



The AMA History Project Presents: Biography of DARYL PERKINS

Modeler since 1986



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Interview with Daryl Perkins

by Lee Estingoy

Daryl Perkins is one of the top Radio Control Soaring pilots in the US. He has won almost every contest, multiple times. A list of his accomplishments would take most of this column space, so following are the highlights.

- Four-time world F3B (FAI RC Soaring)
- Five-time Visalia Fall Soaring Festival champion
- Southwest Classic Soaring contest winner (I don't know how many times – maybe six.)
- More than 20 National Championship titles in F3B, F3J (Thermal Duration [TD] Soaring), Two-Meter, Hand-Launched Glider, and Unlimited.
- Multiple-time Lee Renaud trophy recipient (for highest combined Nats total)

Daryl is generous with his time and knowledge. The miracle of modern technology allowed me to reach out from the clinic here in cold, dreary Kansas to “interview” Daryl at his home in Lake Havasu, Arizona. Are you jealous already? Read on.

LE: How long have you been in RC Soaring?

DP: I think I started flying models in about 1986. [Daryl is 48 years old.]

LE: What brought you in and what keeps you going?

DP: I was introduced to RC by my dad. He is a full-scale pilot, and to kill time on weekends we would go to a local RC power field and watch from afar – you know, behind the safety fence.

He and I would begin building a model – flat board, balsa, Ambroid, lots of pins. We'd frame up a wing on a board, slide it under the bed, and never get any further.

That's not actually true; we did get around to covering a wing once, with that newfangled Monokote stuff, and he pulled the covering so tight, when we hit it with the iron, it pretty much mangled and twisted the wing beyond all recognition.

That's as close to finishing a model as we ever got. I did finally build a glider on my own as an adult. It was a Sig Riser 2M.

I found sloping and just couldn't get enough. Nothing was fast enough. I was very focused on Slope Racing for the first few years of my competition soaring. It wasn't until I decided to fly F3B that I decided I needed to get better (much better) at this thermal thing.

LE: Were there any "Eureka Moments" along the way, when something clicked for you in terms of your understanding of TD Soaring?

DP: Honestly, no. I'm still learning. I learn a little more every time I fly. If conditions are good, I get bored in a hurry. The worse the conditions, the more fun I tend to have.

LE: Did you have any mentors or teachers along the way?

DP: Yes, a couple. My first real teacher was Don Edberg. He would time and call for me. Wow, what patience! I was always a good sailplane driver, but in the beginning, not great at recognizing or working thermals.

Then Joe Wurts took me under his wing. He recognized something in my ability. We became good friends. Joe is the most brilliant mind in RC Soaring today. Joe's mind and my thumbs became quite a powerful combination. Every time we flew together, I would take something new from the experience. I still do to this day when we fly together.

LE: TD Soaring has so many great assets right now. There's a ton of great information online and in commercial videos (such as Paul Naton's works), and the airframes and airfoils are incredibly advanced compared to the state of the art just 10 years ago.

Do you think the skill set/technical understanding of the average flier is advanced compared to where it was 10 years ago? Have we collectively moved forward? Can technology replace skills and good technique?

DP: This is a question that plagues me every time I attend a competition in the USA. The models are definitely better. The sections are better. The available information is better. The skill set of the average competition pilot has gotten much worse. I have to say I really don't understand it.

I think it's an issue of training. While I didn't realize Joe was training me, that was the result, whether either of us meant it or not. I had the opportunity to fly his models, to see and to feel how important setup is.

You can't get any better, at any sport, without a coach. In golf, the top guys all have swing coaches. I think to get better, we need some sort of one-on-one training.

The videos are a great start, but how do we replicated the personal, one-on-one training from a guy like Joe? I see so many mistakes being made out there, even by very top guys.

LE: What is your favorite airplane to take to the field these days for fun? For TD/F3J competition?

DP: I don't really get to fly just for fun anymore. When I fly, I'm always working on something.

Right now, I'm working on the upcoming World Championships in France. So I'm focused on flying the model I plan to fly for that competition: the Icon2 from Maple Leaf Design.

I love to fly models with lots of span, and the Icon2 is 150 inches. It has a full 72 inches of flap span; it's just a dream to fly and land. Span for eating up time, plus light weight and large flaps for landing are a great combination for either TD or F3J.

