



NORTHERN CALIFORNIA
AEROBATIC CLUB
CHAPTER 38

Jim Koepnick

STRENGTHENING the IAC, ONE CHAPTER at a TIME

LESSONS FROM THE TRENCHES

By Darren Pleasance

As many of us know, the trends in EAA membership overall, and IAC membership specifically, have been heading in the wrong direction over the past few years. A challenging economy, an overall decline in the number of certificated pilots, and perhaps some of the internal turmoil within the IAC itself a couple of years ago have all likely contributed to the slow decline in membership we've seen over the past few years.

At the heart of the IAC are the individual chapters that provide the local connection to IAC members and often serve as the primary vehicle for driving member recruitment and member involvement and loyalty. Unfortunately, chapters are also wrestling with ways to preserve and increase their membership, just like the broader IAC. I've spoken to several members who feel the declining

membership trend is something that has to be solved at the national level by the IAC officers and directors. While this is perhaps partially true, I firmly believe the greatest opportunity for improving and increasing the IAC lies at the local chapter level.

Chapter 38, the Northern California Aerobatic Club, is among the nation's largest chapters with more

than 90 members and growing. In the past three years, this chapter has added more than 20 new members and sustained a renewal rate of 80 percent. This success has caused me, as its current president, to step back and reflect on what it is about our chapter that has allowed us to be as successful as we are. It's clearly not just one thing or one person, but rather a combination of things that

contributes to building an organization aerobic pilots and enthusiasts alike want to be a part of.

As I reflect on the history of our chapter and our achievements to date, it seems to me there are five key aspects of building a strong and growing chapter that have contributed to our success. These factors are as follows:

1) Affiliate with a local aerobatic school: We conduct all of our monthly meetings at Attitude Aviation in Livermore. A portion of our new members come directly from the fliers we post on the wall at the aerobatic school, and some simply because they were finishing a flight lesson and saw us meeting that Sunday afternoon. We in turn contribute to the school by drawing in new aerobatic enthusiasts and maintaining excitement among existing aerobatic pilots who will often rent from the flight school either in preparation for the contest season or simply to improve their aerobatic skills. This relationship is clearly symbiotic and works to strengthen both organizations.

2) Write a great newsletter: Much like the broader IAC, many of our members' only connection to our chapter is a monthly newsletter. Our newsletter editors, formerly Peter Jensen and now recently Che Barnes, have done a phenomenal job by putting out an eight- to 12-page newsletter every month, in color, with lots of good gossip, educational stuff, and humor. The content for the newsletter comes from a variety of sources including other newsletters around the country, member contributions, and the editor himself. The newsletter has a standard format that simplifies its creation every month, and several of us are on point every month for regular contributions (e.g., my Prez Post starts every newsletter, Marilyn Dash

writes our Heard It on the Ramp column). We used to mail the newsletter, but that got to be too costly and time-consuming, so we now simply send the newsletter to all members as an e-mail link to a PDF file on our website. This approach has worked extremely well, with great feedback from the members and downloads from as far away as Europe and Asia.

3) Hold a contest every year: Although most IAC members don't compete, and that's clearly true within chapters as well, there is something quite fun and galvanizing about planning and executing a successful contest every year. It provides

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us with a common goal, it provides leadership opportunities for a number of our members, and the event itself is always a ton of fun. It also serves as a great vehicle for getting people involved, whether planning for the contest, simply flying the Known sequence in advance of the contest, attending critique sessions getting ready for the contest, or perhaps just attending the post-contest bash every chapter should throw the month after the contest. Even for our

non-competitor members, the contest provides a place to spend a weekend around aerobatic planes and pilots, volunteer their time, learn a thing or two about flying aerobatics, and share in the fun we all have. All in all, the contest itself is largely just a means to an end of driving member participation and involvement and having some fun.

4) Make your chapter meetings fun: Our chapter's stated mission is around education, entertainment, and community, and we try to reinforce each of these throughout the year via our monthly chapter meetings. We have a cadence to our chapter meetings that maps to the annual flying calendar and helps us fulfill our chapter's mission. For example, we typically start the year by preparing for the contest season. As such, the first few chapter meetings often look like this:

January: Designing a sequence that we submit for the next year's Known, and many in the chapter fly it during the year as their Free Program (last year we did Sportsman, and this year we did Intermediate).

February: Learning to use Alan Cassidy's Aresti software program by showing our members how to create a Freestyle.

March: Flying the maneuvers—a view from the judges and from inside the cockpit at many of the maneuvers in this year's Knowns. One or two of our more experienced chapter members typically lead this session.

We then add other topics to fill in the year and make it entertaining and fun:



Peter Jensen



Peter Jensen

“Maintaining an Aerobatic Aircraft,” in which an airframe and powerplant mechanic in our chapter describes some of the key things to watch out for in aerobatic aircraft.

“Member Profiles,” in which one of our members shares something about themselves that others would find interesting (e.g., I talk about my time as a bush pilot in Alaska; another member talks about his time as a U-2 pilot).

“How To” sessions on any number of topics including making in-flight aerobatic videos or flying in formation safely.

“Judges School,” held every year or two to help preserve the population of judges as well as to provide a fun way for new folks to learn a little more about aerobatics and meet other enthusiasts whether they want to become judges or not.

“Fly-outs” to an airport within an hour or less, typically for breakfast or to an event like an air show. Many of us will meet up in the air, others will simply meet at the destination, by plane or by car, and we’ll have a fun time just getting together to talk about planes and other stuff. We typically get great turnouts for these.

