

# ONTARGET

BY PAT CANNON

## Reflections on a Competition Career



In preparing for this last article in the competition series, I was faced with the task of choosing a wrap-up subject. I considered a recap or review of the series of articles, maybe just reflecting back on specific key points, or just ending with a thank you for the many kind comments I have received about the articles.

I think rather that it is most fitting to end with a little reflection as to why I have become so involved in this project. I never dreamed, as I started competing over twenty years ago, that I would be writing about my experiences and sharing them to other pilots that were interested in learning the art of competitive flying. But, it has become quite evident over the last ten years, that fewer and fewer pilots are choosing the competition route.

In an effort to understand better, why that might be happening, I had to take a look at the profiles of some of the major competitors. For one, it seemed that the better, more established competitors made a focused effort out of their quest for the brass ring. Many of them spend little or no time in the air for the pleasure side of the sport and some of them follow only the major competition circuit. This would be truer, say ten years ago, than it is today. Things have changed some and we will discuss that later.

In one of my earlier chapters we discussed how the major competitive events require extensive work on the part of the individual, to prepare for. The map work alone can be staggering, when considering the size and scope of a regional or National competition area. I know pilots who visit a new Nationals site six months ahead to begin the target driving and marking process. I have even flown a small single engine aircraft in to a competition area to look it over and take photographs of major features for later posting to the map. So, it stands to reason that when new competitors were introduced into the system and saw what it would take to compete, it turned many of them off and the ranks of new competitors shrank.

In recent years, the technical aspect of Nationals-style competition has gotten a little easier. Event directors and staff are now providing lists of goals for the competitors, in effect, putting all of the participants on even ground with respect to target and goal selection. Event directors are taking the time to call special rules to the attention of the participants during the briefings, instead of seeing if you find the Gravity Drop rule pasted in among the other applicable rules.

GPS and pseudo targets will add a new dimension to the future of competition that will have to be learned by all competitors, new and old. I believe that event organizers and directors have realized that very effective competition, even at the National level, can be run in a manner that will attract more competitors to the field, rather than to discourage them from taking a crack at a National title.

In my series of articles, I have tried to impress upon you, not only the rigors of a National competition, with observers, multiple chase vehicles, penalties and strategies, but the incredible ability of competitive flying to improve your overall flying, judgement and management skills during other aspects of this sport as well.

One goal I had was to provide you with the tools I used during competitive flight, to manage any flight, whether competitive or not. Embedded in some of my articles, were tools to evaluate weather, winds, terrain conditions, and many more aspects of every day flying. I once did a seminar presentation called, "Competition and the Pleasure Pilot." That presentation was aimed at taking the new balloon pilot and helping him or her to improve their every day flying skills through the use of basic competition skills.

My other goal was to bring new competitors into the competitive side of this incredible sport and I hope that some of you have become interested enough to begin actively participating in local and regional competitive events, to begin honing your skills. Hopefully, it will give



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you the incentive to do well and to ultimately compete for a national championship, and win!

My love of balloon competition is certainly no secret. My wife says that when I get together with my competitive friends, we cackle like a bunch of hens. She says that especially at a competitive event, after the flight, when the scores are posted for that series of tasks, that we are like a bunch of dogs, sniffing around each other to see how we compare.

In closing, I want to thank those of you that have contributed to the information that I had the pleasure to write about. I also thank all of you that either responded to my articles, to provide your encouragement, or to suggest additional subject areas that I might cover, or just to ask a question. Lastly, I wish to thank the BFA and *Ballooning*

for providing the forum for this series.

As the summer draws near and a new menu of competitive events develops, I'm look forward to seeing many of you on the launch field. Until then, fly safe and compete well.



*Editor's Note:*

*This wraps Pat Cannon's column on competition flying. Thank you Pat for your two years of devotion to this publication and to sharing your knowledge of competitive skills.*

*For those who may have missed any of Pat's series, we hope to have it archived soon on the BFA website. Watch for news of this in the near future.*

*We will continue to hear from Pat in the future but for now, a new column on gas ballooning will debut in this space next issue!*