

30 Years of Flying at the Field (Part II) – Gerry Markgraf

The latter years of the '80s were good times for the club. Contests were held often and were well attended. Each contest was split, generally into 3 groups according to the flier's expertise. Winning in a class generally promoted a flier into the next higher class where competition was more skillful and intense. Tasks were generally time and spot landings with small buttons, pins or other rewards for win and place. It was a good time, but change was in the air.

This is the second of a three part article. Anyone who has missed part I, check the EDSF website on the club History page. Each released segment of Gerry's article will be appended to the previous segment and posted on the website. A collection of club photos from the past are also available for viewing on the website. – Tom Shinsato

The sport of sailplane flying changed rapidly as we moved into the late '80s and early '90s. Competitive fliers found that the 2-channel polyhedral "floater" design or "gasbags" as they came to be known were less desirable than fast maneuverable sailplanes. "Floaters" were fine in a thermal when they found one, but the fast airplanes could search more efficiently for thermals, maneuver better to stay in one and were easier to fly back to a landing in a specific spot and place. Earlier designs like the "Gnome" gave way to aircraft like the Airtronics "Sigitta" and others. Around 1990, the Airtronics "Legend" appeared; a full house design (rudder, elevator, ailerons and flaps) with a fiberglass fuselage and almost no dihedral. The Legend was set up to take full advantage of the new computer radios that were just appearing such as the Airtronics Infinity and Vision radios. Even the Legend was an early victim of progress as its built-up wood wing with modest dihedral was quickly made obsolete by highly efficient foam, composite and fiberglass wings with modern airfoil sections and little or no dihedral. Purchase of one of these new models as well as the required computer radio quickly reached well over a thousand dollars. Mastery of the airplane and equipment took many hours of practice to produce a competitive flier and the sport of competitive sailplane flying became the province of the most dedicated sailplane fliers.



Gerry Markgraf



Joe Ballasch during his Porterfield period.



Gerry Markgraf with his Oly II. Mark Child with his Gnome & unknown flyer in the early 1980's.



Pat Stoker (standing) and Geoff Drought.



About 1978. Gas storage tank in the background.



Walt Lewis, one of our pioneer members with his "Scooter".



Joe Richert striking a heroic pose with his sailplane.

Another technology that had a profound influence on the field was the appearance of electric powered aircraft. We were fortunate here in Southern California that we have had 2 pioneering manufacturers located right here in the area. I speak of Bob and Roland Boucher. Bob is owner and founder of Astro while Roland was the owner of

Leisure. Both produced motors and some fine kits and they sponsored some early electric flying events here in Southern California. My first electric was a Leisure Wasp, powered by a Leisure ferrite 05 motor. I used a small electronic on/off device sold by Hi-Sky to switch the motor and a 6 cell 1200 Mah Nicad battery. I was utterly astonished when the Wasp flew and flew well. It seemed much too heavy to fly. Gradually, electric powered designs began to proliferate at the field, flown mostly by the sport fliers while the sailplane fliers concentrated on improving their skills in soaring. There was certainly a lot of cross-over flying for many years as I and others often took a mix of sailplanes and electrics to the field. Also, most of the early electrics were primarily sailplanes that used the motor to get to altitude in lieu of a winch or high start. When the airplane reached altitude, it became a sailplane and usually, there was enough power for an average of 3 climbs to about 400 feet. Sport designs like the Wasp pushed the envelope of the technology of the time and many were less than successful. More successful were the Davy Systems Curtiss Robin (I made hundreds of flights on mine) and the Leisure Amptique that was a popular flyer at the field. Old Timers made good electric designs and Leisure produced the Playboy and Lanzo Bomber. Astro made a great old timer kit with the Viking. The Goldberg Mirage was a good performing beginner's sport design of the time with landing gear that could (mostly) handle the gopher holes in the field.

A big shock to the electric flyers at the time was the banning of powered flight at the field, including electrics. For approximately a year, we were back to gliders. It seems a 1940's law banned all propeller-driven model airplane flight in the city of Long Beach. A long and delicate negotiation with the city and park ensued. Every week at the field or at the monthly meetings, Bob Peters or Mark Child would report on progress (or lack of progress) as the negotiations drug on. Finally, after a successful demonstration to prove the safety and goodness of our intentions, we were allowed to resume flying electrics. Oh the joy! For a time, we had to curtail electric flying after 11:00 AM (I don't know why), but gradually we were able to demonstrate that our flying was safe and the powers that be came to tolerate electric flying at all times.

Another change that affected all of us at the field was the change to "1991" standards for our radios. The good news was we were going to be given many new frequencies, each of which would be in a very narrow band of the radio spectrum compared to our old radios. The bad news was that many of our old radios would soon be obsolete and would require either scrapping or a costly modification requiring new receivers and modified transmitters. However, we made it through that trial, not without cost to our pocketbooks. For many years afterward, we would occasionally see some beginner arrive at the field with a newly purchased "used" radio that still had the old red/white, green/white, orange/white style flags on the antenna.



Dennis Jenkins & "Treas".



Early days - 100" woody. Unidentified pilot.

After spending a small fortune buying on/off motor control devices from Hi Sky, I observed that proportional motor controls were beginning to become available at a reasonable size and price. I had an Astro controller that was about 1/2 the size of a brick, but one of the fliers at the field, a retired electrical engineer, was making and selling a very nice little speed control at a very reasonable price. The first ones did look a bit home made, but they worked well (I still have mine) and his products improved rapidly. That's how I first met Joe Ballasch and Joe's influence on me and just about every other electric flier in Southern California has been profound. Joe was able to supply the most needed and obscure electrical components back in the day when they simply were not available from any other source (still does). More importantly, Joe was able to help the novice electric flier through the mysteries of electric motors, batteries, motor controls and other components that were (and still are) borderline black magic to most. It's difficult to imagine what the electric participation at the field would look like today had Joe not been there to help.

EDSF sailplane fliers were beginning to spread the fame of our club throughout the Southern California area in the mid '90s. Fliers like Jim Skinner, Pat Stoker, Dan Wilson, Bill Duncan, John Bickle, Kevin Joyce and Mike Carrico were scoring well at the SC2 (Southern California Soaring Contest) meets throughout the area. Indeed, the club has hosted several SC2 contests right up until the present. These regional contests required a great deal of planning and organization within the club. As many as 50 fliers were known to attend from around the area. Indeed, many of the club sailplane fliers and other members had to volunteer their entire time during the contest and were unable to fly due to the enormity of the task. Family members and non-sailplane fliers were also called in to help with the task. EDSF sailplane fliers improved their skills and were beginning to be seen as high scorers at contests at the state-wide level. Hand-launch gliders were also popular in some areas beginning in the early '90s. A few were seen at the field, but they never seemed to gain much popularity. More would be seen later with the advent of the Discus launch gliders.

The last segment of Gerry's article, Part III, will be presented in the Aug Newsletter.