



Your 2010 National Champion

Jeff Boerboon



. . . (pronounced "bourbon," like the whiskey) began his fascination with aviation at an early age. Growing up in Brooklyn Park, just north of Minneapolis, Minnesota, in the early '70s, Jeff was close enough to EAA Oshkosh that regular trips to see the show were the norm in his family. Jeff's father, a commercial pilot, would take him to see the likes of Art Scholl and Leo Loudenslager. It was Leo who would leave an indelible impression on young Jeff.

BY REGGIE PAULK



Radio-Controlled Airplanes

“He’s always been my idol in this game,” Jeff says. “When I got my first airplane, a Pitts S-1S rebuild project in the late ’90s, I got the registration number 17NV as a tribute to Leo’s one world and seven national victories. I liked watching Leo and thought his dedication to the sport of competition aerobatics was great.”

With his fascination for aerobatics cemented, it would take Jeff 30 years to rise to the top of aerobatic competition in the United States.

“I’ve been an IAC [International Aerobatic Club] member since the ’80s,” says Jeff. “Besides getting the magazine and watching from afar, I was not able to participate until much later.”

As a kid, Jeff built and flew model airplanes. He received his first radio-controlled (RC) airplane on his 10th birthday. Before that, he flew control-line and free-flight airplanes. He did participate in competitions with his models, dreaming of the day he’d be able to fly the real thing.

“I flew model airplanes all through junior high and high school,” he says. “After graduating high school in 1987, I went into the aviation program at the University of North Dakota [UND] in Grand Forks.”

College Days

It was at UND where Jeff’s aviation talents really began to blossom. It was also where he’d meet his advisor and coach, Kent Lovelace. Kent instilled the values Jeff holds dear today.

“Kent was a great motivator,” says Jeff. “He was very much into the team concept and had the three rules of life: Never give up; never give up; never give up.”

Jeff was a team member and participated in the National Intercollegiate Flying Association (NIFA) Competition while studying at UND. The contest consisted of spot landings, a navigation event, and a 15-minute pre-flight in addition to a number of ground events.

“My team won the NIFA national championships in 1989 and 1990,” Jeff remembers. “During the ’91 and ’92 championships, I was the assistant team coach.” In addition to his championship titles, Jeff was also two-time outstanding team member in the years they won.

Jeff’s first aerobatic flight was at the controls of UND’s CAP 10-B with instructor John Caturia. “I flew through the 10-hour introductory aerobatics course,” Jeff says. “After I became a flight instructor at UND, I gave tailwheel training in the Super Cub, the CFI [certificated flight instructor] spin course, and aerobatic instruction.”

Throughout his college career and later on in his aviation career, Jeff has had a copilot in Kent. Jeff’s air show company, 3D Air Shows, represents his mentor’s 3D values: dedication, determination, and discipline. Jeff credits Kent with many of his successes both during his time at UND and since graduating.

“I heard him yell, ‘If you send him, send a body bag and a hearse, too!’”



“Kent instilled these values in me,” Jeff says. “Getting through interviews and jobs I’ve had along the way and certainly my success with aerobatics are all a credit to those values.”

With two championship rings, Jeff was motivated to pursue aerobatic competition. It would still be a few years before the dream came to fruition, but the seeds had been sewn. After graduating from UND in 1992, he worked as a flight instructor for just under a year before heading to Nevada to fly tours of the Grand Canyon.

The Lesebergs

In April of 1993, Jeff headed to Boulder City, Nevada, for an interview at Lake Mead Air. Arriving a day early, he walked into the small office. An older gentleman sitting on the couch asked point-blank, “Who are you?”

“I came down from UND, and I’ve got an interview tomorrow,” Jeff responded.

“You see that [Cessna] 206 out there?” the man replied. “Go out and preflight that thing... Let’s go fly.”

“I’m not really supposed to be here until tomorrow, and I was just checking it out,” a startled Jeff answered.

“#%&* it!” the man exclaimed. “Go out there and get in that airplane!”

That was Jeff’s introduction to Earl Leseberg, the owner of Lake Mead Air. At the time Jeff went on his evaluation flight, Earl had already been in business 30 years. Flying for Earl was 180 degrees different from flying at UND.

“When you graduate from a big school like UND,” says Jeff, “you follow every one of the rules and everything is regimented. The FAA is like God. Earl didn’t care much for the FAA.”

During the first few days he was there, Jeff overheard Earl yelling into the phone. He asked the lady working the counter who he was talking to, and she responded, “The flight standards district office [FSDO].”