LE: What is your "rosebud" sailplane?

DP: I think probably the Comet 89T. I had so much fun flying that thing.

LE: You have won a few contests here and there. Which ones mean the most to you?

DP: Obviously the [F3B] World Champs. Each one of those was special. The first one in Romania in '95, because it was the first one, the second one was in Turkey in '97. As good and consistent as everyone was getting, and as level the playing field was becoming due to commercially available models, I never expected to win two in a row.

The third one in South Africa ('99), well, no one had ever done more than two. I had an awful first round and finished the round in 36th. Came back to win that one and set an F3B speed record too that didn't get broken until last year.

And then, of course, there was no way I could win four in a row in Czech in '01. Every one of the WCs was special in its own right, and for very different reasons.

The Slope Race victories were pretty awesome, since I'd only been flying a couple of years. My first Unlimited Nats win was in (I think) '92. Winning the IHLGF [International Hand Launch Glider Festival] twice in a row was huge for me.

I'm not an HL pilot, and Joe was so far advanced over everyone else at that time. I couldn't believe I had beaten him. Sweeping all the classes at the Nats is always special.

Every win is always special for one reason or another, but I always feel bad when I fly poorly and win. I felt that way after Visalia this year. I actually feel better when I fly well but get beat by someone flying better.

LE: You've worked with airframe designers and builders in the past. Are you working with anyone now?

DP: Mostly Don Peters from Maple Leaf Design. The Icon2 got a bit of a bad rap initially, but we have continued to develop it. New stiffer fuse, bigger stiffer stab. It is now a truly world class airframe.

LE: Crystal ball question: where do you see RC Soaring headed over the next 10 years? Is this good or bad and what can we do to help steer things in the right direction?

DP: It's a shame, but models are going more and more ARF, the designs will continue to get better, bigger, stronger, cleaner, and lighter. This is good and bad. Improved technology is always good. People's building skills will continue to deteriorate, as will their soaring skills.

Competition, mostly F3J, seems to be growing around the world, yet much of the US is losing interest in all forms of sailplane competition. I don't know why. It is truly a shame.

I have had so many amazing experiences travelling the world, competing with and against top pilots. You can't imagine the camaraderie.

How to fix it? Kids – take your kids to the field, let them fly your top models, let them fly in contests. Kids go nuts for trophies and recognition. Get them involved. They may not stay involved, but they'll come back later on in life.

LE: I have had the pleasure of watching you fly at a few events. The best way I can describe what I saw was that it was like watching the NFL's Brett Favre.

You took what I thought were huge risks, and most of the time they paid off for you. How do you decide whether or not to range out- sometimes terribly far –with your sailplane in a contest? What factors do you take into consideration?

DP: Well, there are a couple of things going on there. Yes, I fly out far. I don't see it as taking risks.

I don't like to mark lift for other guys. I'll fly through thermals, make a mental note of where they are in case I need to come back, and then just keep going until I'm out of reach before stopping to work lift.

If I know there is lift out, I'll just go get it. I'd rather stretch to get to a known thermal than search around in unknown territory. There's not much point in making the landing spot and not your target time.

I'll drift with thermals downwind faster than most. I'm comfortable seeing and flying the model out. This allows me to come back through marked air. At that point, all the competition is in your field of vision and you can use them to pick and choose your route home.

Because of my F3B experience, I think I have a better understanding of how to cover ground efficiently. Most guys, when they are trying to come home from downwind, tend to float the model, or even try to fly at L/D [lift/drag] max.

L/D max may not cover the most ground. You must constantly evaluate how efficiently you are covering ground and adjust your glide path accordingly.

Lee, you saw me fly at the '08 F3J in the Rockies. This is a perfect example. In the last round of the fly off, the wind was blowing so hard, L/D max would have had the model going backward, and not covering any ground. I was literally racing between thermals just to stay even.

If you recall, most competitors landed over a mile away. It's amazing how efficient our models are if you just shove the nose over and let them run.

I can literally count on one hand the number of times I've landed off field at a contest in my 20-plus years of competition.

Whoa, I'm proud of myself for finding and staying in one thermal!

Visiting hours here at the clinic are over. Until next time, see you at the field!

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