

Dave Mockler: a sight for 'soar' eyes

U.S. glider champion preparing for international competition

By Larry Roquemore

Dave Mockler's wife, Amy, found her husband in a "rather awkward" position after his final, grueling flight in national sailplane competition at Tonopah, Nev. He had rolled out to a remote spot on the mile-long runway. When Amy drove up, David was flat on his back looking west toward the stormy skies of the final leg. She ran out to greet him. "OK Amy," he told her. "You may not believe it, but I've had enough racing – at least for now ..."



Photo by Amy Mockler

Dave Mockler with his personal ASW-27 sailplane.

Then the announcement came: Dave Mockler had come from behind to pass Bill Bartell on the final lap. Mockler was the 2002 National Champion in the hotly contested 15-meter sailplane competition. He also had won a trophy for the top speed logged during the nine-day event – 112 mph. Not bad for a contest in the high desert, with 60 superb pilots often beset with high winds, thunderstorm turbulence and wisps of smoke playing tricks on visibility and wind currents; 112 mph – not bad for an airplane with no engine.

A typical sailplane contest involves a race from the home airport, around specified turnpoints and back to the home field each day. Navigation is by GPS integrated with advanced flight data computers. Required distances vary from day to day, depending on the weather, and the longest run for Mockler at Tonopah was more than 400 miles.

An engine-driven tow plane gets the sailplane aloft, to an altitude of about 2,000 feet, then the sailplane pilot releases a 200-foot nylon or polypropylene rope secured by a special hook to the tow plane. From there, veteran glider pilots gain altitude by skillful maneuvering through areas of rising air, called thermals. In mountainous areas such as Nevada, ridge lift or atmospheric wave conditions can provide pilots with alternate means of gaining speed and altitude. Mockler said thermal conditions at Tonopah were excellent for ascent

most of the time, with his aircraft achieving climb rates of 1,200 to 1,400 feet per minute, compared to the 500 to 700 feet per minute rate often found in the Fort Worth-Dallas area. Inter-thermal cruising speeds were often more than 130 mph indicated, with altitudes up to 17,500 feet common.

The pilot who flies the fastest is the winner, receiving 1,000 points; others receive fewer points based on their speed or distance. Mockler was the winner at Tonopah, achieving the highest point total at the end of the nine-day competition.

He now has his sights set on Poland. That's where the Super Bowl of soaring will be held in July 2003. As a national champion, Mockler joins other top aviators on Multi-class U.S. team to compete against the best glider pilots from nations around the world. In the meantime, three key words rule the day for Mockler: practice, practice, practice.

"I have been focused on competitive soaring now for 26 years," said Mockler, manager of Air Force Projects in Facilities at LM Aero – Fort Worth. "No other activity I've found offers the enduring challenge, beauty and suspense found in glider racing."

A sailplane pilot since his 14th birthday – the legal age to solo in a glider – Mockler is no stranger to close competition. "I thought it was cool," Mockler said. "I could fly an airplane before I was old enough to drive."

Over the years, he has won the top spot in five Schweizer 1-26 national meets, along with strong finishes in both 15-meter and standard-class national competitions. Note: The 1-26 meets are a single-design American glider class and do not count toward seeding on the U.S. team for international competition, which features various classes of aircraft.

Mockler's 2002 U.S. title is in the 15-meter class, meaning a wing with camber-changing flaps,



Photos by Tom Arbogast

U.S. 15-meter sailplane champion Dave Mockler performs some aerobatics in a sleek ASW-27 in which he won the competition in Nevada in July.

which does not exceed a span of 15 meters (49.2 feet). He won the competition in a finely crafted ASW-27, a sleek composite aircraft made of fiberglass and carbon fibers. The glider belongs to Wells Morse, a fellow member of the Texas Soaring Association in Midlothian, where Mockler serves as president (see related story).

Soaring is definitely a family affair in the Mockler household. His father, Dick, and brother, Dan, are long-time competitors. And Dave's wife, Amy, has been in training and is expected to perform her first solo flight in the near future. Amy also serves on her husband's ground crew at meets across the country, where the cheering section would not be complete without their daughters, Blair, 8, and Sarah, 5.

During the World Soaring Championships next year in Leszno, Poland, Mockler plans to compete in a factory Ventus 2ax glider. "The 2ax is the latest

version of the most popular, and best-performing glider in Germany," Mockler said. "It is quite an honor for the factory to provide me the opportunity to fly the latest and highest-performing sailplane available."

LM Aero President Dain Hancock sent Mockler a note of congratulations on his national title: "We appreciate the leadership you have demonstrated on the job, as well as applying your aviation skills to the promotion of an exciting sport where, like Lockheed Martin, quality and performance are the keys to success ... Everyone at Lockheed Martin will be cheering you on as you represent the U.S. team in global competition."



Photos by Tom Arbogast

A sophisticated array of equipment controls the flight of sailplanes, including navigation by GPS integrated with advanced flight data computers.

Next thing you know, you'll be wanting to fly solo

A number of past and present LM Aero employees belong to the Texas Soaring Association, a local chapter of the Soaring Society of America. The TSA, located in Midlothian, Texas, was founded in 1947. There are about 200 members.

The club is situated on some 140 acres out in the country. The site is replete with hangars, row after row of sailplanes, long trailers, single-engine tow planes and a 3,200-foot runway. David Mockler has been president of the TSA since September 2001. He has been a member of the organization for 33 years.

Visitors are welcome to come out and take a look around or maybe even book a ride in one of their two-place sailplanes. Next thing you know, you'll be wanting to fly solo.

For more information on the TSA, visit their web site at <http://www.texassoaring.org>

In the Marietta, Ga., area check out these sites: <http://www.soar-mgsa.org> and <http://www.mindspring.com/~gmlawler/ses>.

Also visit the LMEA Soaring Club by clicking on 'Links' at <http://www.chilhowee.com>.

In Palmdale, go to <http://www.greatwesternsoaring.com> and <http://www.caracolesoaring.com>

There are a number of additional sites at all three locations that can be found through the Soaring Society of America search link at <http://www.ssa.org/flying>