



2/50: Impressions *of a* **First-Time** Competitor

BY LISE LEMELAND

EDITOR'S NOTE: THIS IS the last of three parts of Lise's foray into the world of aerobatics. Please see the December '09 and January '10 issues for her first two parts.

MY 11TH FLIGHT IN N50YY, a fresh new Super Decathlon, was already starting out a bit differently than the 10 previous ones. It was a hot, sweaty, Saturday morning in August, and as I took off from an unfamiliar Runway 1 with my instructor in the back seat, I was feeling more than a bit distracted. My instructions were to find a golf course, climb to 3,000 feet (no higher, no lower), fly a tight holding pattern, switch to the box frequency 122.52, and await clearance to the aerobatic hold. *Where the heck was that little golf course?* I thought to myself. *Not good...they're probably all chuckling about the girl who couldn't find the first hold, let alone the box!*



A FAINT AND IRREGULAR noise in my headset was bothering me, but I was mentally shooing it away as I scanned the ground, until bingo! I sighted the landmark. As I put the airplane in a tight bank, I refocused on the headset sound. Holy cow! It was my own breathing! You've got to get a grip, I told myself, you know you can do this! I took a deep breath and reminded myself that this was for fun. I was not here to prove anything, at least so I thought...but I was, after all, only one of two women competing out of a field of roughly 50 competitors. A loud voice in my headset yanked me back to reality. It was the chief judge clearing me to the box! Here we go...

ABOVE: Left to right: Weston Liu, Lise Lemeland, Mark Rogge, John Perkins, Marc Nathanson (my instructor), Farrell Woods. BELOW: The first day's pilot briefing was held outdoors.



A CONTEST in HONOR of ANOTHER WOMAN

This was my first aerobatic competition, and I was flying in the Primary category at the Kathy Jaffe Challenge contest held in Lumberton, New Jersey. In the late '90s, the energetic Kathy Jaffe was then president of IAC Chapter 52. One chapter member recalled, "She threw herself into it (aerobatics) and kept us all together. She had more ambition and guts than anyone I've ever met."

Regrettably, Kathy perished while practicing aerobatics some years ago. Since then, to honor her memory and the contributions she made to the sport, the Chapter 52 people hold their annual contest in her name. And, the more I learned about Kathy and came to appreciate her drive and determination, the more pleased I was to be flying at a contest in her name.

FIRST COMPETITION FLIGHT

Being my first time ever at a contest, there was much to learn. I knew this would be an experience I would never forget. What led such a neophyte as myself to compete so early in my training?

One factor was the Doug Yost Memorial Aerobatic Scholarship (see "Training Notes," *Sport Aerobatics*, January 2010 issue) I had won just a month prior, which provided funding for some aerobatic training. Another

factor was having an experienced instructor who artfully built my confidence and furthered my desire to do aerobatics. And the remaining factor is my love for challenges and adventure. Even though I'm a mother of three, I'm an artist/athlete hybrid, with a good dose of kick-up-your-heels. And besides, by setting my own personal goals high, I give myself more room to dream! So why not compete?

Off I went, excited to fly and anticipating my practice time slots. But the first thing I learned about aerobatic contests is that old man weather is the real contest director. Marginal conditions kept my airplane, and many others, from flying into Lumberton to do the essential practice in the aerobatic box. So show time was also the first time I got to see the box.

As one of the five competitors in the Primary category, I navigated my Super Decathlon around the invisible perimeter of the box. I was surprised at how difficult it was to get oriented. Landmarks from the aerial photograph I studied before my flight looked so small and insignificant.

I executed my three wing-wags, each with a little more confidence, and registered my instructor Marc's encouraging voice through my headset: "You're the girl, kiddo, go get 'em!" I smiled and began to relax—a little—as I dove into the Primary sequence, which (by the way) I had really only come to know in the prior week.

