

The Off-season

By Tom Johnson – SSF Trustee

One of my fond memories of watching Chicago baseball as a child was the announcers talking about what the players did in their off-season. For example, Rich Hebner worked as a grave digger with his father in the off-season. Other players had odd and unusual jobs as well. I found it was fascinating these professionals did activities and jobs besides baseball in the off-season.

For many of us, now is our off-season. Down here in the deep south, the days are not long enough or warm enough to generate any decent soaring. But up north, like in Chicago, we usually took the sailplanes apart and stored them for months at a time.

Much like the baseball players, our ability to see and react to what was coming at us is a perishable skill. You not only have to experience it, but you must think about it as well. Even at my advanced age, I can still hit an 85-mph fastball. But make that ball move down or curve or change speeds and I am helpless.

The same dynamic happens in the cockpit of the sailplane. Make a flight where nothing out of the ordinary happens and I am quite sure you will handle it well. But throw an unexpected glider ahead of you in traffic pattern, or a cross wind you did not realize was there, and the probability that you may make a bad decision is dramatically increased.

At the end of your soaring season, you probably had things pretty well in hand. You could see the conflict in the traffic pattern long before it developed. You already were formulating a plan to deal with the situation. Your perceptions and decision making were working well. It never occurs to you that this skill could go away.

Like the baseball player, his batting eye was keen and perceptive. He could see the rotation of the ball out of the pictures hand. The arm angle and speed gave away the movement and location of the pitch. Putting the bat on the ball was never in doubt.

But then the off-season happens. You stop thinking about the soaring situations and how to handle them. You think you will come back to the field in the early-spring and pick up where you left off. But like the ball-player who did not spend time in the batting cage, your timing and perceptive skills are off.

Ironically, the off-season can be when the best progress is made in your perception and decision-making skills.

You need to practice your decision-making skills regularly. You need to keep your head in the game. You must make a conscious and concerted effort to do this.

The mission, should you decide to accept it, is to work practicing your decision-making skills into daily life. Consciously decide to think about soaring situations and what you would do. Put yourself into realistic situations you have experienced, and re-fly them in your head. Do this sitting in traffic, in line at the grocery store, waiting for the water to boil, or anywhere else where your mind has idle time.

Think about what you would do with a left crosswind. Think about how you would follow another glider around the pattern. Have that glider extend too far downwind or be too wide from the runway. Have that glider land short, long, or in the middle of the runway. The possibilities are only limited by your imagination.

The beauty of this mental exercise is when you actually experience it for real, you have already done it many times and you know have a plan of action. Your probability of making good decisions that lead to a positive outcome has greatly increased.

If you really want to up your game, practice your scenarios in Condor. You can practice launch failures and other abnormal situations until you get tired.

You can also participate in Condor on-line competitions putting you into close contact with other sailplanes and the situations that come with that.

The focus of all of this is keeping your mind and decision-making skills fresh. Flying the sailplane is all about integrating the decision making skills of what to do with the aircraft with the monkey-skills of actually putting the aircraft in the attitude and configuration it needs to be in.

The more work and effort you put into your off-season, the faster you will return to mid-season form. Your first couple of flights after a long layoff will be challenging. But if you have your decision-making skills relatively intact, the first flight will not feel as overwhelming.

Hitting a baseball is the hardest task to do it sports, and flying a sailplane well is probably the hardest task in aviation. And your mental preparation makes all the difference.

So this off-season, wherever you are, put down the shovel and dig into the books. You will be glad you did.