

Patty Wagstaff

Three time US National Aerobatic Champion talks aviation



FA: When women were finally allowed to enter aerobatic competition, you came in, kicked butt and took names. What was it like to be a big winner in a field traditionally dominated by men?

PW: Women were always allowed to enter aerobatic competition, but it wasn't until the mid-70s that men's and women's scores were combined and the compe-

titions were desegregated. Before that, there was a "feminine national champion" and a "male national champion" so even if a woman scored higher than a man, she was not allowed to be overall U.S. National Aerobatic Champion.

When I first started competing, the prevailing attitude of the men — and women — in the sport was that a

woman would never win the overall U.S. National Aerobatic Title (even though a woman had come in as high as third overall in the past). When I asked why, I heard that women were not "competitive enough." I countered with, "Haven't they ever been to high school? Girls can be downright nasty, especially if you mess with their boyfriends!"

FA: In your experience, is aviation a field where women are automatically given equal footing with men, or is there a lingering misogyny?

PW: In my years in aviation, I have seen huge positive changes in attitudes towards women aviators!

I have known some of the first women in their aviation fields and heard stories that people wouldn't believe today. For instance, one friend was the first female fighter pilot in a certain command. She told me about walking in a room her first day of training and seeing every other pilot in the room turn his back on her. I have spoken to a number of military aviators and, while there is some lingering feeling that women don't belong in a fighter squadron, they are the first to admit that women do their jobs as well or better than men.

I don't find airshows particularly sexist, but rather very encouraging towards the new women. Perhaps the last bastion of heavy macho flyer attitudes can be found in the Warbird world, and they're not going to give that up without kicking and screaming!

FA: In the old days, aerobatic skills were often passed along from barnstormer to barnstormer. What's the best way to learn aerobatics today?

PW: Aerobatic skills are still passed along from pilot to pilot. In the airshow business,

we've tried to carry on the tradition with the ACE (Aerobatic Competency Evaluation) Program. The program was started with the idea in mind that we cannot all get together and talk about the nuances of airshow flying on a regular basis, so there must be another way to share the knowledge. The program encourages mentorship and a stepping stone approach to flying closer to the ground.

FA: And speaking of the days of the barnstormers, do you think the public is becoming jaded about seeing those daring young men (and women) in their flying machines? Is aviation less of a draw now? Less interesting, less inspiring?

PW: No. In fact, in 2009, airshow attendance was at an all-time high. Look at it this way — airshows or public aerial displays are the only place in existence where people can see, touch, smell and feel aviation up close. Airshows combine the history of the National Air & Space Museum with the sound of freedom — the Blue Angels or the Thunderbirds. A child or big kid can sit in the cockpit of an F-16 and walk around inside a giant C-5A

transport airplane. Some airshows have airliners, like 747s or 787s on display, and you can go inside and walk around and sit in the cockpit! Try that on your next airline flight!

After 25 years of airshows I cannot even describe the feeling I get when someone tells me he or she decided to be a pilot after watching me flying at an airshow as a kid. Every airshow performer will tell you the same story.

FA: We're all aware now that there seems to be an established, downward trend in terms of new pilots. Is that of concern to you? And if so, what can we do to give aviation a shot in the arm?

PW: Yes, the downward trend in terms of new pilot starts is of a concern to me, but my bigger concern is the general public's image of aviation. When speaking about aviation or learning to fly, I find people consistently express fear and doubt. I can tell them that aviation is the most beautiful thing in the world; that it's a great way to get places; that it opens up your world; that it's a fantastic challenge.

I can tell them anything, but the fear

and doubt remain.

I would love to initiate and head up a public relations and marketing effort designed to highlight aviation, both general and commercial, in a positive way to the general public.

FA: You fly at the edge of the envelope. Have you ever had any close calls?

PW: I get that question a lot and there's no short answer. I probably have had a close call or two that I can directly attribute to lack of concentration and focus, basically lack of compartmentalization. But, even though I've scared myself a few times, mostly in bad weather rather than low-level aerobatic flying, I am convinced that my biggest fear is fear itself. People think the airshow game is about adrenaline, and that couldn't be further from the truth. It's about control and discipline. If I feel adrenaline during a performance, something is definitely not right! Great focus and discipline is required to fly low-level airshow work or competition aerobatics, but it is precisely that discipline that gives you the most freedom. Ironic isn't it!

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