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CFI of
the Year**



GREG LASLO

MENTOR

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Executive Director—Jason Blair
..... jblair@aaa.org

Program Coordinator—Melissa Miller
..... memiller@aaa.org

NAFI Board of Directors

President—Sean Elliott . . . selliott@aaa.org
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Harry Riggs hrriggs@fuse.net

Macy Teetor. macy.teetor@gte.net

EAA

Director of Publications—Mary Jones

Editor—Greg Laslo glaslo@kc.rr.com

Copy Editor—Colleen Walsh

Display Advertising

Director of Advertising—Katrina Bradshaw
Advertising Coordinator—Sue Anderson

920-426-6127 sanderson@aaa.org

Display Advertising Representatives:

U.S. Eastern Time Zone-Northeast: Ken Ross
123 N. Swarthmore Avenue, Ventnor City, NJ 08406
609-822-3750 Fax: 609-957-5650 kr40@comcast.net

U.S. Eastern Time Zone-Southeast: Chester Baumgartner
14141 46th Street N. Suite #1208, Clearwater, FL 33762
727-532-4640 Fax: 727-532-4630 cbaum111@mindspring.com

U.S. Central Time Zone: Gary Worden
5215 Crooked Road, Parkville, MO 64152
800-444-9932 Fax: 816-741-6458 gary.worden@spc-mag.com

U.S. Mountain and Pacific Time Zones: John Gibson
1905 Larkin Drive, Roseville, CA 95661
916-784-9593 Fax: 510-217-3796 john@gibson@spc-mag.com

Europe: Willi Tacke
Flying Pages GmbH
James-Loeb-str. 27, 82418 Murnau, Germany
Phone: +49(0)1716980871 Fax: +49(0)8841/496012
willi@flying-pages.com

Mailing Address: PO Box 3086
Oshkosh, WI 54903-3086
920-426-6801

Article Submissions: nafi@aaa.org

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Master of Her Domain

Arlynn McMahon

2009 National Certificated Flight Instructor of the Year

NAFI Master Instructor Arlynn McMahon is the 2009 National Certificated Flight Instructor of the Year. She grew up at Lexington, Kentucky's Blue Grass Airport, where she was the kid in pigtails sweeping hangar floors and washing airplanes. Now, more than three decades later, she is a chief flight instructor at Aero-Tech, located at the very same airport, with more than 9,000 hours of dual given, working alongside her husband, and first flight instructor, Charlie Monette.

When FAA-Industry Training Standards (FITS) and scenario-based

training were introduced, she eagerly jumped onboard. Aero-Tech was the first traditional flight school to offer FITS-accepted courses, and to date the school has a total of 34 FITS-accepted FAA-approved training syllabi. Earlier this year, ASA published her book, *Train Like You Fly: A Flight Instructor's Guide to Scenario Based Training*. She also provided editorial assistance for the newly revised FAA Aviation Instructor's Handbook.

Since 1984, she has been active in the FAA National Safety Program and currently serves as an FAA Safety

Team (FAASTeam) representative with the Louisville Flight Standards District Office, where she contributes to the quarterly FAASTeam flight-instructor workshops. She holds a Bachelor of Science in professional aeronautics from Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University and a Master of Science in business administration in strategic leadership from Amberton University.

Mentor: How did you get started in flight training?

Arlynn McMahon: I started attending a private pilot classroom

ground school with my father at 14 and found that I liked it. My father recognized my continued interest and supported my flight training starting at 15. I soloed on my 16th birthday and received my private pilot certificate on my 17th. I turned down a date with the high school quarterback for a chance to help my instructor change the oil in the airplane.

More advanced certificates followed quickly. I learned to fly from the same building that Aero-Tech is based in today.

M: What has been your greatest success?

AM: Having supervised a flight school for 25 years, maintaining an

My background lets me relate flying expertise to other endeavors.

M: How is training new instructors different than training primary students?

AM: I don't know how to answer that; I don't train anybody any differently than I train anybody else. I think the primary thing for new instructors is getting them to think a little bit about their final product—you know, what is a good pilot?

The FAA never defines what a good pilot is; they only give us the minimum standards necessary to pass the test. If a new flight instructor has just got it honed into his head *PTS, PTS, PTS*, he never thinks beyond that. So, I guess one

shows. I appreciate students as customers and work hard so that they can learn easily. At this point in my career, I actually have second-generation students, having taught the fathers of my current students—I'm a "grand-instructor."

M: Why did you stick with flight training, instead of some other aviation career?

