Part II: Learning to Fly a 3-Axis Ultralight
Jon Arney

In the early days of ultralight flying, back in the 1970s and '80s, it was common for people to teach themselves how to fly. The trial-and-error approach was used, involving fast taxiing, short "crow hops" into the air, and eventually a full flight around the field. However, this is NOT an appropriate method for learning to fly a modern 3-axis powered ultralights. The reason is that modern, high performance ultralights are much faster and quicker on the controls than the craft of the '70s and '80s. Even back then, nearly 60 deaths occurred each year among ultralight flyers (http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/3573093), and a survey of RUFF Old Timers indicates there were several deaths and near-death accidents among ultralighters in the 1990s before EAA95UL was organized. The bottom line is that 3-axis ultralights really are airplanes, requiring formal flight training to master the SIMULTANEOUS, COORDINATED CONTROL OF RUDDER, AILERON, ELEVATOR, AND THROTTLE.

So, how DO you learn to fly a 3-axis ultralight? The method I recommend is as follows, assuming you have no prior flight training.

Step (1): Get Formal Flight Training from a certified flight instructor. Training is available at many larger airports in the area, including Rochester (ROC), Canandaigua (D38), and Batavia (GVQ). Costs range from $130 to $188 per hour of instruction (both aircraft rental and instructor). It is sometimes possible to find an independent flight instructor with an airplane who might offer cheaper instruction, but these folks are much harder to find and don't always follow through with their commitments to student training. Some of our RUFFians have had bad experiences in this respect.

Flight training is typically done in 2-place a Cessna 152 or 162, and most instructors are focused on Light Sport and Private Pilot instruction. You should discuss your training needs with your instructor. Explain that you are not trying to earn your Light Sport license, but hope to reach the point of solo in order to proceed on your own as an ultralight pilot. Some instructors may not be comfortable with this, but others will. I talked to the instructor at Batavia (Bob Miller Flight School) and he told me he was okay with providing instruction to someone who plans to transition himself to ultralights.

Typical time to solo is around 10 hours flying time, but additional ground instruction at $40 to $65 per hour is also strongly encouraged in order to become familiar with air spaces, charts, and basic flight theory. This part of the training is as important as the actual flying, so you really shouldn't skip it. The bottom line is that you should budget between $1500 and $2500 for a course of instruction that will prepare you to begin transitioning to a 3-axis ultralight.

Step (2): Transitioning to a 3-axis ultralight. The 3-axis ultralight is significantly lighter than the training aircraft used by regular flight instructors. They don't handle the same way. For this reason, you should NOT just jump into your ultralight and attempt your first take-off. There is a very good chance your landing will be very bad, and you and the ultralight will be damaged. So, you should find an experienced friend willing to coach you through the process. Several members of RUFF I have spoken with said they would be happy to serve as coaches in this
respect. If possible, find someone with a Light Sport 2-place that flies and feels similar to your ultralight, and ask that person to let you get some "stick time".

The transition to a 3-axis, single place ultralight requires a lot of practice at fast taxiing and "crow hops". You should plan on devoting several days to this phase of the process before attempting a real flight. The most common difference you will discover between your ultralight and the 2-place trainers used by most flight instructors is that your ultralight will loose speed faster when you begin to round out in a landing. This is because they have more drag than regular trainer aircraft. As a result of this, most people transitioning themselves from regular aircraft to an ultralight will begin to round out their landing approach too soon and too high, and flop in at full stall from 10 to 50 feet over the runway. Your ultralight CAN be a very safe craft, but it can still kill you. Take your time and practice crow hops for a few days before trying a full power take off. And discuss your practice sessions with your volunteer ultralight coach. Remember, "taking off is optional, but landing is not!"

As a final note of caution, you should realize that your ultralight coach is NOT a legal flight instructor. He is simply a friend who is willing to discuss ultralight flying with you. He should NOT recommend to you that you are ready to solo in the ultralight. He can NOT legally give you that advice. Only YOU can make the decision, and if you hurt yourself or break your ultralight, it must remain solely YOUR responsibility.