'n FUN. He is a frequent presenter at the ICAS Convention and preaches that "it's not enough to be a good pilot."

"You have to demonstrate that you bring value to a show beyond the 12 minutes that you fly. Ask yourself what a show needs. What is the show's cause? Who are its major sponsors? Adapt your language to their language when you are discussing why you should be there, and remember that it is all about them, not about you," he says.

Gibson said all the information a performer needs about a show can usually be found on a show's web site. "The more you know about an air show in advance, the more you are able to help them meet their goals. This means arriving early, offering to do appearances at sponsor businesses, being available for media interviews, talking to kids in schools or clubs, and whatever else you can do to help. If you don't have the right approach, you're going to get the door slammed in your face."

Peitz agrees. "Air shows aren't all about the flying. I've seen performers fly, then go hide behind their airplanes. Fans want to meet you, shake your hand, talk to you, and get your autograph. You might be the best stick in the world, but if you don't have the personality to go with it, the crowd won't like you. Conversely, you could be just a fair pilot, but if you relate to the crowd, they will love you," he said.

Peitz noted that, unlike the air show industry, not many industries offer the opportunity for fans to interact with performers, and performers should use that to their advantage. "People want to interact with us as much as possible. And, if shows haven't geared up for that interaction, there are a lot of polite ways to encourage them to do so, such as asking in the briefing where the autograph table will be and how to get there. If the show hadn't thought of that, you are giving them the idea. There is nothing a kid likes better than a pilot's autograph in a program, on a poster or a hero card," he said.

Bill Stein does a lot to help new performers, both in the competition arena as well as air shows. "I try to get them to be very good before trying to be famous," he said. "Sometimes, that's a hard conversation to have, but that's my first priority. This business is very unforgiving. And once I believe they will stick with it, I will do everything I can to help them stay safe and be entertaining. The objective here is to get them through their first five years without becoming a statistic," he said.

Stein says he learned a lot from Wayne Handley. "When I was getting started, Wayne

Remember that it is all about them, not about you.

- Greg Gibson



If a show isn't willing to pay you at least \$3,000, then they aren't interested in you.

- Bill Stein





When it comes to air show insurance,

Count On Shannon & Luchs

for the greatest performance.

Shannon & Luchs has been insuring air shows for over 30 years. Expertly and professionally.

As the originator of the ICAS air show insurance program, and member of ICAS since its inception, Shannon & Luchs is recognized as one of North America's leading authorities on insurance for air shows.

At Shannon & Luchs we have the expertise, experience and products to protect your financial interests so you can get your show off the ground. We provide comprehensive policies with high limits from some of the world's most sophisticated aviation insurers.

If you are an event organizer, promoter or sponsor in need of air show or airport insurance, call us, and watch us perform.

Air show insurance from the real authority on air show insurance.

www.shannonandluchs.com
e-mail: Jennifer@slins.com

Telephone:
1.800.989.7766
Contact: Jennifer Zak

Call us for your Airshow
and Airport Insurance Needs

MEMBER



**Shannon & Luchs
Insurance Agency, Inc.**

told me to call people, tell them my name, tell them that I'm good, I'm cheap and I'm safe. That was the best advice I ever received," he said.

Benzing advocates finding not one, but several, mentors and learning from all of them because each will have something to offer. "No one has all the answers. Get advice on everything from what type of aircraft you should fly, and what music you should use, to how to write a script for the narrator and even what to wear at air shows," she said.

And, Benzing said, above all, remember that you are the product. "You need to do something to help the air show be successful. Dress appropriately, behave appropriately, work with show sponsors and VIPs. You can't just go fly. There is much more to participating in a show than flying" she said.

John Collver has been flying his T-6 Texan in air shows for the past three decades. He has had opportunities to mentor a number of pilots and approaches that responsibility seriously. "I always encourage pilots to first be safe, then I try to find out why they want to perform. If they want simply to become better pilots, I steer them toward competitive aerobatics and encourage them to avoid air shows," he said. "But even if they do want to go into air shows, I say they need to get involved in competition first, through the International Aerobatic Club (IAC), because the IAC will straighten up a flier real fast. There is no room for cowboys in competition aerobatics," he said.

Collver said he sought out mentors when he got into the business, noting that was in the days before the ACE program. "Performers at that time had to watch and learn on their own. They had to seek advice where they could get it and it wasn't always the best way to learn," he said.

Another issue plaguing young performers is setting their price and how to craft a contract that protects them. A pilot who has yet to receive his low level card is usually not as valuable to a show as a high-energy performer with an unlimited waiver, so he

or she can't command as much money. But what is the right amount?

Bill Stein calls that one of the biggest challenges a new performer faces. "Your fee will depend on your act and your skill level. How much it has cost you to get to that level has no bearing on what you can or should charge. The more novel your

act, the more you can get," he said. Neither Stein nor anyone else has any kind of fee structure in mind because there are simply too many variables, but Stein does have one rule of thumb. "If a show isn't willing to pay you at least \$3,000, then they aren't interested in you. You can work for less and that's up to you, but that doesn't mean you should. Talk to other pilots to find out what they charged when they started, where they are now, and how it has gone for them," he said.

