SSA Region 6 Report

As best I can tell Region 6 membership has generally held steady in 2019, with new members replacing those who for whatever reason have left the sport (i.e., age, ambivalence, change of job or life situation). Anecdotal reports from Indy Soar (who recently rebranded themselves launching a new website), and elsewhere are that new equipment has attracted new members or at least retained them. Sandhill for example is selling ~35 minute Mile High Discovery Flights now in its DG-505 for $250/each, and on days when its Twin Grob 103 is being used heavily for primary training, guests are being encouraged to upgrade to fly in the club’s “Ferrari of two-seat sailplanes.” Guests are taking the upsell and not even flinching at the price. I encourage all clubs to rethink their pricing for introductory flights and experiment with it if necessary; find the sweet spot where you can make the most money without giving up much in the way of business.

Marketing, Airshows, and Public Outreach

Locally, Sandhill Soaring Club experienced a great deal of age, health, and job related attrition last winter but more recently (over the summer), has seen a surge in new membership, partly due to local outreach efforts but mostly due to word of mouth by a couple of dedicated, enthusiastic newer club members... one pursuing his Private Pilot Glider (he’s about to sit for his checkride), and the other, in his mid-30’s, actively mentoring other members in cross-country soaring in the club’s new DG-505. More specifically though, these two members have been flying their powered ultralights to EAA pancake breakfasts around Southeast Michigan and talking up the soaring club. They not only talk about the club in its best light, but often share a glimpse of the club’s activities by playing short clips of YouTube soaring videos and sharing personal video and experiences with others via social media (Facebook and Instagram). They also invite engaged listeners to visit the club, if for no other reason to take a ride with one of them and enjoy a nice afternoon picnic while they visit the club. Similarly, thanks to the efforts of Orin Beckham, who Chairs Oakland County Airport’s Airshow Committee) and Nathan Tardif, Sandhill also recently displayed a privately owned Ventus-2bx at the county’s airshow in August. Nathan and a handful of other club members passed out newly minted business cards and brochures to people who expressed an interest in gliding or desired to know more.

Local News Coverage

Lastly, Local News 4 (WDIV) in Detroit ran a news segment filmed at Sandhill about a 90-year old man fulfilling a life dream of his to go soaring again. According to the news station’s own website the video segment has been “shared” 58 times. It’s difficult to know exactly how many views the video has had but just know that the video was not only picked up and shared by the SSA, Sandhill, and local glider pilots who embedded a link to the news-station’s story/video in their own social media accounts but was largely shared by local viewers who reacted to and expressed an interest in this content (see below - the number of “shares” at the bottom of the picture of the above embedded video). Assuming some 50 people outside of soaring circles shared the video via social media and it was viewed just 20 times each, the video exposed over 1,000 members of the general public to gliding through social media alone (in addition to what exposure the news actual news story had when it aired live).

It’s my opinion that local clubs need to find any excuse they can to attract local media to run positive new stories about their club. You can’t buy (read “afford to buy”) this type of media exposure… so why not give a news channel a reason to make a visit to your club. Examples of events worthy of similar news
coverage: sailplane contests; club fly-ins that are open to the public; club Anniversaries; STEM programs involving local high school or community college students; Boy Scout, Cub Scout, or Girl Scout outings involving STEM or Aviation Merit Badges; Rides for Veterans; outdoor adventure; Fall color change; etc.

2019 Sports and Standard Class Nationals @ Caesar Creek Soaring Club

Two weeks ago, I was lucky enough to get away with my three kids (ages 5 and 7), for a couple of days to visit friends who were competing and to meet with John Lubon, CCSC’s President and Contest Director for the 2019 Sports and Standard Class Nationals. The contest had a total of about 25 participants and had been was re-scheduled from an earlier contest date that was cancelled in late June due to unusual and excessive amounts of rain throughout the Midwest, including MI, IN, OH, etc. While visiting, I was able to also meet with Hank Nixon and ask John Lubon to have CCSC’s Board consider hosting R6-South next year in conjunction with the US Junior Camp Contest. Hank and other CFIG’s have volunteered their time and offered to bring their Bus Class or 20-Meter two-seat glider to the contest to mentor Juniors. The SSA’s Junior/Youth Committee is awaiting an answer from CCSC as to whether their club would like to host such an event next year and hoping to nail down dates for the contest. CCSC is an ideal location to hold such an event and is less than a day’s drive for most East-Coast and Midwest pilots. The club has campground facilities, public restrooms and showers, kitchen, dining hall, outdoor pavilion and BBQ grilling area (as well as a pond that produces lunker Bass).
Help Needed for future U.S. Junior Camp Contests

Clubs looking to volunteer the use of their two-seater for this type of mentoring (to be flown by a Commercial or CFIG rated pilot club member of theirs), are encouraged to contact me ASAP at: cschraderb2g@gmail.com. Since 2016, the SSA’s program has mentored nearly 50 Juniors in advanced cross-country and sailplane racing tactics, many having completed their first contest flying solo in a rented or borrowed Club Class glider. Those Juniors without access to single seat gliders rotate with various mentors who are experienced in sailplane racing and get a chance to fly a contest task at least 50% of all contest days. Such camps have an all-inclusive $200 Entry Fee, which covers everything from aerotows, contest sanction fees, campground fees, meals, educational materials, etc. Best. Soaring. Deal. Ever.

Note to Clubs: Please encourage your post-solo youth members (ages 15-25), who are either really close to sitting for their checkride or who’ve already obtained their Private Pilot Glider rating to register for future US Junior Camp Contests. JYC is actively working to grow its volunteer base and simultaneously trying to reach out to more Juniors to ensure future Junior Camps are run at full capacity. The number of attendees has fluctuated from year to year, which is why the SSA could use your help promoting the camps to your youth members. Please keep in mind that these camps engage youth by exposing them to advanced soaring techniques, it challenges them, and provides a unique opportunity for them to see what’s possible when flying a modern sailplane. The immediate net result will be a more active, engaged youth member in your club – the type of Junior who when turns of age, may be uniquely positioned to obtain their CFIG or SEL rating and be able to instruct or tow throughout the summer at their home club (usually to build-up hours while working towards an ATP). While most Juniors step away from the sport in their mid-20’s and 30’s, this and similar Junior Camp programs from the early 2000’s have produced a fledging class of leaders in the soaring community, including local Chapter board members, present day tow pilots, nearly a dozen CFIG’s, at least three DPE, several current or former US Team members – most not only stuck with the sport but are actively engaged with their home club’s operations, much more so than the kid who had merely just taken glider flying lessons as a kid. The key point being that the program is excellent for retention. Food for thought.