

Simply Soaring

Starting a daughter flying

AMY LABODA

Last winter my 14-year-old daughter decided she wanted to learn to fly, and that put me in a quandary. I'm a flight instructor and own a Kitfox IV. I've got ratings in airplanes, seaplanes, gyroplanes, and gliders. I wondered, what was the right machine to begin in, and am I the right person to teach her to fly?

I annoyed my husband (a former flight instructor) with my dilemma—he said I was overthinking. I pummeled my friends with questions. The topic was hashed over at cocktail parties and birthday parties and “after air show” parties. Why? I want her learning to fly to be the best, most positive experience possible because I believe it will spur her on to great things in aviation.

When I was her age I didn't know I wanted to fly. But I did study brown pelicans. They'd cruise just above waves on the river, past the dock in my backyard. I'd squint through the late afternoon sunlight at them, even try to imitate the precise curvature of the bones that make up their wings' leading edges by stretching my own arms out so far I could feel the pull of my shoulder blades straining. I imagined that was the feel of the wind pressing my arms—I knew about Newton—and if I wished hard enough, I was there, rising with the wind and skimming the water, inhaling its briny freshness with those pelicans, gliding on the breeze.

I took my first flight lesson not long after those musings, but it wasn't until I drove by a gliderport and saw the lanky white ships twirling upward on skinny tunnels of rising air that I realized the kind of flying I really wanted to do—soaring.

The challenge of an aerotow to altitude is nothing

compared to the exhilarating rush you get when you pull the red knob and, with a loud snap, the rope and the towplane are gone. You are alone, and it is suddenly quiet. From that moment on it is your skill at finding rising air against gravity, which guarantees that eventually all flights end on the ground. If you are good and conditions are ripe, your flight, at the cost of a single aerotow, might not end for hours.

In a glider there are no complicated instruments, just an airspeed gauge, an altimeter, a compass, and a variometer (a sensitive rate of climb indicator). There are no complicated controls, just the stick and rudder. The flying takes place at nontowered airports—often wide, forgiving grass fields where radios may be optional.

It is as basic as flying gets, and I realized it was

the best introduction to aviation I could ever provide my daughter.

But I'm not a glider instructor. So, where could she learn to fly in a safe environment at 14? Some research with the Soaring Society of America (www.SSA.org) turned up a youth soaring week put on by the Sugarbush Soaring Club of Warren, Vermont.

I locked in on the Sugarbush Soaring Youth Camp as much because of its brevity—too short if she loved it and just a little long if she was miserable—as its location, which happened to be on the flight path for my own summer odyssey. We called in January to find that nearly all of the 12 slots were taken and quickly sent in the \$100 deposit to hold a slot for July.

At that point, like most teens, my daughter seemed to completely lose interest. Sure, we played around on

I found myself in a world of airplanes glistening with dew and drenched in buttery morning sunlight.

the occasional weekend with the Kitfox, and I taught her to taxi and control it in takeoff and during flight (we're holding off on landings and takeoffs for more formal lessons), but we didn't talk much about gliders.

June rolled around. Ginny and Rick Hanson, the principals of the Sugarbush Soaring Youth Camp, sent a few papers for me to fill out, the usual camp stuff, and suggested we send the balance of the camp fees in a check with our daughter. Ginny promised to meet her at the airport (she would airline it one way), and we sorted out dates and equipment. For, you see, this camp was, well, really camping. The kids needed to bring a tent and a sleeping bag because as long as it didn't rain, their lodgings were as close to the runway as you could get, on a grassy mound by a gazebo, surrounded by the gliders they would fly during the sunny afternoons.

I showed my daughter pictures of happy kids posed by the gliders, a couple of Blaniks and a sleek, sexy white fiberglass ASK 21. She noted that most of the campers were boys and grimaced. I sighed. I showed her pictures of the campers splashing at a nearby swimming hole and mountain biking down a narrow path in a dark mountain forest.

"I don't like mountain biking," she murmured, and walked away, leaving me wondering if I'd just made a classic, expensive, overenthusiastic parent mistake.

A neighbor left us a video about soaring. She watched it and handed it back without comment. Her father gave her our well-worn primer from when we learned to fly gliders. I found it covered in dust bunnies under her bed, just days before she was to leave. I bought her a new, compact backpacking tent. The day before her flight she set it up in the living room. I found her sitting in it, pouting.

"It's too small!" she wailed at me.

"You'll be fine," was all I could manage. The Sunday came, finally, when I waved her through security at our regional airport, and she was off. That evening I received a brief "I'm here, and I've found my ride" call—and then, nothing. Not an e-mail, not a text message, not a voice mail. It could only mean one of two things: she was having a great time, or she was so miserable and mad she didn't even want to talk to me.

Friday arrived, and it was time for me to head off to Vermont—a nine-hour solo cross-country. The plan was to cover as much ground as comfortable on day one and make it to Sugarbush just in time for parent-pickup on Saturday afternoon. The day, however, was great for flying, and I made the trip in three manageable three-hour legs. As the shadows began to lengthen in the Mad River Valley, I descended over the last ridge and saw the airport. I circled high and settled into the pattern to land just before the crest of the hill that the runway sits on. After touchdown I taxied back and shut down in the grass next to a Beech Baron. Pilots and campers milling about on the FBO front porch watched, but one person seemed to be squinting inquisitively my way. I waved, and my daughter, pigtails

bouncing, smile glowing, came running up.

"Mom! You're here early! I've got one flight tomorrow—you'll be able to watch," she said, breathless. "Come meet everyone!"

It was clear that she was having a very good time. She proceeded to introduce me to staff and campers and show me around. Ginny Hanson, manning a grill, beckoned me over.

"You're welcome, and just in time for dinner."



Later they dug out a tent and a sleeping bag, and I collapsed into slumber near the runway, with the kids.

The summer sun comes up early in the Vermont mountains. I climbed out of my tent refreshed and found myself in a world of airplanes glistening with dew and drenched in buttery morning sunlight. In the distance my daughter and a fellow camper were walking toward me, laughing and snapping towels at each other. Before noon a soft breeze kicked up, and the two senior campers flew their first solos in the Blaniks as their proud parents and co-campers watched. My daughter pulled Rick, the senior instructor, aside and asked him to hold a place for her next year, because she wants to solo, too.


I smiled. That's when I knew I'd gotten my money's worth. *EAA*

ADULT EAA FANTASY FLIGHT CAMP
B-17 Flying Fortress
December 1-3, 2006

EAA AIR ACADEMY 2007

 Young Eagles Camp (Ages 12 & 13) July 8-12 and August 6-10	 Basic Air Academy (Ages 14 & 15) June 14-19, June 21-26, June 28/July 3
--	--

Advanced Air Academy
(Ages 16-18)
July 16-25 & July 27-August 4

For more information and registration materials call our web page at www.fantasyflightcamp.org and www.eaaairacademy.org
email: airacademy@eaa.org fax: 928-486-6262
phone: 800-527-3273 or 928-426-6262 

Please provide e-mail, phone number and mailing address in your first contact.