AM: I can't really say why I didn't do something else. I was happy in the moment, and the years just slid by. I've always found flight instruction to be a very satisfying and rewarding career. I've earned as much money as my counterparts who chose the airlines or corporate aviation, but I have enjoyed a stable family life. I've flown in each of the 48 contiguous states, plus Alaska, throughout Canada, Central America, and the Caribbean. I've flown some really great aircraft and have met some great people who have turned into lifelong friends. I don't feel that I've missed anything by being a professional career instructor—quite the contrary.

M: Who influenced your flight-training career the most, and how?

AM: I learned to fly in the mid-1970s, and back then, we tended to keep instructors longer than we do today. I was lucky enough to have the same instructor from student pilot all the way to training for my airline transport pilot. No kidding! That's unheard of today. Sure, I had several fill-in CFIs when Charlie was unavailable or to add perspective, but Charlie taught me to fly for fun, but with a business-like mind-set.

When he added me to the business, he kept reminding me that Aero-Tech existed because he had become disenchanted with the flight-training operations in our area, and he knew there had to be

"I don't think scenario-based training is something I adopted; it's what I have always done. It's the way I learned. It's all I know."

impeccable safety record for students enrolled, and influencing their ongoing safety mind-set after graduation.

M: How did you come about owning a flight school?

AM: [Charlie] was looking to expand the business and offered me a stock option. I started as Aero-Tech's first employee on April 1 (April Fools' Day), 1984.

M: Do you still actively instruct? In what manner? What value do you bring students?

AM: Yes, of course! In the previous 12 months, I've endorsed 21 practical exams, including 14 for initial flight instructor. I guess training new CFIs is my specialty. I'm also a Cirrus and Cessna factory-authorized instructor. I teach ground school.

My value is in my vast experience specific to general aviation.

of the main differences is, I try to walk away from the PTS just for a little while, and get them to think about what makes a really good pilot and help them to define that, so they can recognize it when they see it, and they know what they're shooting for.

M: What's your teaching philosophy?

AM: Lead students to the answers themselves. Inspire insights. Make it practical. Keep it fun. Teach thought processes: *How* to do what's necessary, *why* it's necessary, as well as *what* is necessary.

M: How have you stayed busy during your career, while other CFIs have come and gone?

AM: I've never lacked for students; they seem to find me. I think that, when you love what you do, it

a better way to do flight-school business. It was incumbent on me through the years to perpetuate that philosophy—to be the best pilot you can be. We really excel in excellence and inspiring people to be more and do more, rather than just pointing to the minimum hours or the minimum standards for being the worst pilot they can be.

M: How do you inspire your employees to do that?

AM: For one thing, we lead by example, and we're working hard all the time to stay up to date on what's going on. Just the other day, the FAA released all the revisions to Part 61 regulations, and two days later, we were kind of sitting around the lobby—it was raining outside—and we were discussing this and that and the other, and what it might mean, and how we might need to make some changes. And so, from the get-go, they get the idea that we want to do things right, and we want to do things smart.

M: What have you had to learn about the business side of flight training?

AM: Everything. Flying is fun, but aviation is first a business, and students are first paying customers who expect to hire a professional and receive value for their money. Through the years, my consistent problems have been finding good employees and cash flow. The customers have always been there, but training new employees in customer service has been challenging. The flight school has always been profitable, but cash flow is difficult to manage, with constant changes in weather, economy, and airline trends. Marketing, insurance, financing, negotiating contracts—it's all part of owning a flight school.

M: How did you learn it all?

AM: The school of hard knocks. At

some point, I did learn to develop business relationships. I learned that I could go out to lunch with a banker and have him teach me how to read financial reports the way he does so I would know how to evaluate the financial status of my business. I learned to build relationships with my insurance man so that I could call on him and pick his brain in terms of what's smart. I think that having those key business relationships—having those key people who you can just pick up the telephone and call—it took me a while to learn you can have those kinds of relationships and that those people really were there to help, and that they really had a lot of good, valuable advice that I needed to listen to.

You know, when you first start out, you think you know it all, right? But by year three, you're thinking, *My God, what am I going to do?*

M: You package training in several different ways; how did that come about, and how does it work for you?

AM: I love it. It's excellent. It's probably the single thing that makes us most unique. I learned it from McDonalds. You know: "Would you like to make that a Happy Meal?" or "Would you like to upsize that?" Many times, when the non-flier is first considering aviation, they don't really know what they want and don't know how to speak our language. Packaging allows them to pinpoint what they want. Of course, we customize all of our packages based on the needs of the customer.

M: How do you manage that sales process?

AM: We have key people within our organization who are specially trained to give that information. We don't allow just anybody to do it. One of the reasons is because we

think it's important that the school be standardized—we want the customer to ask the same question of three people and get the same answer from all three. So then, at some point, the instructors are all trained to get this person to one of the key people who are experts at enrollment.