“I heard him yell, ‘If you send him, send a body bag and a hearse, too!’” Jeff remembers. “I couldn’t believe it. He was talking to his primary operations inspector, who couldn’t make it for a maintenance inspection, and they were going to send somebody else out. He was an old-timer. He’d been flying planes back in World War II, and the FAA was just a nuisance to him. With this company, it was, checklist? What’s that? Weight and balance? What’s that? Weather? We’re going.”

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Earl always hired young 500-hour pilots, and no one stayed more than a year. In the 43 years he was in business, Lake Mead Air never had a fatality.

“Earl had a really good sense of who was going to be a good pilot,” says Jeff. “He didn’t talk to you. He didn’t need to interview you. He just wanted to know how you operated an airplane.”

As an RC enthusiast, Jeff brought along all of his airplanes when he moved to Nevada and stored them in the office. Their mechanic was also into RC airplanes, so he and Jeff began flying them at a nearby dry lakebed. When Earl’s son Mark, a Delta pilot, came by one day and saw all of the airplanes, he asked who owned them. After a quick introduction, he asked Jeff if he would build an airplane and teach his 10-year-old son Mark Earl to fly. “I’d love to,” Jeff responded.

“Even at the age of 10, Mark Earl was a very talented full-scale pilot,” says Jeff. “I flew with him a number of times, and he flew a full-scale airplane really well. In fact, on his 16th birthday, I signed him off to fly seven different types of airplanes.”

Mark Earl was doing so well on the RC trainer, Mark Sr. asked Jeff to build something bigger for him. That eventually took off to the point where today Mark Earl is a three-time champion of the Tucson Shootout—the equivalent to U.S. National Aerobatic Championships except for large-scale RC airplanes.

“He got his start with me when I was flying for Lake Mead Air,” says Jeff. “I taught him how to fly and built all of his airplanes until about 2001. Now Mark Earl is using much of what he has learned flying models to help me with my four-minute freestyle design.”

Jeff credits the power of teamwork for where he and Mark Earl stand today.

“I’m pretty much at the top of full-scale aerobatics in the U.S. after my win at Nationals,” Jeff continues. “If you look at Mark Earl, he’s at the pinnacle of scale RC aerobatics. He and I got started together back in 1993, and we’ve been helping each other out the whole time. He and I have the same birthday, October 17. I was 22 at the time, and he was 10 but very mature for his age.”

Even though he wasn’t flying competition then, Jeff was a student of aerobatics, and

coached Mark Earl on all of the International Aerobatic Club’s figures and routines.

“This is my whole thing about teams,” says Jeff. “I can’t do this on my own; nobody can. At the time, we had Mark Sr. providing airplanes. I was doing the building and coaching, and Mark Earl was doing the flying. If you ask most people right now, he’s probably the best in the country at most of the disciplines.”

After his year was up with Lake Mead Air, Jeff moved on to Eagle Canyon Air, flying twins over the Grand Canyon. He continued to live in Boulder City and to coach Mark Earl on his path while keeping full-scale aerobatics in the back of his mind. After flying for Eagle Canyon Air for the summer of 1994, Jeff got a call from American Eagle and began flying for the company in the fall of that same year. For the first two years, he flew the Jetstream 32, and later the SAAB 340. In 1995, while flying for American Eagle, Jeff officially began his long journey toward the aerobatic championship.

Maria and the Pitts

“Mark Sr. had heard of a Pitts S-1S project for sale and ended up buying it,” says Jeff. “It was an airplane that was flipped upside down on landing. The idea was to have me rebuild it.”

After tearing the airplane down, they powdercoated the fuselage, replaced the original landing gear with spring-aluminum landing gear, sent the engine off for overhaul, and had a new set of wings built. Nearly five years later, and after a trip to Wyoming for finish and paint, the airplane was ready for its first flight since being flipped over. In the meantime, Jeff struck gold when he met his future wife Maria on a trip to Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, in 1997.

“We met at a bar called ‘The Zoo,’ Jeff says. “Later on, she invited me to her place in Phoenix, and I never left. She’s been my biggest supporter throughout my aerobatic pursuits. It’s an expensive sport, and she’s made many sacrifices, giving up many of the things she wants so I can compete.”

In March of 1998, Jeff had an interview with Delta Air Lines and was added to the hiring pool. In 1999, he was hired on. With the Pitts nearly finished and a real paycheck coming in, Jeff began to concentrate on competition in earnest.

