# The dream fly-in

Richard Bach

It was the strangest fly-in I had ever seen. Maybe it was a dream, it was so strange. There was this new-satin sky, not quite real, with silk-fluff clouds sewn way high (not enough of them to block the sun, which was all lemon light), with green-velvet grass for landing on and concrete white and hard as ivory for taking off. Some big trees around, leafy wide umbrellas for people to sit under and watch the flying. Sandwiches. Cold orangeade.

Parked here and there about this gentle-sloping lawn were airplanes, twenty of them or so, some taxied under the tree shade. Two-place high-wingers, most of them.

I was sitting in this place under the wing of my Cub taking in this strange sight, watching a Cessna flare to land, when this fellow stopped by. He watched the Cessna, too, and then he said, “She’s a pretty Cub, you have here. You going to fly in the Test?”

Like anyone who considers himself among the world’s most skillful airmen, I’m always game for competition, which is what I figured the Test would be, though I had never heard the word used this way before.

“Of course,” I said.

“Glad to have you,” he said, and jotted the number of my airplane on his clipboard. He didn’t ask my name.

“Is that a sixty-five-horse engine?” he said.

“Eighty-five.”

“Height of propeller?”

Now that was a strange question. “Height of prop? Why do you need …? Seven feet, I guess.”

He shook his head and reached for a tape measure. “What do you do with pilots who come for a Test and don’t even know their height-of-propeller?” He walked to the nose of the Cub. “Do you mind?”

“Not at all. I’d like to know.”

The tape sighed out, carefully, stretched from the ground to the tip of the propeller. “Nine feet four and a quarter,” he said, jotting that number on his board. “And now we need your factor.”

“Factor?”

“Performance factor. Wing loading to power loading. Say, is this the first Test you’ve flown?” He seemed surprised.

“Well, with height-of-prop and factors, I’ve got to admit, yes.”

“Oh! I’m sorry! Welcome aboard! Glad to have you here.” He thumbed a sheaf of listing. “Let’s see. A Reed Clip-Wing Cub, eighty-five horse … here we go. Wing loading eight point five, power loading fourteen point three, and your factor is one point seven.” He noted this on his pad. “You don’t worry about that,” he said, and smiled. “You just fly.”

“The Wedge is first. Start engines on the hour. Fly your best.” He handed me a thin booklet and then he was gone with his clipboard to an all-white Taylorcraft parked by blanket and picnic basket on the slope opposite.

The booklet was engraved printing in dark blue ink, elegant as an invitation to dine.

THE TEST

PILOTS

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I was skeptical. I don’t like my fly-ins quite so organized.

“For those who do not like their fly-ins quite so organized,” it said, part way down the first page, “there is a list on page nineteen of conventional fly-ins in the local area. This meeting is designed for those aviators who believe that they are among the best airmen in the world. This meet is the Test to see if they are.”

There was a note about the history of the affair, some technical information about the performance factor and judging, and then began an outline of a series of weird challenges, the like of which I had never imagined before. The booklet pointed out that most pilots don’t become good at airplane control without practice, but practice or not, the only way to score well in the test was to fly very skillfully indeed.

I swallowed, at this. I enjoyed thinking of myself among the best, but naturally there are good reasons why it is impossible for me to practice much precision flying. A man has to earn a living, after all.

There was one final comment at the end of the introduction that was perhaps supposed to be funny: “Excuses for poor flying will be heard sympathetically, but will not affect the Test results.” I swallowed again, and turned the pages.

THE WEDGE

TEST: Altitude control. The Wedge is a tunnel of obstacle ribbons arranged in series across the runway centerline. The highest ribbon is fifteen feet, the others descending in three-inch steps every ten feet down the centerline to form a wedge-shaped tunnel two hundred forty feet long, the lowest ribbon at a height equal to the contestant’s propeller height plus two inches …

It went on in detail, about how contestants were disqualified if wheels touched runway, if they strayed from centerline; how there would be no go-arounds allowed and no second attempts. Any pilot who broke more than four ribbons was expected to provide a keg of iced orangeade for the ribbon-setting crew. This was added parenthetically, a kind of traditional joke, but there was no note about the cost of a keg of orangeade.

My brow went suddenly moist, picturing that trap of ribbons coming up at me; and then, remembering that the Wedge was just for openers, which the pilots flew for warm-up, in fun, my brow went cold as death. Propeller height plus two inches.

I thumbed quickly through the booklet, and because self-esteem depends a lot upon one’s ability to fly his airplane, I turned from fire to ice to fire again, worse than ever.

The only event I had seen before was a low-speed race, that had happened at Len von Clemm’s annual marvel, the antique fly-in at Watsonville, California. In this one, the pilot who took the most time to fly between two marks along the centerline, time corrected by his performance factor, won the points. Not only did one have to know slow-flight, he had to know slow-flight in ground effect, even to score.

If this was challenging, though, the remainder of the Test was devastating.

There was to be a Slalom, to find the fastest pilot through a wild-curving one-mile course, the turns marked by giant balloons on strings.

The short-field takeoff lane ended in an angled plywood ramp, six inches high. The pilot chose his own minimum distance to the ramp, made his takeoff with his tailwheel on the ground (or nosewheel lifted, the booklet said … there were six nosewheel airplanes in the competition), and catapulted off the ramp. If his airplane flew before the ramp, or if his wheels touched the ground again beyond it, he wouldn’t even place in the event.

There was a test in dead-stick spot landings, propeller observed to be at full stop from an altitude of one thousand feet over the field until touchdown beyond a four-foot fence-ribbon.

