

F2D News - June 2009

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Last weekend, F2D pilots from across North America gathered in Texas for the annual Houston F2D “World Cup.” This is consistently one of the biggest and best-attended competitions in the US. Despite the tough economic conditions, this year still saw 23 of the nation’s top pilots from places as far as Minnesota, Massachusetts, Florida, and California, along with Leonardo Silva from Mexico descend on Houston for some combat. Unfortunately missing were representatives from the Pacific Northwest and Chicago/Detroit.

I was happy to be able to make it down to the contest, but due to a recent wrist injury I’m currently stuck on the disabled list and not able to fly/pit. As a result, I spent the weekend on the other side of the rulebook, playing the role of timekeeper and pit-jurist. This was actually a quite interesting experience (yeah that’s right, I’m trying to turn lemons into lemonade here). Although I’ve counted cuts and airtime plenty of times in the past at big meets, this was the first time that I got a chance to chase pit crews around and keep things on the level at a big F2D meet. One trivial thing that I realized was how useful those colored vests are for time keepers. In the middle of the action, if one pilot goes down (especially if both streamers are gone), it can be easy to lose track of which airplane is which. The chance to take a quick glance at the appropriately attired pilots to double check significantly reduces the likelihood of serious timing errors. Even more important than that, however, is good communication between judges. I was very happy about the constant dialog between judges all weekend that kept us all on the same page at all times.

Less trivial than the issue of vests, I think my time on the other side of the watch gave me a chance to gain a new more global perspective on the workings of a big contest. Most importantly, perhaps, I gained a new appreciation for the work that our friends Ingemar, Guido, Vernon, and Mack have done over the years to keep the World and European Championships and World Cup events running smoothly. The F2D rules, while not unreasonable, can be somewhat complex. A key to success as a pilot, mechanic, or contest judge/organizer is to know the rules inside and out. What I learned this weekend, however, was that for a judge, the rule book is only the starting point.

If the rules look like a patchwork of special cases and stop-gap measures, that’s because they are. Anything that you can possibly imagine happening during a combat match will at some point find a way to occur, and by the time that happens at least 10 things that you never could have possibly imagine will have occurred. Over the years, the rules have expanded to cover the major holes that have been exposed. Most of these rules are written with very strict conditions under which they are to be applied (e.g. “if the model aircraft lands with no streamer string AND the streamer retaining device is missing or bent, but NOT as the result of a mid-air collision.”). As I found, over the course of a whole competition, it’s not unlikely that a judge will encounter a situation that somehow slips through the cracks – the situation may look similar to one described by a particular rule, but if the conditions aren’t satisfied the judge must quickly (no time for prolonged deliberations) make a fair assessment of the situation and firmly decide how to proceed with the match. These are tough, high-pressure moments, but this is where I think experience and a firm resolve can make the difference between allowing a situation to erupt into a big argument or keeping things running smoothly. On Saturday I was confronted with such a situation; in the moment I tried to make what I thought was a fair compromise between the almost-applicable rules, but in retrospect it was probably not the optimal decision. Fortunately nobody was disadvantaged by it, and the outcome of the match was not affected. Nonetheless, it made me take a fresh look at the rules and think about our sport from a new perspective.

As for shutoffs, the new rule was temporarily suspended for this competition, though the use of shutoffs was strongly encouraged. Many pilots used a variety of designs including swing arms, line-tension activated string-over-wing and moving bellcrank devices, and Alex Prokofiev used his electronic shutoff that I reported on previously. Lots of pictures are available on the MACA website or Mike Willcox’s blog. The flying was actually rather clean, and to my knowledge only resulted in one fly-away (no shutoff), so we didn’t have any spectacular demonstrations of these new safety measures. There were a couple of times when planes turned in to the middle of the circle and did shut down before plowing into the ground. Center Marshal Pat Willcox was undoubtedly grateful for this, as he took a direct hit on the arm by Bobby Mears’ falling model. If the engine had still been running, it would have been a much uglier situation...