We don't necessarily say, hey, you're talking to an enrollment officer; you're just talking to a senior flight instructor, and at that point, we're just talking about flight training. You don't have to sell flight training—flight training sells itself—all you really have to sell is what's unique about you, the features that they're looking for, and assuring them that you can deliver. And you have to take away the fear factor—*Am I making the right decision? What if later on down the road, this? What if that?* You just have to be ready with whatever their issues are to have some way to answer that.

M: You were an early adopter of scenario-based training—why?

AM: I don't think scenario-based training is something I adopted; it's what I have always done. It's the way I learned. It's all I know. I don't think we called it SBT; it's just the way it was done. I was so naïve; I thought everyone trained that way. I was surprised to find that others weren't doing it and that they didn't know how easy it was and how much fun it was—for both the instructor and the student.

M: Could you describe those early training experiences?

AM: For instance, my flight instructor called and said, "I need to fly over to this other airport; I'm going to be there for about two hours, then come back. Do you want to go with me, and we can call that your cross-country flight, and you'd probably get some good

practical knowledge.” So, I said yes, and we participated in the preflight planning process, and we went on this actual flight that had an actual purpose. Two days later, he said, “Hey, they’re having a pancake breakfast over here, do you want to go? We’d need to leave

minimum standards. Flight instruction is still not a widely respected career option within our industry.

M: What would you change in flight training, if you could change anything?

AM: I would write FARs so that pi-

“At this point in my career, I actually have second-generation students, having taught the fathers of my current students—I’m a ‘grand-instructor.’”

at about six in the morning; is that okay with you, and do you want to do the flight planning? I’ll meet you there at X time.”

So, really, it was not anything I was aware of that was anything specific—I just thought we were going places and having fun, you know? It wasn’t until much later that I realized that it was all part of the design so that I would know how to do it when I got my certificate.

I don’t recall ever having a lesson called “regulations.” They were just built in to what we were doing that day. We would just talk about what was required as it related to what we were doing. It was a much easier way to learn it, I thought, than trying to learn a bunch of acronyms, and mnemonics, and ways to help me remember things. I remembered it because that’s just what we did.

M: How has flight training changed—for better and for worse—since you started?

AM: The airplanes are much better—finally we have new innovation. We have a widespread safety momentum that has replaced the “macho pilot.” We have more quality resources available. However, we still haven’t purged the attitude of “help me be the worst pilot I can be” by meeting

lots could understand what they actually mean. I would remove all references to hours of aeronautical experience and base certificates solely on proficiency—but the proficiency would include standards for decision-making and risk management.

I would implement a mentoring program for new CFIs—that could be a newly certificated CFI, but it might also be an experienced CFI flying new equipment for the first time. I would raise the level of professionalism of flight instructors, which in turn would gain them the respect that a true professional deserves.

M: What would that mentoring look like?

AM: When somebody signs up for our flight instructor course, one of the things that’s included in the course is 12 months of mentoring. Normally, what we see is, when they finish the training and they go back home, lots of times they don’t have anyone there locally that they can just pick up the telephone and ask a simple question to.

It’s worth a lot to them to be able to pick up the telephone and ask a question, and you’re talking to somebody you know, somebody you trust, and somebody who’s got something in common with you,

in terms of just being comfortable asking a “stupid” question.

M: What does it mean to you to be Flight Instructor of the Year?

AM: It’s an acknowledgement of a lot of work beyond the call of duty. It’s an acknowledgement that you don’t have to just get by doing minimum standards, that it is recognized when you try to do good work, and people are paying attention.

I think that’s the main thing—I mean, you sit over here in your little flight school, and you do what you do, and *does anyone even realize what I’m trying to accomplish here?* You hire all these flight instructors who are just so against everything you believe in, and they’re telling you every day that you’re wrong, and then you get this, and you say, *See that? I am right. I do know something.* So, there’s that part of it.

And then, I don’t think that being Flight Instructor of the Year means that I’m the best flight instructor—I think there are a lot of people who are better flight instructors. Charlie is a better flight instructor than I am. But I think it points more to the attributes that are important in an instructor, or at least what the industry is ready and willing to stand behind.

I spend hours on e-mail—people e-mailing me questions. I spend hours on the telephone—with what might seem to some to be a really stupid question, but if you’re out there working by yourself—you take a flight instructor who’s working in Podunkville, he doesn’t have a chief instructor to turn to and ask questions to. He doesn’t have a mentor. I think that is important, and it’s that type of thing the industry and the FAA were trying to acknowledge when they made somebody like me the Flight Instructor of the Year.

Visit www.NAFINet.org to read the full transcript of Mentor’s interview with Arlynn McMahon. ■