

The Business of Being an Aerobatic Champion



Julie Clark, Shannon Filippi, Tony Filippi & Joe Bellino

You might think of flying the professional aerobatic circuit as an extreme sport where pilots fly outrageously fast, 500 feet above a crowd, while they perform seemingly outrageous maneuvers and play with G-forces like a yo-yo. One second they are in the middle of an Immelmann maneuver with a slow roll out to a half reverse Cuban eight and the next moment they seem to be plummeting towards earth in a Hammerhead stall. It's almost magic; the aircraft's movement seems choreographed to the music and the fireworks illuminate the sky just as a low level pass clears the airspace.

Obviously being a champion is not all luck. The air show performer's life depends on the competent combination their pilot skills, their ground crew professionalism, the theatrical choreographers' skills and licensed fireworks technicians. Running the business of a serious aerobatic champion requires so much more than just great flying ability. Talking with Julie Clark, a decorated aerobatic champion, she shared a few secrets to success. Clark's insight and experience has earned important recognition such as the 2007 Woman of the Year, California Senate District 1, 2006 and 2007 Airport Journals "Top 40 Living Legends in Aviation", Women in Aviation Pioneer Hall of Fame, multiple award winner of the GA News as the "Performer of the Year, recipient of the Art School Memorial Showmanship award, and the Bill Barber Award for Showmanship.

I said shared a few secrets but "secret" is probably a journalistic term to spike your interest. More accurately, Clark shared her beliefs and best practices to success that easily translate into a pragmatic doctrine for any profession. If you are a young pilot of any age, pay particular attention to the rest of this article. Over the years she has practiced an equal number of wheels down landings as she has take-offs. She has managed to not bend, crunch, bash or damage an aircraft or individual in her 29,000 hours of flight experience. If you're an aviation enthusiast, these beliefs are likely transferable to your profession and worth instilling into your children.

Her sponsor, Chevron Global Aviation, invited Julie to give a talk to an audience attending a four day Chevron conference. The company is focused on being recognized as a leader in protecting the environment, the safety and health of people, and conducting their operations reliably and efficiently. These are core values at Chevron and the conference helped share the values and practical expertise of a global company with their network of 800 fixed based operators. Clark addressed the room of FBO's talking about her lifetime personal beliefs which interlock closely with Chevron Global Aviation's safety reminders.

With Chevron's permission we can reprint their written reminders. I suggest reading the ten reminders a couple of times. As an aviator they are a premise to being able to stay the course so that you will have time to be successful. They mirror Clark's beliefs that have helped her become a leader in the business of being an aerobatic champion. I work in the computer industry and these tenets are equally compelling to success in my business.

Chevron Global Aviation's safety reminders.

1. Always operate within design and environmental limits.
2. Always operate in a safe and controlled condition.

3. Always ensure safety devices are in place and functioning.
4. Always follow safe work practices and procedures.
5. Always meet or exceed customers' requirements.
6. Always maintain integrity of dedicated systems.
7. Always comply with all applicable rules and regulations.
8. Always address abnormal conditions.
9. Always follow written procedures for high risk or unusual situations.
10. Always involve the right people in decisions that affect procedures and equipment.

If you prefer a short list, think about infusing these ten points into two guiding principals: 'Do it safely or not at all' and 'There is always time to do it right.' The principals are basic beliefs and deliver benefits to both a global company with multiple brands and to a Chief Executive Officer of an aerobatic team. At Chevron, safety is upheld as a personal issue that starts at a personal level. Chevron's mission is to have 100% product integrity from refinery to wing tip with zero tolerance.

Clark talked about how she and her team put these tenets into practice everyday as they get ready for their awe-inspiring air show routine known as Serenade in Red, White and Blue. Each show's aerobatics feature trailing loops, rolls and hammer heads, which are enhanced by multi-color wing-tip smoke trails and ground-launched fireworks. To deliver her performance, she flies a 3,050 pound, 1950's military trainer known as a T-34. Her warbird gets an added boost of power from a custom 285 hp Golden Eagle Series engine coupled to a Hartzell three-bladed prop. The low level routines are choreographed to the sounds of Lee Greenwoods' "God Bless the USA" or "God Bless you Canada". The show is an exceptional display of flying, music, and as she concludes her performance, a dazzling display of fireworks.

Putting the safety tenets into practice Clark said, "My routine is a carefully planned balance of showmanship, aircraft and pilot capability, aligned with detailed preflight inspection. If a fluid is leaking we replace the gasket or the part. Since I fly my aircraft to every show it serves dual purpose, GA with all of the hard IFR and personal pleasures of flying with my dog and it serves as the platform to entertain at the air show. We have a routine to ensure the aircraft converts, making sure the right things are properly locked down, removed or added. We want to make sure that every spectator loves the show and wants more of it. We've always followed these plans and they closely align with my sponsor's safety reminders."

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Hosting a dazzling display of fireworks requires her expert ground crew to preload fireworks that are prepared to a planned sequence of events. They choreograph to Clark's flying. The fireworks are loaded into a frame, fused and ignited — it's serious business and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) is the law enforcement agency that helps ensure safe operation. Her crews stay as focused on their work as Clark does on the flight. They regularly put into practice these important tenets:

- Always maintain integrity of dedicated systems.
- Always comply with all applicable rules and regulations.
- Always follow written procedures for high risk or unusual situations.
- Always involve the right people in decisions that affect procedures and equipment.

The air show air boss is one of the key people that interface with her ground crews, letting the fireworks technician know when they can preload, connect the electronics and when it's safe to inspect a failed fuse.

Joe Bellino, from Simsbury, CT heads up the East Coast portion of Clark's team and along with several other dedicated teammates help her crew in implementing her personal beliefs. It's ingrained into their daily practice. It's funny; when I was traveling this Spring I pulled off the interstate to gas up. At the stop I had a choice of service brands and chose to buy Chevron fuel to support Julie and because I appreciated what I learned about their commitment to quality.

When you meet Julie Clark on the flightline, you'll immediately realize her love of flying. She is fortunate to have been able to blend the personal love of flying she inherited from her Dad with the business of being an aerobatic champion. Her aircraft represents the end of the piston fired trainers but is just the beginning of Julie Clark's Chevron sponsored air show.

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