

ONTARGET

BY PAT CANNON

The Key Grab

We've covered a lot of ground over the last year and a half, and it's time that I finally cover a skill that is not on my top ten list of favorites: The illusive Pole Grab. Why, you ask? Let's just say that in all the years that I have been competing, I have only snagged one pole grab, and that happened just last year. For all the work it took to finally grab the magic ring, it was worth only \$500. No new car, no big check, just a little check, but along with that came the satisfaction of saying that I had finally done it. In addition, it brought about a realization that the technique that I used to get there was quite a bit different than my usual target acquisition technique. Now, I know that there are pilots out there that have never gotten close to the pole and then there are those that have gotten there more than once. I'm not complaining about my lack of previous success. After all, I have gotten one ring, but it amazes me that as a competitive skill, it doesn't fit in with all of the things that we have been talking about in these articles.

For years, I had wondered how some pilots excelled in finding just the right path to the pole, while the rest of us just never seemed to get there. There are a few masters of the grab and most of you know their names. Owen Keown seems to be the reigning champion of the pole. In fact, he has gotten so many keys that it was once rumored that if he was going to attend a race, the organizers may not be able to buy key grab insurance. I don't know if that was ever true, but it made a great story. Another person that is better than the average when it comes to finding the pole is Steve Lombardi. Steve has had more than his share of successes with the keys. Since I fly with Steve on a regular basis, I have had the chance to observe him closely when the keys are on the pole, and there are some things that I've noticed about his technique during a pole grab flight that are worth mentioning.

In this article, we will look at the differences in flying techniques between a pilot flying to a target and one that is flying to the pole. I will add some comments made by Steve Lombardi as we proceed. He has a unique perspective and agrees with me that while the skills are the same, the way you use them is different.

First, let's look at why the degree of difficulty is different from a normal approach to the target. When you approach the target area for a drop that allows you to throw the marker, you can be fairly well assured that any flight path that takes your balloon to within fifty feet horizontally and one hundred feet vertically, should be close enough to net you a score. A successful pass by the pole is contained in an area approximately seven to nine feet wide and two to three feet vertically. That considerably narrows the margin for error made by the pilot when making the approach. In addition, most successful key grab passes come from a steady state approach. That means that your approach is flat and is made from the right edge of that approach wedge we have been talking about. When I asked him how he modifies the way he makes his approach to the pole, Steve says, "I plan my approach to be closer to the ground, in the low altitude wind line to the pole, farther from the target area than usual. I use smaller adjustments in altitude to make the fine adjustments needed to adjust my track in small amounts." Think about this as it relates to the high approach to the target area and you may see that these two techniques do not mix well. The high approach in more constant winds will produce an acceptable approach to most targets, leaving you the ability to toss the marker to the target. It does not, however, provide the low stable approach path that Steve alludes to. On the other hand, as Steve says, "I take a chance on missing the target to one side or the other when I commit to the long, low approach. If the winds change to the right, I will probably miss the target area, not just the pole." That's the chance you take when you fly the right side of the wedge, so your decision to go for the pole has to be weighed against the points you might lose if you miss the target area.

In discussing the mental process used by pole grab pilots, one thing becomes obvious. When asked, they all respond that they narrow their point of focus to the area of the pole. Most of us have a point of focus that is widened to the expanse of the target field. In conditions where the steering is predictable, that might be narrowed further to the width of the target



Pat Cannon is a past US National Champion

itself. Not so with the pole. Remember, the area you must hit is about fifteen to twenty square feet in size and you must hit it right on the money. In a conversation with Steve, he recalled the old adage that, "if you are approaching a very large field to land, the one tree in the middle will always fall directly in your path." Steve modifies his thinking on that one and uses the area represented by that little tree as the size and scope of his target area. "I focus on that size of area as my target point."

How do you practice for the pole grab? First, leave your practice markers in the truck. Fly into the upwind side of a long field after choosing some object at the downwind end of the field as your pole. Work to cross that exact location at about twenty feet of altitude. Then fly into the next field at low altitude. Look ahead to the other end of the field and do it all over again. Lastly, you must have patience. Don't try to

hurry your approach. Long, low approaches take time and require small adjustments in altitude to make small direction changes. If you lose your patience and make erratic changes, you will over-correct and miss the pole. Remember that if you are making the decision to go for the pole, the long low approach will give you a better chance, but will limit your adjustment options if the wind changes after you have committed.

The next article will be an open forum. I would like to answer any questions you may have about competition. If you don't think that I have covered a subject thoroughly enough and you would like some expansion on it, just ask. Send your questions to me at pecannon@turbineair.com.



*To grab or not to grab!
Getting the prize from the
top of a pole is truly a game
of inches. Just getting close to
the pole can require exacting
pilot skills and a bit of luck.*

Peter Wm.. Richardson photos

