

Focus on Fun

Sport pilot instruction is about recreation, not transportation

I recently read an article by a CFI about Sport Pilot training. The author was approaching the subject from a fixed-wing, transportation point of view. I think many of us have missed the point of Sport Pilot and consequently may be misleading (and probably losing) our students.

When I was working my way through the ratings I thought we were all supposed to shoot for our Commercial/Instrument certificates at a minimum. The “top guns” went on to get their ATPs and flew heavy metal. A Piper Arrow was the “heaviest metal” I ever flew. After getting my Commercial/Instrument and paying the price to keep both current I began to realize I was not using my tickets for transportation but for recreation. Eventually flying got both boring and expensive. Consequently, I stopped. Many years later I discovered weight-shift control aircraft (or trikes) and fell in love with flying all over again – this was recreational flying at its best and what I had been looking for from the beginning but did not know it. Now I have the privilege of introducing others to this remarkable form of aviation.



Trikes are not used for transportation – they are designed for serious recreation. A typical flight is one to two hours and is rarely more than 50 miles from the home airport. We usually do not fly in straight lines but prefer to follow rivers, ridges, roads, railroads, or anything else that catches our fancy (pilotage). If we want to explore someplace new we pack up our airplane, go to a new airport, and start exploring that area. My wife, two boys, and I once took a four month trip through the Pacific Northwest packing our airplanes from airport to airport and exploring anything

of interest within 100 miles (see the April 2005 issue of EAA’s Sport Pilot magazine for “Have Trikes will Travel”). We saw a LOT of the Northwest this way but never flew more than 100 miles away from our starting point.

So, what is my point? This is after all a training magazine and I started off talking about a Sport Pilot training article. My point is we need to train for fun instead of transportation. We are not training Private Pilots. Our students may go on to become Private Pilots, but if they came to us to get Sport Pilot training that is what we owe them. So let us look at what we have to work with.

First, we have less than half the time we are used to working with. A student can legally become a Sport Pilot in 20 hours versus 40-45 for Private; but the average for both ratings is higher (30-35 for Sport Pilot and around 74 for Private) with the Sport Pilot average less than half a Private’s. We cannot pack a Private Pilot course into half the time, so we have to focus our training on what is practical for a Sport Pilot.

Second, we are creating a recreationally oriented pilot flying simple airplanes. The focus of a Private Pilot ticket is day and night VFR transportation whereas the Sport Pilot focus is day VFR and local area navigation. A Private Pilot has to complete three cross country trips of increasing length, whereas the Sport Pilot must complete one of relatively short distance (by fixed-wing Private Pilot standards the Sport Pilot cross country is practically “local”). There is **not** a lot of emphasis on those things normally associated with long cross country trips. For example, most Sport Pilots do not go on cross country trips that cross weather frontal boundaries. What they see at their home airport is what they are expecting to see at their destination. They are interested in micro weather rather than macro. We fly in great weather and go from one easily recognized landmark to the next (pilotage). There are exceptions but I encourage the exceptions to get advanced cross country training as they work on their Private ticket rather than complicating the Sport Pilot certificate.

Sport Pilots are also restricted from operating in controlled airspace unless they get additional instruction and logbook endorsements. So we teach them how to find and avoid controlled airspace but not how to operate in it. After they get their Sport Pilot license, if they want, we can teach them what they need to know to operate safely in controlled airspace and give them the logbook endorsement that makes them legal in that airspace.

Finally, Sport Pilots are limited to flying light sport aircraft (LSAs) which significantly reduces the training requirements. By definition LSAs are two seat, single engine, fixed-pitch prop, and fixed-gear airplanes that cannot go faster than 120 kts. But Sport Pilots are limited to flying aircraft with a top cruise speed of 87 kts unless they get additional training and a logbook endorsement. Right now the faster, more cross country capable airplanes are primarily piloted by owners with Private certificates or higher who are looking for an affordable alternative to the typical GA airplane (and one that does not require a medical). LSAs can carry two adults and a little bit of baggage and are set up so that it is difficult to load them outside their CG limits, so we do not have to dwell on weight and balance – the focus is primarily on not exceeding gross weight. Consequently we do not spend a lot of precious training time practicing weight and balance calculations, memorizing gear extension speeds, or any of the other areas of interest necessary for someone who could legally fly more complex airplanes day or night. Those areas are best saved for their Private Pilot training.

Since we are working with half the time and the goal of the Sport Pilot student is not as lofty as that of the private student what should our focus be if we want to create a pilot who can fly safely in day VFR conditions in so little time?

I emphasize the following, which does not contradict the PTS requirements:

- Fun. I want the student to enjoy learning how to fly an open cockpit, low and slow aircraft. If you are not having a good time what is the point?
- Mastery of the aircraft. One cannot really enjoy flying if the airplane is in charge of you. Mastery of the aircraft includes adequate preparation for the type of flying you are going to be doing.

- Mastery of the environment. We are flying lightly wing-loaded airplanes and consequently have to be a little more respectful of Mother Nature. The Sport Pilot must be more keenly aware of what the winds are going to be doing and what to expect as the day progresses. Additionally, we are training for fair weather flying (remember recreation not transportation – day VFR). So students have to know enough about weather and weather products to determine if the weather for the entire duration of the flight is going to be “fair.”
- Mastery of airport operations. Since most of our flying is done relatively close to our home airports we need to know how to operate in a professional and safe manner when mixing with other aircraft – particularly when mixing with aircraft whose performance envelopes are considerably different than our own. At our training facility in Lynchburg, VA we are mixing with C172s/182s, high performance singles, helicopters, corporate jets, Dash-8s, and RJs. It is fun and, with training, safe.
- Fun. I know I mentioned this before but it is worth mentioning again. In Sport Pilot the only reason for doing the training is for fun – if you take the fun away you have taken away the whole reason for training.

One of the advantages of being a trike instructor is that trikes are so forgiving. We cannot spin so we do not have to worry about the dreaded spin on final scenario. They are difficult to stall unintentionally and when they do stall they self recover. They are inherently stable because of the way the wing is designed and because the CG is so far below the center of lift. When it comes to loading we do not care about balance since our CG is fixed – all we care about is whether we are at or below our allowable gross weight. We take off and land in a few hundred feet, so it is a small field indeed that we would have to do takeoff and landing calculations. We have a lot less to worry about when flying or training.

So in closing remember you are training recreational versus transportation pilots flying slower, simpler, more forgiving airplanes. Focus on the things these pilots need to know to fly safely in day VFR emphasizing those things that will keep them out of trouble. Save the Private Pilot training for those who want it.



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