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FLYING WITH AN ACE

Greg Koontz & Sky Country Lodge

By Jeff Parnau

I've flown with Greg Koontz a number of times. He took me up in the Pitts Model 12 a few years ago – a beast of an airplane with a radial engine that turns “the wrong way.” I give him a ride in my Cirrus. And I was in his Piper Cub for a landing on a moving pickup truck.

In late 2007, I decided it was time to get a bit more serious about aerobatic flight. And about that time, Greg (an Aerobatic Competency Evaluator, or ACE) became the 14th person certified by the National Association of Flight Instructors as Master CFI-Aerobatic. We arranged a date, and headed to Ashville, Alabama on November 13.

A little over three years ago, Greg and spouse Cora began construction of Sky Country Lodge – a bed-and-breakfast flight school located on an isolated grass strip near Birmingham. The lodge is a beautiful open-concept design, with two private bedrooms with baths for Greg's typical workload of two students at a time. The hangar houses Greg's 1946 Piper Cub (used in his comedy act) and nearly-new Super Decathlon, in which he teaches. My early aerobatic experience was in the same make and model.

Why take an aerobatic course? Everyone has their own reason. I had several. (1) I am finishing up a rebuild of the Skybolt I purchased with Bill McFall about seven years ago, and I haven't done much aerobatics during the 18-month project, (2) I love aerobatics, (3) I have an opportunity to teach aerobatics and want some experience recovering from student-induced botched maneuvers, and (4) although I don't intend to fly in airshows, I want to be proficient enough to get a low-level waiver.

What Makes Airplanes Turn?

The standard agenda is to have two students on site. Things start in the morning with a Koontz-cooked breakfast, and then ground school. Greg starts by reminding his students that we tend to forget the basics of how airplanes really work. “What makes an airplane turn?” is question number one. The answer (which we all learned way back when) is not the ailerons or rudder. It's the horizontal component of lift. Eventually the discussion focuses on Zero Angle of Attack – a subject which is at the core of Greg's approach to aerobatics. (More about that shortly.) After about an hour of ground school, each student flies with Greg.

Getting into the front of the Decathlon, I noticed there was a rubber cover over the turn coordinator (the ball). I didn't have to ask why it was there. Greg wants his students to feel what the airplane is doing – not look at an instrument to find out.

Lesson Number One starts with Greg's version of lazy-eights, renamed crazy-eights. The maneuver is flown much like a timid hammerhead, with the airplane being pulled to a vertical line, and then flown over the top to a vertical downline. It's Greg's preferred warm-



Jeff Parnau got an aerobatic workout in Greg Koontz's Decathlon (photo by Scott Slocum).

up exercise. A bit later, Greg asks you to perform slow flight. Slower, and slower, and then he says “Fly it at 45 miles per hour.” Of course, it stalls, and Greg quickly learns whether you recognize and recover.

Next came Greg's version of an aileron roll. He explained there are lots of theories as to exactly what an aileron roll truly is, and referenced a few sources. His version is a roll which requires only aileron, and which is flown at “Zero Lift Angle of Attack.” You start the maneuver at about 130 mph, pull the nose up approximately 25 degrees, and then unload the wing with a forward push, putting it in a parabolic arc. Then, with no rudder application, put full aileron in the direction of the roll, and recover on the original heading. The nose stays straight



on a point (either left or right) when done correctly.

I had a heck of a time learning this, probably because my earlier training was limited to slow rolls and barrel rolls. I never did really “nail it,” but I did luck out a few times. I’ll continue to practice it.

A Lesson is a Lesson

There is no specific time limit on Greg’s lessons. If the student gets queasy and needs to return to terra firma, the lesson can be stopped. If the student needs more time, the lesson gets longer. “A lesson is a lesson,” Greg says, “and you don’t pay more if you fly more, and you don’t save money by flying less.”