The 2009 official Primary sequence was a 45-degree upline, a one-turn spin, a half-Cuban, a loop, a 180-degree competition turn, and a roll. Piece of cake, you might be saying. But to a complete novice, this was huge. Though mostly a rush of activity, some aspects of my first flight remain quite clear. I recall that my figures were performed to varying degrees of mediocrity, sometimes even edging on acceptable. And regardless of the results, I was ecstatic to have flown the entire routine.

When asked by fellow pilots how I performed, I answered like a veteran. "I don't know," I said casually. "I don't think I zeroed any figures...." In actuality, I had no idea how I did! I truly did

not have the perspective or distance to judge myself, but I am told this improves with experience.

When the scores were posted, my instructor congratulated me, saying mine were excellent, considering my experience, of course. I was in fourth

warmly by the contest staff (many of whom were women) and promptly asked if I was there to volunteer. I grinned and answered, "Actually, I'm here to fly!" (Was I offended? Not at all, I was rather amused.) Then excitement erupted all around me. Everyone was full of con-

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place, trailing the first three competitors by about 12 points. Number five was 142 points behind me.

TWO OUT OF 50

Leaving the numbers and figures behind for a moment, what was it like to be one of the two female pilots competing?

When I first walked into the registration area at the contest, I was greeted

gratulations with lots of pats on the back, saying, "You've got to win this for us!" and "Make us proud!" Gee, talk about pressure!

After the personal introductions, I dutifully listened to an abbreviated history of women in aerobatics, recognizing many of the names. I filled out the obligatory registration forms and paid my fees. Then I was whisked away,

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introduced to IAC Chapter 52 Treasurer and Board Member Doug Lovell, and told he would be my first contest mentor, until my instructor (who was weather delayed) arrived. In the hours that followed and throughout the entire contest, there were many other people in addition to Doug, both men and women, who generously took me under their wing, providing help and support of my aerobatics endeavor.



Briefing inside, last day. Paul Russo (Chapter 35 on Lise's left).

NEW ROUTINES, NEW FRIENDS

There were pilot briefings every day, where all of the men—and the two women—gathered. This is where we received the details of the day's activities and procedures. I was immediately conscious of my female pilot status but not bothered by it. I had seen the roster of competitors and noticed that my fellow female was competing at the Sportsman level. She was a seasoned aerobatic pilot, who had recently been grounded by an episode of the "wobblies." I met her the second day, and though our paths didn't cross often, she was always friendly and reassuring. I mused about more women's names appearing on the roster in the future, and in higher categories, too. And, maybe I'd be one of them!

This being my first contest, I found it quite challenging to navigate the maze of information

that needed to be assimilated. Yet, as a woman competitor in a male-dominated sport, contrary to my fears, I did not find the challenge any greater. In fact, the willingness of the other pilots to lend a hand and provide information, irrespective of their age or experience, made all the difference. Being new to the scene and being female can make social barriers tougher to overcome. Fortunately for me, I came to the contest already having met, and flown with, some of the Chapter 35 competitors. They, in addition to many of the 52 members, included me at every social gathering and made me feel welcome.

HUMOR AND HUMILITY

The first day had its funny moments, too. About an hour before my first flight, all I wanted was some privacy to go over my sequence of figures and memorize the frequencies and rules for climbing to holding patterns. I looked around, wandering from building to building, but everywhere were pilots, staff, and spectators. In desperate need of a quiet place, I finally ended up in the ladies' room! Not a very glamorous

way to make my entry into competition aerobatics, I thought to myself, even if no one noticed me duck out. But it did the trick; I was able to visualize my flight in peace and quiet!

I also got many curious looks over the sunglasses when I revealed that I was a 7-month-old private pilot. Pretty much a newborn in the world of aviation, I had just passed my private pilot checkride in January of the same year, so many aspects of flying were (and still are) new to me. But I am certain that I received even more encouragement because of it!

WOMEN IN AEROBATICS

Things are different for women in aviation, sometimes in not so subtle ways. In 2008, the FAA's statistics show an estimated 207,000 active certificated male private pilots versus

about 15,000 active certificated female private pilots. Women are the minority, both in general aviation and the professional aviation world, and the statistics in aerobatics are even more extreme. In the IAC regional chapter contests results for 2009, I found no more than four women competing at any single contest. Often there were none (or one), and the overall average was two female competitors.