Mark Sorensen urges newbies to the in-



You need to do something to help the air show be successful.

- Vicky Benzing

act, the more you can get," he said. Neither Stein nor anyone else has any kind of fee structure in mind because there are simply too many variables, but Stein does have one rule of thumb. "If a show isn't willing to pay you at least \$3,000, then they aren't interested in you. You can work for less and that's up to you, but that doesn't mean you should. Talk to other pilots to find out what they charged when they started, where they are now, and how it has gone for them," he said.

Some pilots new to air shows will fly for free just for the experience. But they hurt their image by doing this and have often been bypassed by those same shows when they started charging.

Mark Sorensen urges newbies to the in-

to know what your true costs are, but that doesn't mean you can charge that much in the beginning," said Wayne Handley. "Be clear as to what you expect and be honest about your motivation for doing air shows." Handley said most performers are motivated by ego, and they use the financial side to justify it. But the two sides aren't always equal because a performer can't always cover the true cost of performing.

Benzing said she tries to keep her rates affordable to small shows. "I really like smaller shows and set my fees so I will be hired. My goal is to at least break even by the end of the season," she said. Like most performers, she started pricing herself low, then increased her fees every year as she improved. "I know that I've scared a few shows away with my fee, but I haven't



**Experience the thrill,
the excitement, and
the history of the
#1 booked
solo Warbird act!**




#ICAS16
LAS VEGAS, NV • DEC. 5-8

Visit us at Booth 404
*Limited 2017 Show dates
still available!*



Gregory "Wired" Colyer

*"Not only the best T-33 demo ever, best solo jet demo!"
-Matt Jolley Warbird Radio*

*"Greg flies a high adrenaline low level routine that is both graceful
and powerful" -Jets magazine, United Kingdom*

"What an amazing job!"

*"Greg stole the show this year and I've heard it from so many people!"
-Major Michael P. Martin, Rhode Island ANG Airshow*



WWW.ACEMAKERAIRSHOWS.COM / 415.531.0970

received negative feedback about my fee, so I'm satisfied," she said.

Jim Peitz agrees. "Contracts are important, as they make clear what each side expects. But I don't advocate flying a show for nothing. We have a very low opinion of ourselves in this industry. What we do touches people's lives, touches their emotions and sparks their curiosity. That has value," he said.

And then there is the marketing side of air shows. Benzing says she doesn't do a lot of marketing because word about her act has gotten around and most of the shows where she flies call her rather than her calling them. "The best way to market yourself is to do a good job and be professional," she said. "All my shows call me because they have either hired me before or someone tells them about me."

But not everybody is that fortunate. Most pilots have to rely on the tried and true techniques of using traditional marketing materials and making telephone calls to get hired. "You don't need a stunning marketing kit to get hired, but the kit does need to be professional and well-polished," said Greg Gibson. "It can include autograph cards, brochures, or anything else you care to include. To a kid, an autograph on a brochure is what is important," he said.

Gibson said social media is also important because it leverages the conventional media used by air shows in any given community.



I tap into the knowledge base of as many performers as possible and it's paid off.

-Ken Rieder

Be clear about what you want to accomplish and lay out a plan that will get you there.

- Mark Sorensen



"Facebook and Twitter are free and they allow interaction with fans. It's stupid not to be there," he said. "People send you the pictures they take of your act and you can use those to your advantage. You also get unfiltered information from your fans which is extremely valuable," he said.

Ken Rieder of Redline Air Shows, a formation aerobatics team, says they have learned every trick in the book when it comes to marketing, mostly from other performers. "We do 18 to 20 shows a year, so we get a chance to interact with a lot of performers and pick their brains. We take their advice on being creative, how to work the news media, how to use cameras on our airplanes, and how to develop T-shirts to promote our act. I tap into the knowledge base of as many performers as possible and it's paid off," he said.

And when it comes to fees, Rieder says, price yourself appropriately. "There are too many people out there who aren't making enough money to cover the cost of aircraft operation, let alone the cost of practicing. I would like new guys to come in with a minimum amount and don't budge from it. You may have to do a favor now and then, but stick to your base rate and work your way up," he said.

Brand development is a key aspect of marketing. Kyle Franklin is one of the most innovative performers in the business when it comes to branding. Like his father before him, Kyle capitalizes on pop culture. "My dad developed the Zar routine because of the popularity of Star Wars. I chose the pirate theme because of the popularity of the Pirates of the Caribbean movies. And the Dracula act is based on the current popularity of vampire movies and the like," he said. He carries his theme through his music, his script and his costume, touching the full range of human senses.

And while Kyle says he is always trying to come up with something new, he's also found tremendous success with his Cub comedy act, a niche act that is almost as old as the air show business itself. "My advice to anyone is: Figure out which direction you want to go. Don't copy anyone. Make your act your own and decide how you can bring it into the industry," he said. ✈