“I spent quite a bit of time in 2000 and 2001 getting the airplane fine-tuned. In 2001, I competed in two Sportsman contests and three Intermediate. In 2002, I began flying Advanced. I won my first regional contest at Casa Grande [Arizona]. I was pretty much undefeated in that airplane. Except for a loss at the 2002 Nationals, I won all the regional contests and became the 2003 Advanced National Champion. That put me on the 2004 Advanced team.”

Klein Gilhausen

As his flying improved, Jeff began to think about getting a monoplane to fly in the competitions. He started looking for a Yak-55 to rent while he looked for one to buy. He put in a call



Jeff and his wife Maria stand in front of his Pitts S-1S.



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*“You’re okay, I said,
‘but where’s the
airplane?’”*



to Klein Gilhausen, who he was told might have one of the few Yak-55s in the western part of the country.

“He said, ‘I’d love to let you use my airplane, but I sold it,’” Jeff says.

That call to Klein would end up being fortuitous for Jeff, because it began a relationship that continues to this day.

“Klein has been one of my biggest supporters by letting me fly his airplanes,” he says. “In 2005, I told Klein I wanted to try out for the team again, but I wanted to try to fly an Extra instead of the Yak. So I went to Montana and picked up his Extra 300L to bring back to Arizona.”

At the 2005 Nationals, Jeff finished second behind Hector Ramirez flying Advanced in the Extra 300L. In 2006, he finished fourth overall, winning a bronze medal in the free program, while Team USA took the silver medal home from the AWAC in Poland. In 2007, Jeff again took first place flying Advanced at Nationals. 2008 would prove to be his toughest year to date.

“This was it,” says Jeff. “Klein had purchased a Sukhoi 31M, so we had an unlimited airplane and everything was rolling along. I’m getting to fly the Extra 300 regularly to prep for the AWAC in Pendleton, and I’m flying the Sukhoi to get ready for team selection to the Silverstone World Championship.”

Jeff had to watch from the sidelines with an ankle he had broken while wakeboarding just weeks before the Advanced World Aerobatic Competition in Pendleton, Oregon, where Team USA won the gold and Rob Holland took the championship. Jeff put his focus on Nationals and qualifying for Worlds.

“I had two weeks, so I’m getting ready and flying,” says Jeff. “We were attending the training camp before Nationals, and a mishap put the Sukhoi permanently out of commission. The Extra was down because it needed a new propeller, so I needed to find an airplane to fly at Nationals. Mike Racy generously offered to let me use his airplane.”

Misfortune nearly struck again the night before the first flight at Nationals when, on a practice flight before sunset, Mike didn’t return to the field.

“We were all standing around wondering where in the heck Mike went,” remembers Jeff. “All of a sudden, he comes running around the hangar and says, ‘We need to get a fuel pump.’ I told him to calm down and tell me what happened. ‘You’re okay,’ I said, ‘but where’s the airplane?’ He said he’d had an engine failure and landed in a small field. The airplane was okay, but it was not running. Around two in the morning, we finally found the problem—a preservation plug had come loose and the safety wire was broken. Mike

flew the airplane out of the field, and we got back to Nationals a half hour before our briefing.” With his ankle still in recovery, Jeff was able to fly Unlimited at Nationals in 2008, finishing fifth place overall and placing himself on the U.S. Unlimited Team for the first time.

The 2009 World Unlimited Aerobatic contest was tragic for Jeff. He placed eighth overall and, flying Klein’s new Extra 330SC, took fourth place in the Q program. In addition, the team won the bronze medal and he took home the Charlie Hilliard trophy for highest-placing team member. That success was overshadowed by the devastating loss of teammate Vicki Cruse to an accident during the competition. “That’s the worst thing I’ve ever witnessed in my life,” he says. “It was a tragedy for all of us.”

For 2011, Jeff is determined to help Team USA take home the gold. His journey began at the 2010 Nationals.

“This year, there was going to be no second place,” he says. “I didn’t care how many points I won by. I worked hard with my coach, Mike

Stevenson. When you have the best flight you’ve had all year at the time, it means the most—it’s the most rewarding. I couldn’t have flown any better, and when it comes out at first place, you feel good. Goody Thomas was breathing right down my neck. He won the Unknown, but I still pulled it off, winning [the Unlimited] by about 125 points.”

Jeff credits his win to all of the people who’ve helped him along the way. “I have so many people to thank,” he says. “Mostly, I have to thank my wife, Maria. She gives me support by helping out as much as she can. It’s been a huge team effort. Without all of that support, you can’t get to this level and beat guys like Goody and Rob Holland. If you took away any of that support, I don’t think I would have ever made it.” **IAC**



Jeff with Gilhausen’s Extra 300L.

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