



The AMA History Project Presents: History of the SENIOR PATTERN ASSOCIATION (SPA)



Written by DW 08/2012); Reformatted by JS (08/2012, 03/2014)

Duane Wilson wrote the following history of the SPA, published in Model Aviation's August 2012 issue, page 22.



There was a large turnout to honor founder Mickey Walker at the SPA's 20th Anniversary Nostalgia contest.

Thirty pilots, flying the best of the golden age Pattern airplanes, gathered together for a special event near Atlanta, Georgia. They wanted to observe the 20th anniversary of the first contest held by a then-fledgling aerobatic organization—one that is still going strong with no signs of a slowdown. They came not only to celebrate that first October 1991 contest, but to honor the founder.

Mickey Walker wanted to return to Pattern competition based on the simplicity of Pattern's early days, without investing a ton of money in the process. The success of Senior Pattern Association (SPA) during the past 20 years has been because of Mickey's successful formula. Many "average" fliers have experienced the joy of flying simple, inexpensive aerobatic competition, which they probably wouldn't have otherwise.



Marty Barry posed with his Compensator before the accident. It was designed by Rhett Miller.



Co-CD Dan Dougherty provided the headstone after Marty's Compensator bit the dust after the engine quit.

In the February 1992 issue of MA, modeling author and renowned Pattern competitor, Ron Van Putte, first introduced the AMA membership to the SPA while covering the very first contest. The feature article explained the concepts and guiding principles founder Mickey Walker (a longtime Pattern flier) used in its formation—primarily a return to the original, non-turnaround-style Pattern event, while using basic, low-tech airplanes designed before January 1970 (approximately 20-year-old designs at that time).

The 20th anniversary Nostalgia contest seemed more like a homecoming or family reunion than a Pattern contest. Numerous pilots who attended had not been active in some time. Many were former SPA competitors and friends whom Mickey invited to come “home” and observe this special anniversary.

Mickey and fellow pilot Keith Watson were the only two pilots present for both contests. I was there both times as well, but the first time was just to watch. I was excited by what I saw, and joined SPA on the spot (I have an early newsletter to prove it), but didn't actually rejoin and compete for another 15 years—long story!

Why SPA? By 1990, AMA sanctioned competition costs had increased beyond the average modeler's resources, with high-tech, high-performance equipment the primary culprit. Only the more dedicated, affluent, or sponsored pilots could compete at the highest levels of competition.

In addition to the prohibitive costs, many Pattern pilots back then simply didn't enjoy the new (at the time) turnaround-style maneuver format. Because of this, many chose to simply move on to other areas within RC. AMA Pattern lost much of the popularity it had once enjoyed.



The SPA-legal The World Models Intruder ARF is a popular alternative to building from scratch or kit. John Baxter's Intruder is decked out in special graphics. Another Intruder is on the ground; others in background include the Dirty Birdy and Ron Chidgey's Tiger Tail 4.



SPA Founder Emeritus Mickey Walker poses with his Jim Whitley-designed Daddy Rabbit V.

Mickey was one of those who had left AMA Pattern, and missed the camaraderie of the contests and the traditional one-maneuver-per-pass aerobatics sequence. After thinking about ways that AMA might have inadvertently excluded pilots by allowing the unimpeded advance of technology and expense, a deliberate limit was placed on the technical aspect of competition similar to the Novice class in AMA competition, which also incorporates limitations.

Mickey's SPA emphasized a deliberate return to the philosophy of "simple and inexpensive," meaning stock engines with stock mufflers, and no tuned pipes or retracts. An SPA-legal airplane is no more expensive than the average airplane on the flightline at your local field. The simplicity and low cost of early Vintage models, in terms of materials and equipment, means that a level playing field is deliberately established, making practice and skill the primary difference between competitors.

Mickey gathered a number of his friends with similar feelings and drafted a set of simple rules and the Senior Pattern Association was born. He based SPA on the concept of the Senior PGA Tournaments, complete with age requirements; you had to be 45 years old. Yet younger pilots wanted to get involved, so the age rule didn't last long, but the name Senior Pattern Association stuck.

What has become of Mickey's brainchild throughout the past 20 years? In the early days, Mickey was president, newsletter editor, chief promoter, and CD. He paid for all of the trophies and expenses of the organization himself for the first few years. Nine years after that first 1991 contest, SPA became an official AMA SIG.