There have been times when I have wondered if women learn differently, or fly differently, but those questions have long-since been replaced by more important and more relevant ones. For example, how am I going to pay for the aerobatic airplane I need to buy? (Just kidding.)

"They, in addition to many of the 52 members, included me at every social gathering and made me feel welcome."

Seriously, why aren't there more women engaged in the sport of aerobatics? The question is misleading because upon closer inspection, one discovers there are many women involved in competition aerobatics—just not as pilots. In no way do I intend to diminish the organization that happens on the ground, which makes these events possible. Many women (and men) put a great deal of time and effort into every aspect of running the contest, and they deserve our utmost recognition and respect. But I would like to see women equally involved on all levels of the contests, including competing.



ABOVE: Lise Lemeland assisting judge Farrell Woods (going over sequence).

BELOW: Lise's instructor, Marc Nathanson, in his Pitts.





judges zeroed me, and I received low scores on the figure by the other three. Ouch!

My half-Cuban was better, I thought, and my loop, too. I don't even remember which way I performed the 180-degree turn, but I did it just fine. I finished with the slow roll and kept the nose from dishing. All front-page news for this greenie! After I exited the box, I shouted to Marc, "That was soooooo fun!" to which he laughed and told me I did great.

THE RESULTS

My scores? Not bad considering my botched spin exit. Some of the comments on the half-Cuban were conflicting: "shallow after" and "steep after," but overall my scores improved on everything but the spin. I ended up staying in fourth place, with a score 3.5 percent behind number three. I won the highest-scoring first-time competitor award (a plaque for my kids!).

But let's keep things straight: I'm no aerobatic wonder girl. I didn't win. But in

Mark Rogge's Super Decathlon N50YY, flown by Lise Lemeland.



this sport, scores and standings don't tell the whole story. I found competition aerobatics to be a personal test: a place to assess the limits of my flying abilities in a safe, controlled setting.

Through volunteering, and watching other people's flights, I learned a lot. For

me, the contest was an amazing, positive experience. I discovered a lot about myself. And in the end, being one woman of two competing was not all that significant. Learning that I had the guts, the perseverance, and the spirit to go through with the contest was what really mattered. *IAC*

SECOND COMPETITION FLIGHT

It had been a long day since my first contest flight that morning. I spent the afternoon melting in the heat on the judges' line and had just returned to the fixed base operator to quench my relentless thirst. I was sitting with Marc, going over my score sheet, when it was

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announced that Primary would fly again. Despite the surprise announcement, this time, I wasn't as nervous. I was excited to have another chance to improve my scores. Because of the time of day, to complete the flights for the Primary category all competitors were flying back to back. Since three of the pilots were sharing two airplanes, this would mean some quick shuffling between airplanes.

I headed to my Decathlon to suit up. The heat was stifling. The sun was hotter than it

had been all day, and I crouched in the shadow of the wing to stay cool. Soon it was time to start the engine, taxi into position, and wait for my devoted instructor to jump in with me. And I mean literally jump; his feet barely touched the ground from one airplane to the next. I would be his third flight in a row. The man is a hero, I thought, how does he do it? I was sweating buckets, but aside from the knot in my stomach, I was a lot calmer than before the morning flight.

We took off and headed straight for the box. Since we were the only category flying, there was no need for a hold. "Lise Lemeland, you are cleared to enter the box." Here we go again! I wagged my wings, entered the box, and pulled nice and hard for the 45-degree upline. I remembered to bump the stick to make the angles sharper... so far so good. My spin entry was good. I kicked left rudder, entered the spin, and watched for the runway to come around... but I initiated the spin recovery too late and came out off heading. Overspun—darn! Not much I could do but try and sneak a little slip in there to correct my heading and hope the judges didn't notice. (It didn't work. Two

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