And in addition to all of these activities, we always have a summer barbeque in lieu of a chapter meeting, typically the month following our annual contest. Plus, we have an annual holiday party potluck every December with a “white elephant” gift exchange that is a ton of fun for

everyone. We also have several critique sessions throughout the year, organized by one of our chapter members, to help drive participation and provide some fun for everyone.

5) Recruit a few good volunteers:

We’re lucky enough to have a handful of really good volunteers who help support critique sessions, hold officer positions in the chapter, run our annual Paso Robles contest, and contribute to monthly chapter meetings and the newsletter, which clearly makes my job as president much easier. In the end, it only takes a few active volunteers to really make a club go.

Finding someone to publish a newsletter is critical, and finding someone to take on the task of coming up with a fun topic for monthly chapter meetings is the other critical role. And of course, if you’re holding a contest, the contest director is key. Beyond this, all the other roles people play become icing on the cake to building an active and healthy chapter. And as luck would have it, the stronger the chapter gets, the more people want to volunteer to help and the stronger the chapter becomes. It’s a wonderful, self-reinforcing model if you can get it going.

Chapter Challenges

Of course, delivering on these “five key success factors” is much easier when you’ve got a chapter that’s already 80 members strong with a

lot of active volunteers to help keep things going, as it was when I became president. I think the real challenge is what to do if you’re running a chapter that’s brand new or perhaps only has a handful of members or has some other handicap that makes this five-point plan seem unrealistic or too daunting.

Although I haven’t found myself in exactly that situation, my approach to this type of challenge would be based on some core principles of focus, early and steady wins, and patience. Specifically, I would try to find a small flight school nearby that shares a common interest in promoting aerobatics and would be willing to allow us to hold our chapter meetings there. I’d then try to get a newsletter going, though perhaps just every other month if monthly publications were too challenging. Thirdly, I’d try to hold a few fun events during the year, whether it’s the monthly “educational” chapter meetings I reference above or simply some fun fly-outs or barbeques/parties. And lastly, I’d make sure to either host a contest or at least pick one that another chapter is hosting, and push to get as many of my chapter members to attend that contest as possible. This combination of efforts should begin to make belonging to your chapter fun and enjoyable to your members and also provide a platform for attracting more members and generating greater participation from everyone involved.

The other challenge experienced by some chapters is that of geographic spread. It’s clearly easier to hold a group together when everyone’s in the same town and substantially harder when folks are spread out for miles. Our chapter has members from as far south as Los Angeles, as far east as Reno, and quite a few up in Northern California; all in all that’s several hundred miles separating many of us. While we don’t get everyone across

the chapter to attend our meetings every month, we consistently draw folks each month from 90-plus miles away, and most folks have at least a 30- to 45-minute drive to get to the meeting. Why do they do it? I believe there are several reasons. For one, we’ve all built friendships with other members so it’s a chance to see each other again. We also have a program each month so there’s always a chance to either be entertained or learn something, or perhaps both. We also hold the chapter meeting at Attitude Aviation, which makes it easy for those who want to fly in as well as for those who want to fly at Attitude Aviation before our meeting starts. Rich Perkins, the owner of Attitude Aviation, also contributes several pizzas each month that I’m sure appeal to many of our starving, yet aspiring, aerobatic enthusiasts.

For those with chapters having as dispersed a membership as we do, I’d suggest, again, focusing on delivering a good newsletter so even those who can’t attend meetings get value and feel connected to the chapter. In addition, I’d recommend proactively reaching out to individual members to appeal to their participation. A personal request goes a long way. Lastly, work to make the meetings interesting, even if that means holding the meeting every other month, rather than monthly. Better to have six good meetings than 12 marginal meetings that turn members off. As I described earlier, participation breeds participation, so getting the pump primed is a lot of the challenge here.

I think it also helps to remember that a healthy chapter will always have an ebb and flow of active and non-active members as their life circumstances change. The chapter benefits greatly from a broad cross-section of member-types, including 1) the old and moved on, 2) the longtime aerobatic but past chapter participant, 3)

the used to be active but now into air shows, 4) the used to be active but now into kids or something else and will be back sometime, 5) the new, raw energy of the young and the passionate, 6) the dependable old-timer glue that keeps things going, and lots of other examples of people who may or may not be active or competing but mean a lot to keeping the chapter functioning, vibrant, and interesting. Remembering that all of these folks exist and reaching out to them to help keep them feeling connected and involved with the chapter in whatever way they’d like is foundational to keeping the chapter healthy and exciting.

In the end, I believe the responsibility for strengthening and increasing the IAC does not lie just at the national level, but in the hands of

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our many local chapters which touch and influence the experience of IAC members in a much more frequent and profound way than a simple issue of *Sport Aerobatics* will ever do. This is not to say that the national IAC doesn’t play a role in supporting these efforts, or that the *Sport Aerobatics* magazine doesn’t matter. To the contrary, I’m quite confident the officers and directors at the national level are investing significant time and energy in finding ways to help chapters be successful and providing members with a compelling monthly magazine and real value for our annual dues. However, simply waiting for this to occur when so much can be done right away within your

own chapter would seem a mistake to me.

Aerobatics is alive and well in many parts of this country of ours, and there are still many aerobatic enthusiasts out there just looking for a place to spend some time around people like themselves who share an affinity for aerobatics. Now’s your chance to make your chapter just such a place... ✈

Darren Pleasance is the president of IAC Chapter 38, in Northern California. When not competing in Intermediate in his Laser 230, Darren is a partner for a global management consulting firm.

Editor’s Note: For individuals interested in forming a new chapter, contact Lisa Popp (LPopp@eaa.org) for an IAC chapter resource kit.

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