Next was another dead-sticker: Each plane took aboard only ten minutes volume of his engine’s normal-cruise fuel. Each was timed off the ground, the winner to be whichever stayed aloft the longest.

Then came a race through a balloon-and-ribbon obstacle course, where a man had to bank between turn points narrower than his wingspan, leap over red ribbons, dive under blue ones; at least three times were hard-climbing left swerves instantly followed by hard-diving right ones.

It went on and on. There were aerobatic events, formation tests for team flying, even an event in high-speed taxiing. Nowhere was there room for anybody who did not know his airplane, nowhere was there room for a man who talked his ability but could not fly it. For the briefest instant I had the irrational thought that I might very well be one of the latter, but at that moment a green flare was fired aloft and a judge spoke calmly into the loud-speaker, “Start your engines now for the Wedge, if you please.”

The white Taylorcraft opposite came to life, the pilot waving cheerfully to an attractive young lady who stayed with the blanket under the tree. He didn’t look at all frightened by the tunnel of ribbons. He didn’t have to look frightened. He took off in that little airplane, turned around once, like a swimmer turning easily at the end of his lane, and he dived into that Wedge in one smooth motion. For a few seconds he was surrounded and flickered by the ribbons and then he was free, ribbons whipping and fluttering from the wake of his flight but not one of them broken. My throat was very dry.

An Ercoupe took off, turned, and lazily came back into the Wedge to do exactly the same thing. The ribbons weren’t even frayed.

I got the Cub engine going, convinced now, as a Cessna 140 shrugged through the tunnel, that it must be a great deal easier than it looked. I have, after all, been flying airplanes for a good many years …

Orangeade, by the keg, iced, goes for the staggering sum of $21.75. And ribbons don’t jam evenly into an engine cowl. They are cut by the cylinder fins into little shredded smashed pieces that you have to tweeze out with your fingers.

While I completed this job, I decided that the way to practice for the Wedge would be to set up one ribbon, all alone, on my home field. Fly under that till I was good at it, then lower it a bit. The other ribbons were just sham to test a pilot’s calm. If one forgets about everything except flying under the lowest ribbon, all the others take care of themselves. But the terror of flying head-on into all that silk (bounced there by a gust, I must have been, though no one else had the same bad luck) is real terror. I think I ducked, as I hit them, and cried out.

The fly-in went right along as though it was not uncommon to have somebody like me entered in the Test. The point, after all, was to prove which pilots are good and which are not quite so good. Any other comments were beside the point, though possibly amusing to spectators.

With just a few exceptions (the low-level race around a ten-mile course, for one), the events of the Test were all held in sight of the airfield … people there with The Test … Spectators booklets to check how the aces and the laughingstocks were faring.

There was not a great feeling of hurry through the fly-in, it was almost languid, with time between events for the pilots to talk, sandwich and potato chip in hand, of the test just past and the one coming up.

My reward was the old maxim of competition, that he who knows least, learns most. Never is it less than delight to stand quiet at the sidelines and listen to a man talk who has just proved, in flight, that he knows what he is talking about.

The pilot of the Ercoupe, for instance. That little airplane, so maligned, in his hands turned and flew like a gazelle in a wide spring meadow.

“There’s not all that much to it,” he said when I asked. “It’s a good airplane. You take a while and get to know it, start to care about it, and you’ll find she can do a trick or two, if you let her.”

It was the Ercoupe that won the Turnaround … flying closest head-on to a crepe-paper wall, then leaping, pivoting in its wingspan, and flying out the opposite direction. I would have bet it was impossible for an Ercoupe to do that.

For all the hard flying, there were no trophies given at the end, no proclamations made about winners. What seemed to matter most to the pilots was how well they flew compared to how well they wished to fly. The reward was not a trophy but a certain knowing that each seemed to value highly.

A sealed envelope was handed to each, which he tucked absently in his pocket to open after the fly-in, if he opened it at all, listing how his flying compared to the others. I, for instance, did not find it necessary to open my envelope.

Do not expect me to go into detail about my performance at the Test, because you see this story is not about my ability as a pilot but about this strange fly-in with all these strange competitions and all these other pilots who had somehow grown to be very good indeed, with their airplanes.

I’m not sure, in fact, that the whole thing wasn’t a dream, after all, a remarkably vivid dream. I certainly would have flown much better in all the events had they actually happened instead of being some kind of self-destructive Freudian dream brought on, perhaps, by a slight bounce in an otherwise perfect landing with the Cub.

That must be it. None of this could possibly have occurred. There is no such place as an airfield where lawns slope to runways and one can taxi into tree shade, no such sky as that was, or grass. But most of all there could be no such pilot as the man who flew that Taylorcraft, or the one in the Cessna 140 or that easy gray-haired chap who flew the Ercoupe to the Turn-around and around the Slalom with nothing more than a ruffle of silk ribbon.

I am not so bad a pilot, myself, to have hit any ribbons, anyway. Let me tell you about the time I was flying this Skyhawk. It is another story, not like this silly dream that means nothing because nothing like it ever happened anywhere, but if we ever meet and you want to have a much more honest picture of how good a pilot I in fact am, ask me about the time in the Skyhawk when the engine stopped at ten thousand feet and the only place to land was this little tiny field in the trees. And frightened? I wasn’t frightened at all because I knew my airplane and it would be child’s play even with oil all over the windshield …

Ask me sometime about that day in the Skyhawk. I’ll be glad to tell you.