

HOMEBUILDING - A PERSONAL ASSESSMENT



"Nobody has all the answers." Wittman has more than most.

STEVE WITTMAN

By Budd Davisson

If there is one experience everybody in aviation should have at least once, it is a conversation with Steve Wittman, panther of the pylons and not-so-homespun philosopher of the Experimental Aircraft Association.

In his easy, articulate way, he touches every conversation with a sincerity that makes you come away knowing the time was well spent. He's not an oracle, or even an aeronautical guru, but he's obviously a man who gives a damn—about everything.

Standing behind the food tent at Oshkosh, balancing a hotdog in one hand and a Coke in the other, he looked like anything but a famous race pilot. "I don't think I ever really thought of myself as a race pilot," he grinned. "I've always thought of myself as a frustrated engineer who raced airplanes to make a living."

His "frustration" was the short-circuiting of his plans to get a formal education in aeronautical engineering. Because of sickness in the family during his first years out of high school, he had lots of time on his hands, so he launched a self-study

program, reading everything he could that had to do with engineering. Then the air races began. "I don't know exactly why I started. It just seemed like the natural thing to do. The prize money looked good, and it didn't seem difficult to go fast, so I built an airplane and went racing. I guess I got lucky."

Chief Oshkosh and Bonzo and other strange-looking Wittman racing machines began to roar out of Wisconsin to astound the world, first with their Rube Goldberg appearances, and then with their anything-but-mediocre performance. He beat the best, but more importantly, he usually finished the race, and his airplanes never killed anybody—a record that's hard to equal in air racing. Safety and reliability have always been his trademark.

"Maybe I worry too much, but I like to plan for emergencies, especially engine failures. I even design for them. I used to have a tricycle gear on my own Tailwind, but I finally changed it because I knew if the engine ever quit and I hit hard,

that nose gear could go right back through the gas tank." He laughed, "A lot of people thought I got rid of the nose gear because it slowed me down too much, but I changed it because that thing hung over my head like a sword and I couldn't enjoy flying my airplane."

Safety in experimental aircraft is one of his favorite subjects and even though he wouldn't say a bad word about anybody, he's obviously worried about some of the quick-to-build plans on the market. He's worried because some of them weren't designed by engineers, and safety and longevity were the last things considered. He considers the structural integrity of some of them so obviously bad that even the greenest EAA member could spot the weaknesses and cure them. But many of these plans are being bought by non-EAAs who have no experience and nobody to guide them. "I'm a little concerned that some of the weaker designs that are now so popular are going to start killing people and the Government is going to step in and..." he made a thumbs-down motion with his hands.

"We're going to have to do a lot of self-policing in designs, construction

and flying. The Government won't ignore us if we start hurting people, and the last thing we need is more regulation. It's up to us to see that we are self-regulating. Otherwise, we're in deep trouble."

Our hotdogs finished, we wandered back down the line toward the area where he had parked his Tailwind. Outwardly, it differs from the normal Tailwind only because it lacks the razzle-dazzle paint job most new Tailwinds sport. What doesn't show is the 145-hp six-cylinder Continental that pulls him along at 180 to 190 mph and is "a little heavy, but it's so smooth."

Next to his Tailwind was a tiny slab-sided bullet that bears the traditional Wittman racing trademarks, square corners and wire-braced wings "... maybe not pretty, but it sure is light and strong." It was his new Formula V racer.

But both his Tailwind and F/V racer were being ignored by the crowd surrounding a fragile tubing framework alongside. As the crowd parted to make way for "Witt," the tubing frame could be identified as a Tailwind, but that's not what the crowd was gawking at. There was an aluminum Oldsmobile V-8

fastened to the firewall!

Wittman won't claim it as an original idea. He says he's just mounting the auto engine and building the airplane to see if it'll work. He's simply experimenting with an idea, which happens to be another of his favorite pursuits.

He feels that many builders capable of original thinking are falling into line and constructing already established designs, which gets away from the original idea behind the EAA. Although some look upon Wittman as a traditionalist because of his construction techniques, they forget that the first Tailwind was built in 1953 and, at the time, it was as radical as a flying saucer. After all, he could outcruise a then-new Bonanza with only 90 hp. He'd like to see more experimenting with new and untried ideas, even though it cuts into his sale of Tailwind plans.

"Sure, there are lots of pilots who shouldn't even think about designing their own airplanes or modifying someone else's plans," he said. "Airplane design can be risky. But there are many others who have ideas but are afraid to try them because they aren't engineers or think engineering is too hard. A lot of good ideas have been invented by people who are only slightly familiar with aerodynamics or structures, so we've got to get back to experimenting. If somebody has an idea but doesn't know how to engineer it, or wants to check it out, he can contact other, more experienced builders or engineers. That's what our EAA-designee program is all about, to help innovations along by providing the technical backup."

Our conversation was constantly interrupted by people who wanted to talk to Wittman-the-legend, or builders who wanted to confer with Wittman-the-homebuilders'-homebuilder, or pilots who "... saw you race in Cleveland in '38" and wanted to shake his hand. Not one of them went away disappointed. No matter how inane the remarks, the questions or the statements, Wittman gave them his entire attention. He wasn't faking it, he was genuinely interested in what the others had to say. He wanted to make certain they got their answers or their autographs.

Did he have any advice for aspiring airplane builders?

After a few seconds of thoughtful silence, he said in his usual slow manner, pausing as he searched for the exact words, "I guess I'd have to tell them to go ahead and try things that are new. Use their own ideas because none of us has, or will ever have, all the answers." □



Witt's latest brainstorm is a Tailwind powered by an Oldsmobile V-8 engine, mounted inverted. "Homebuilders should go ahead and try new things," he says.