

Soaring

The sailplane experience at Hinckley Airport just might be the Fox Valley's greatest thrill ride

By Jim Faber
STAFF WRITER

The Windy City Soaring Association

Location: Hinckley Airport, roughly three miles west of downtown Hinckley on Route 30

Contact: (815) 786-7200 or www.windycitysoaring.org

Services: Glides from 3,000 feet (\$85) or 5,000 feet (\$139) and soaring lessons

HINCKLEY — Some 3,000 feet in the air over DeKalb County farm fields, I made my single biggest contribution to a Sunday-morning glider flight: yanking on the yellow knob that released us from the converted crop duster plane.

From then on, I was little more than ballast for pilot Ray Konrath during the 25 minute descent to the well-groomed grass strip known as Hinckley Airport.

Sure, I got to steer the ASK-21 sailplane back and forth for a bit and, for a split second, I seriously considered Konrath's offer, made in jest, to help land the glider.

For me, the chance to soar high in the air in powerless flight was a thrill and a new sensation. For Konrath, a pilot since 1965 and a glider pilot since the 1980s, the ride was routine. He told me that, later in the afternoon, thermal drafts coming off of the heated-up ground would give gliders a chance to stay up longer and even gain some altitude after being released from the tow plane.

Konrath is a board member of the Windy City Soaring Association, which flies out of the Hinckley Airport, offering pilot training and rides for the public in an effort to bring more people into the sport.

The club formed about three years ago, when its founding members realized Hinckley Soaring — which had sold rides and done training at the tiny airport about three miles west of Hinckley — would be going out of business.

Most of the glider pilots, a group of about 20, had been heading to Hinckley Airport for years to spend a day in the air, and they didn't want to see other people miss out on what they loved, said Mark Akerley, president of Windy City Soaring.

So the group pooled their money and bought Hinckley Soaring's small fleet of tow planes and gliders, pledging to open their doors wide to the public for thrill rides and glider-pilot training, regardless of previous experience — something that few soaring clubs do.

People come to the sport of soaring in different ways, Akerley said. The three main groups of people are teenagers seeking something thrilling, licensed pilots looking for a new challenge after a few years of flying and people between 35 and 50 looking for a new, exciting hobby, Akerley said.

Akerley started soaring when his wife bought him a flight at Hinckley Airport as a gift roughly 20 years ago. After the flight, he walked into the soaring company's office and put down the money for a full training course.

Konrath has been a pilot since 1965. In the early 1980s, he bought a glider, built it and then learned how to fly it.

For most of the downward glide, Konrath and I sped over the landscape at slightly more than 50 knots per hour. But the glider didn't seem to be moving that fast.

Far below the farm homes looked like dollhouses, and the land took on a checkerboard feel as fields of varying shades of green line up next to one another in straight lines and right angles.

With a tinted green bubble keeping out the glare of the sun and my stopped-up ears dampening the rush of wind

sending the glider into a rush of speed.

My stomach was thrust into my throat in a way that was more spectacular than any dozen roller coaster rides I'd ever been on. Then I started to float. Wrapping my arms around the chest straps, I tried to force myself back into the seat as Konrath leveled out the gliders.

"I got you up into the air for a moment there," he chuckled.

There is a difference between gliding and soaring. Gliding is being towed high in the air and then gently floating back down to where you took off from. That keeps some glider pilots entertained for years, said Akerley.

Soaring is an adventure. It's a chance to see just how far you can take your glider once the tow rope is released. Given the weather conditions, the landscape, the glider and many other factors, soaring is figuring out how far across country you can go before making it back to land safely, Akerley said.

Or, as Konrath put it, "It's no fun hanging around the airport all of the time."

Becoming a glider pilot who can handle that kind of flight — which can put you in the air for hours at a time — means understanding weather, including how to spot thermals, drafts of hot air rising off parts of the ground that absorb then throw off heat from the sun. It means planning ahead to know where you can land in a pinch if the weather doesn't cooperate. It means knowing exactly what the instruments in the glider are telling you about where the aircraft is and what it is doing, Akerley said.

He likened the sport to learning to play the piano. Almost anyone can learn chopsticks and a few other simple tunes and have fun noodling around on a keyboard. But to really be a pianist, you have to learn more than what keys to push down in what order; you need to know music theory and history, have or develop a keen sense of rhythm and acquire a certain sensitivity to what turns notes, played in a certain order, into art.

Sitting in the front seat of the two-seat glider, with Konrath behind me, a quick flash of terror ran over my face when Konrath rather suddenly introduced me to a steep, 45-degree turn.

Sure, he gave me warning before banking the glider strongly to the left, but I had no real reference for what the turn would feel like. It was as if the glider were trying to spill me out of my seat and, if it weren't for the tinted green bubble, right out of the cockpit to tumble earthward.

Afterward, I decided the turn felt pretty good. Soaring in a glider so light that a few people could easily push it across a grass runway meant experiencing new sensations that most people, confined to a commercial jetliner whenever they fly, never know.

The Windy City Soaring Association's membership has grown to about 75 members this season — gliders only fly in northern Illinois between April and November. Akerley only expected the club to have 35 to 50 members by this time. But, for a club with a goal of raising awareness of soaring, a bump in membership, even if Akerley can't explain exactly why it happened, is a good thing.

Membership is evenly divided between highly experienced glider pilots, new pilots and power pilots making the transition into soaring. The club has about 20 students along with the 75 members.

Konrath, who takes many of the customers up for rides, credits some of the club's growth to being the only club in the area to take such a welcoming approach to those just learning about gliding and soaring.

Some of his customers have made the decision — as Akerley did two decades ago — to become glider pilots immediately after their first ride. Other have had a life-long interest in aviation and a passion that builds with each experience.

"Flying just gets in your blood," Konrath said.

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