Back on the ground, the students trade places. And after both have flown once, it’s lunch, either in beautiful downtown Asheville or right at the Lodge. Then the afternoon session starts, with another hour of ground school, and another flight for each student. After the flying, Greg proves that he’s not only a Master CFI-Aerobatic, but also a Master Chef. Day two follows the same pattern.

During the “standard” course, the student flies (or tries to fly) most of the basic aerobatic maneuvers: loop, aileron roll, slow roll, barrel roll, hammerhead, and of course, spins.

Ah, spins. I am not sure every student at Sky Country gets as beat up as I did, but it was my own doing. “If I intend to teach,” I



said to Greg, “I need to see what a student can do to me, particularly in a spin.”

I had witnessed what I thought was an accelerated spin many years ago, when I tried to snap-roll the Decathlon on a downline. Apparently I pushed the stick too far forward, and the rotation increased, while the airspeed shot up. It took two turns to stop it, and I never tried to repeat the maneuver.

Accelerated Spins

Greg demonstrated the first accelerated spin. After establishing a normal spin, just push the stick forward, and hang on. We did about seven or eight turns, which is more than enough to get you dizzy. Then another turn or two with the stick back in order to return to a “regular” spin, and finally a normal spin recovery. “Now you try it,” Greg said.

I tried. I really tried, but something inside me would not let me push that stick forward. “Come on, push,” Greg said, “I’m with you. Nothing’s going to happen.” I felt him on the stick as he pushed it well forward, and there we went again, dizzier and dizzier. “Okay, recover.” I gently began pulling on the stick, and then felt Greg abruptly pull it full back. “Don’t baby it.” We were now doing a normal spin, having lost about 3,000 feet. Right rudder, stop the rotation, stick to neutral, recover to level flight, and wow, my head was still spinning, but the airplane was flying normally.

I also had asked Greg to demonstrate other typically botched maneuvers. It was much like what you go through in “unusual attitude” training for your private license, but of course much more dramatic. For example, Greg flew the first part of a loop, but kept the nose about 25 degrees above the horizon at the top, lost about 30 degrees of heading, and then let go. My typical reaction was to let the airplane fall through to a downline, but Greg pointed out that I

needed to consider rolling out, rather than falling through.

During our final flight, Greg let me experiment with any other maneuvers we hadn’t covered. I wanted to see a shoulder roll, snaps to the right, plus do a little inverted flight, and review split-S recoveries. I also wanted some back-seat time (that’s where the instructor sits in the Decathlon). He obliged, and at the end of day two, I was certain I got my money’s worth.

A Photo Shoot

Day three was not on the course agenda. Scott Slocum had flown in the prior evening, and we had scheduled a photo shoot from his Bonanza. I got the front seat of the Decathlon for this flight, and my job was to turn the smoke on or off and point out any mountains or ridges that might interfere with our horizontal velocity. As per usual, there were extended periods of inverted flight, reminding me of some advice I received from Gene Soucy. “If you were inverted long enough to get a good photo, you were inverted too long.” We got some great photos.

Does it make sense to train in a relatively low-performance airplane? I think so. The Super Decathlon doesn’t have much of a roll rate (160 degrees per second) or horsepower (180). But those limiting factors mean that the student must learn to fly the airplane throughout a maneuver, rather than just ride along.

Greg trains about 100 students annually at Sky Country, which – combined with his airshow activity – makes him one of the busier performer/instructors in the business. If you’re inclined to learn aerobatics by carving out a good foundation in a basic trainer (as compared to a composite hot-rod), you may want to mosey on down to Ashville, Alabama, and spend a few busy days and relaxing nights at Sky Country Lodge.

For more info, surf to www.gkairshows.com



Top left: Beautiful fall colors made for great flying in Alabama (photo by Scott Slocum). Top right: “If you were inverted long enough to get a good photo, you were inverted too long” (photo by Scott Slocum). Above left: Greg’s Sky Country Lodge (photo by Jeff Parnau). Above right: Jeff (left) and Greg with Greg’s Decathlon.