

F2D News - May 2008

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Houston, we have a problem. Phoenix, we have a problem. Chicago, Detroit, Lubbock, Jacksonville, we all have a problem. But fear not, men and women, this is a problem that has something very positive at its origin, and that I believe can be solved in a way that will in the end in fact make us even stronger. Before I explain, however, let me not take credit for what's below. This month's column is the product of a recent email exchange that I had with Neil Simpson, in which he presented the problem to me and his ideas on how to deal with the situation. I think he hit upon some very important issues; therefore I am now using this platform to spread the message, reinterpreted from my point of view, and supplemented by some of my own thoughts on how we may best proceed.

"Who is this Neil Simpson?" you might ask. If you're from New England, you would most definitely not ask this question. For those of you who are not from New England or who have never had the opportunity to fly here, Neil Simpson is the life-blood of control line combat in New England. Without Neil, there would be no combat here. He is an indefatigable man of infinite energy and limitless powers of organization. He is also a very thoughtful and observant man, and a very good combat pilot.

To many (probably most) of the combat pilots in this country, Neil Simpson is an enigma, wrapped in a mystery, wrapped in mylar covering and a streamer – a dark horse of sorts. For the last several years, Neil has finished #1 in the MACA Top Twenty rankings (for Neil's perspective on the Top Twenty, I urge everyone to read his article "MACA Top Twenty – A Time for Change" that I hope will appear soon in the "MACA News"). How did it come to pass that a figure, relatively unknown to the national competition scene, could so consistently garner the ranking of our country's #1 pilot? Certainly it was no accident. To paraphrase Neil's words, he earned the crown through consistent participation and solid performance in Speed Limit Combat (Formula GX), which is the dominant event in this neck of the woods. Let me add that he has been a consistent and tough competitor in our single-airplane F2D competitions as well.

This finally brings me to the central point: our community has become fragmented, both geographically and by type of event predominantly flown. I believe it is safe to say now that F2D has taken over as the premiere combat event in this country. While the Bladder Grabber and possibly a few other Fast combat contests live on, the vast majority of the large, prestigious competitions drawing pilots from all over the country have turned over to F2D. This is a great thing in my opinion, but also it seems that if our national ranking system is supposed to mean anything, the pilots at the top should be the ones winning in these premiere events. Neil's solution (and one that I think is quite reasonable) is to do away with the overall Top Twenty ranking, and to keep it separated by event, perhaps recognizing the top 5 in each event at the end of each season. Furthermore, because F2D is the most prestigious and hardest-fought event, this event should be singled out and those top pilots identified as the "major leaguers" of our sport. I propose to take this one step further.

There has been plenty of talk and steadily building support for a complete restructuring of the F2D Team Selection process in this country, and I believe that we are almost ready for it. I propose that we give the MACA F2D Top Twenty a real and tangible significance, and replace it with the MACA F2D Team Points. Discussions are ongoing to debate how to set up a multiple-contest team selection system, but once such details are worked out we will have a well-defined system for calculating these MACA Team Points. The top scorers will be rewarded with trophies or medals, and, if eligible, the prestigious position of representing the United States in the Control Line World Championships.

However, I said that we are almost ready for this change; I didn't say that we are ready. What's holding us back is the geographic fragmentation/isolation mentioned above. A large fraction (not all!) of the top F2D pilots in this country live in the southwest (Houston, Dallas, Lubbock, Phoenix, Los Angeles, San Diego, ...). As a result, a large fraction of the activity, in particular of the big competitions with national draw, is localized in the southwest (2 Phoenix contests per year, last two Team Trials in Lubbock, Houston's yearly meet that just took place last weekend). Don't get me wrong, all this activity is great, and the energy these people are breathing into the event by hosting these contests is awesome. The guys in Chicago have been hosting a late-summer event in their area for a few years too, and the Duane brothers are doing a great job supporting the southeast with their yearly contest

in Jacksonville. Contests like this in places like Jacksonville which are still developing as hotbeds of F2D are great because they give new local pilots, who may feel that they are not yet ready to travel great distances to compete, the chance to experience national-level competition. This experience is the Red Bull that will energize these new pilots, feed their enthusiasm, and help get them the preparation they need to be able to compete on the national circuit.

In New England we have a handful of pilots with the potential to become national-level competitors, but with the majority of activity so far away, it's a tough mountain for them to climb to gain the experience needed to become prepared for those contests. As one step towards helping this situation, I hope to bring the competition to New England. We are currently having a bit of flying site trouble, but if we can get it sorted out I tentatively propose to host a high caliber F2D competition here next June (2009). For those of you who know me, you know that when I decide to do something I'm going to make sure it's done right. If we can make this happen, I will do everything in my power to make it a first-rate contest, and sincerely hope that as many of you as possible will come to participate.

One other way to help close the geography gap, and which addresses another long-standing problem, is to revitalize the Nationals. The combat Nats lost its luster long ago, and is basically in the ICU right now. In fact, the situation is so bad that, when one of our readers from Europe emailed me a few months ago to say that he would be in Indiana around the time of the Nats and wanted to know if he would be allowed to enter, I was ashamed to tell him that, although he would be allowed to enter after buying an AMA license, I couldn't guaranty that there would be even 5 pilots in F2D. What is that? That's an embarrassment. However, the Nationals may be the solution to our geographic dilemma.

Right now we have several great competitions dotted around the map, but they are all roughly equally prestigious and none of them stands out as *the* contest to attend for a slightly wary new pilot. Think about it: Muncie is quite centrally located in the country. That makes it a roughly fair commitment for everybody from California to Washington to Florida, and New England. One problem that plagued the Nats was how time consuming it was to travel there and spend an entire week to fly all of the events (Fast, Slow, F2D, 1/2A). This basically killed all of the events. Instead of trying to build the whole thing back up, which may be an insurmountable task, why don't we just focus on building up one event, F2D, and make the Nats into the country's top F2D event? We can talk to the AMA and have F2D run on Saturday and Sunday like all other contests, with 1/2A and/or Speed-Limit run on Friday before as a bonus for anyone who can come early (like what the Phoenix guys do).

If we all agree to commit to revitalizing the National F2D Championships, it could become a really great contest. We could even encourage participation by offering a bonus team point for entering the Nats. Singling out this centrally-located, well-attended contest (not to mention the beautiful site and the presence of all the other events going on simultaneously) would give new pilots a clear goal to shoot for, and a real reason to pick one far-away contest to attend in the year.

It's too late to try to change the Team Selection Program (TSP) for 2009-2010, so next year we will need to hold a Team Trials in our usual format. Let's put the wheels in motion right now to draft a new TSP for 2011. In the meantime, if we agree that we want to revitalize the Nats, perhaps we can kick off the new-and-improved National F2D Championships by combining it with the 2009 Team Trials. Who's in?