As the organization grew, Mickey was finally able to step back some from the administrative duties. He is now Founder Emeritus of SPA as it enters its third decade.



Keith Watson (L) and founder Mickey Walker were the only two pilots present for both contests 20 years apart!



Dan Dougherty prepares his Joe Bridi Dirty Birdy, which was designed shortly before the 1976 legal cutoff date.

For most of SPA's 20 years, there was slow but steady growth. Much of the activity was concentrated in the states of Georgia, Tennessee, and Alabama. However, for the past five years—especially since two articles about it were published in MA—growth has accelerated; there are now members in most of the 50 states.

Throughout the past few years, there has been tentative, isolated SPA contest activity in Virginia, the Northeast, Pacific Northwest, Indiana, and Florida, but nothing that has lasted. This past February, after four years of increasing contest activity, a second designated region of permanent SPA activity comprising Texas, Oklahoma, and Arkansas with established, regularly scheduled contests has been formed.

Mickey often mentioned that he always wanted SPA to be a national organization with regions across the country. Now that the second region has been established, the organization wants to help other areas of the country make Mickey's goal a reality.

Rules have remained relatively unchanged, but some changes are needed to respond to the growth of the organization. As mentioned, the age rule was the first to be amended. SPA now has competitors as young as 10 years old experiencing what it's like to meet the challenge in front of the judges.

There are two classes of competition: traditional SPA and Antique. The cutoff date for legal SPA models changed from 1970 to January 1, 1976, in order to accommodate a wider range of models from which to choose. Why did SPA choose the 1976 date rather than adopt a progressive date range of 20 to 30 years?

By the mid-1970s, the use of retracts and pipes was commonplace at all levels of competition. That date fits the philosophy of SPA, which tries to keep the original SPA concepts of simple and inexpensive in mind when rule changes are considered.

One gratifying result of recent growth in Vintage Pattern competition has been the involvement of several kit manufacturers, which has made it much easier to have a legal airplane to fly (see "Sources"). In 1991, essentially all of the airplanes were built from plans. Now we even have some ARFs available, including the popular The World Models Intruder, Horizon Hobby Phoenix 7, and Tower Hobbies Kaos.

There has been growth since that first contest 20 years ago, but the founding principles upon which Mickey based SPA haven't changed. The emphasis is still placed on non-turnaround competition with simple, inexpensive vintage airplanes.

From the beginning, an important goal of SPA competition has been the idea of individual competitors experiencing a good time above all else. The camaraderie, friendships, and memories will always be worth more than the hardware you win. Still, we are competitive creatures by nature, and a lot of practice is rewarded with a first-, second-, or third-place finish or through fifth place in Novice.

This SPA 20th anniversary contest was one of the highlights of the 2011 contest season. It was a special time to gather together and honor Mickey for creating such an enjoyable outlet for RC competition. It was a wonderful weekend, and a chance for everyone to convey thanks and best wishes to Mickey for a job well done.



The author poses with his Daddy Rabbit V (1969), a capable SPA competitor in all classes.



Keith Watson displays his new Daddy Rabbit. You'll see a lot of Rabbits on the flightline.

If this sounds like fun to you, and you might be interested in friendly Pattern competition (in front of friendly, helpful judges), then go to the SPA website to learn more about the organization. Feel free to come out to a contest; SPA offers competition at all skill levels. Most start in Novice.

It's time to practice ... see you at the field.

—Duane Wilson

duane.wilson@va.gov

SOURCES:

First SPA Contest

MA, February 1992

www.modelaircraft.org/MembersOnly/archive

SPA

www.seniorpattern.com

VINTAGE KITS:

Classic RC Hobby

www.classicrchobby.com

Eureka Aircraft

(479) 239-4427

www.eurekaaircraft.com

Bluejay Airplane Kits

(308) 276-2322

www.bridiairplanes.com

Carolina Custom Aircraft

(919) 630-4610

www.carolinacustomaircraft.com

Early RC Models

(269) 665-9630

<http://earlyrcmodels.com>

ARFS:

Horizon Hobby

(800) 338-4639

www.horizonhobby.com

The World Models/Airborne Models

(925) 371-0922

www.airborne-models.com

Tower Hobbies

(800) 637-6050

www.towerhobbies.com

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AMA History Project
National Model Aviation Museum
5151 E. Memorial Dr.
Muncie IN 47302
(765) 287-1256, ext. 511
historyproject@modelaircraft.org

