

Landing To Win

by Dave Johnson

The following is an article by Dave Johnson, one of the great pilots of the Northwest. Dave tells us that he was inspired to write this after reading a story on basic landing techniques for sailplanes, back in 1975. The article had made the rounds of newsletters across the country, but Dave thought "That's not the way I land." He decided to write about landing techniques for the serious contest pilot, and produced this article in about 1979. After being published in the PASS Newsletter, it was quickly picked up by other newsletter editors, and spread nationwide. In the early 1980s, Bob Dodgson began including it in the instruction booklets with all his kits, which he still does to this day.

I've always been a firm believer that the difference between a good flier and a winning flier is simply paying attention to all the little things that most people seem to overlook. I like to think of flying your airplane as a big thing, and landing it as a little thing. That may not be totally accurate since landings can account for as much as 50% of your score, but landings, to my mind, are a combination of many little things the importance of which too many pilots seem to underestimate. A good flier gets into the trophies - but only a good pilot who can land can win. So how do you learn to land? Practice, right? Well, no, not just yet - because most of what you have ever learned about landing isn't what you need to know if you're landing to win.



SETTING UP:

You've probably seen articles written about landing an airplane. "At two minutes (to go) you should be at such and such... at one minute you turn here... at 30 seconds... etc., etc." That may be OK if you're just learning to land, but it doesn't work for contests. You simply cannot count on the checkpoints being there. You'll be scratching for time, or you'll be far downwind, or whatever - but you can't count on a textbook landing approach. You're going to need a setup that you can use in almost every situation. Don't lock yourself into any one landing approach - learn to turn left into final, right into final, a short final, a long final, etc. Avoid using any visual checkpoints (except one, which I'll explain later) to set up your landing. On your home field you'll unconsciously be using trees, or power lines or other visual references to locate your plane in setting up a landing. On a strange field those reference points won't be there. So what can you count on to be there wherever you're flying? Just two things - YOU and your AIRPLANE. You're standing on the ground next to the landing circle. The one visual checkpoint you can use (it's good about 95% of the time) is to bring the airplane close enough to yourself before landing that you can "know" precisely where it is. I think of it as bringing it within "touching distance". Not literally, of course, but close enough so that if your arm was that long you could reach up and touch it; just as surely as you can now reach out and touch something within your normal arm's reach. You know precisely where it is. For me it means bringing my plane to within perhaps 75 feet of myself about 30 seconds before landing. The exact position is not critical, nor is the exact time. Once I have thus pinpointed my airplane, I feel like I have located it relative both to the countdown and to the landing spot

and I can now fly out and set up an approach and still retain this feeling of contact.

THE COUNTDOWN:

The countdown to landing is a lot less important than most people realize - one of the most important lessons for me was learning to view the countdown in its proper perspective.

First of all, keep it simple. Most pilots use countdowns that are far too complex. "At one minute to go, give me a 10 second count, at 30 seconds a 5 second count, at 10 give it to me every second...backwards...in Yiddish." Even if you have your favorite timer trained to your own peculiar count, he won't necessarily be there just when you need him most. I use a 5 second count UP the last minute of the flight. Always count UP - that way the timer can read directly from the watch. (Five, ten, fifteen, etc.") Count-DOWNS require too much from the timer (besides, how do you count backwards toward the target time on an "add-em-up", anyway?).

Start the count early enough (in this case with one minute still to go) that you can coach him if he forgets your instructions; and don't change that count within the final minute. With 30 seconds or 20 seconds to go, you need to be thinking about your landing, not trying to get the proper count from your timer.

Finally, - and this is the most important thing I have ever learned about countdowns - HAVE HIM STOP COUNTING at "fifty" (10 seconds to go). Forget about the count and just land your airplane.

Stop and think about it - your plane is on final, approaching the spot and will touch down in about 10 seconds. How many flight points do you still have control over at this point? One or two? That means that about 99.5% of all your flight points are in the bag. And how many of your landing points are certain at this point? That's right, zero, niente, ZIP! So why are you concerning yourself about two points when you still have 100 points just 10 seconds away?

A point is a point is a point. What do you consider a good landing? Eighty-five or ninety points? (I'm thinking in this case of a 100-point landing circle.) That gives you 10 or 15 points to try to improve on, so forget about those two flight points. Besides, what if you ARE late? Having your timer continue to count is like having him holler in your ear, "YOU'RE LATE, YOU'RE LATE!" That's just about the last thing you need to hear when you should be concentrating on those 100 landing points.

