

Day Three AVweb

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## What A Difference Some Decades Make: Ultralight Turf Turns 20

*It's been almost 25 years since the first ultralight aircraft made their sometimes embarrassing debut at OSH. The rest, as they say, is history. So historical, in fact, that the industry has created a Hall of Fame installing its first inductees this week at EAA AirVenture '99. AVweb's Dave Higdon reflects on the mature ultralight industry and its 1975 debut.*

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### First Pioneers Tapped For Ultralight Hall of Fame

Twenty-four EAA conventions back, a flyer of slight stature stepped off the Oshkosh grass and into the air -- before his Easy Riser tumbled to the ground before tens of thousands of eyes. But three years later, John Moody's minor mishap in his McCullough 101 chain-saw-engine-powered flyer was hardly remembered compared to the large leap in light flying he helped launch with those few small steps. It was 1979 and the EAA had literally given The Farm to a swarm of Risers, Quicksilvers and sundry other unconventional flying machines newly dubbed "ultralights."

Twenty years later Moody's prop wash can still be felt in the midst of hundreds of ultralights and light planes flying from a sod strip in the shadow of The Farm's headquarters, a big red barn. In the two decades that have lapsed, thousands of rated and unrated pilots have become Oshkosh pilots in what has grown into a dizzying array of designs to follow the powered hang gliders that spawned the sport.

Fixed-wing and rotary, rigid-wing and flex wing, conventional and unconventional, it's hard to imagine a niche with more variety of design and singularity of purpose: fun flying.

### The Envelope, Please: Ultralight Hall Of Fame Names First Three Inductees

This week, 20 years after ultralights officially became part of Oshkosh, the EAA recognized Moody and two other pioneers of ultralight aviation, Homer Kolb and Chuck Slusarczyk, as the inaugural members of the EAA Ultralight Aviation Hall of Fame. They'll be officially inducted at the EAA AirVenture Museum in October

Each contributed something individual to sport flying; all three remain influential even today; and all three are still flying light.

Moody, of course, remains the guy who first wowed crowds in the late 1970s, in a machine that was part hang glider, part chain saw and totally unconventional. Moody's foot-launching gave the FAA an impetus to declare that a machine that could be foot-launched and foot-landed was not subject to aircraft or airman regulations.

About the same time, even before the name ultralight had been invented, Kolb built a tiny Briggs & Stratton-powered twin machine to fly from his farm in Pennsylvania; he caused a stir at ultralight flying's early Oshkosh appearances by using actual landing gear in an era of foot-launch fervor. Later on, Homer's company, Kolb Aircraft, set a standard for a series of honest aircraft that reflected their creator's individual philosophy.

And Slusarczyk, a former NASA engineer, single-handedly revolutionized ultralight power when he patented a propeller-speed-reduction drive for ultralight engines. Slusarczyk opened the door to quieter, more reliable light power for these little planes and ended the era of direct-drive engines that deafened with the supersonic tips speeds of their tiny wooden props. Manufacturers feared Slusarczyk might impose an expensive licensing fee to use his creation, but "Chuckles," as some friends call him, never enforced the patent. He basically gave away a potential fortune to the benefit of the ultralight community.

Ultralight flying is, strangely enough, old enough to appreciate its elder statesmen and still be young enough to have them around.

Chuck owns and runs CGS Aviation, manufacturer of the award-winning Hawk ultralight; Homer sold Kolb Aircraft several years ago but he still flies machines he designed from his farm strip in Pennsylvania. And Moody still flies his weight-shift Easy Riser, awing crowds with foot-launched flights of a bi-winged machine powered by the thrust a tiny two-stroke engine.

And ultralights have as much appeal as ever.

## **We're All Only A Medical Certificate Away From Being Ultralight Pilots**

Each Oshkosh, thousands of spectators flock daily to The Farm to watch these happy folks and their colorful flying machines as the dot the sky in powered parachutes, hang-glider trikes, and conventional-design ultralights. In the warm glow of dawn, during most of the day, and on until dusk, the sounds of tiny engines draws the faithful and the curious, many would-be pilots ineligible for a pilot's license but still drawn inexorably toward the sky.

Curiously, ultralights originally were viewed by many as the budget-oriented path to flight for people uninterested in tackling the rigors of formal flight training. Thanks to the advent of FAR 103, which defined what is an ultralight in 1982, ultralight aviation remains largely free of FAR-reaching influence. No license or registration is required; the FAA sets no standards of airworthiness; participants largely self-regulate their flying.

And, fortunately, FAR 103 eliminated foot-launching as a requirement.

Over the years, however, the predominant profile of an ultralight flyer has been that of a licensed pilot who also flies certificated aircraft. Seems some aviators just want to have fun once in a while boring holes in the sky.

"These machines are the great leveler of aviation," said Frank Beagle, who provides color and commentary as the public-address announcer at The Farm. The owner and pilot of a vintage (at least in ultralight terms) Pterodactyl ultralight. "Up there, it doesn't matter whether you fly jets for a living or Cessnas for family travel," he said.

"We're all up there to have fun, for the simple thrill of flying and the enjoyment of flying with others of our ilk."

## **History Repeated: Grass-roots Flying Machines Even The Wrights Would Love**

Watching the sunset flying down on The Farm this week reaffirmed something EAA founder Paul Poberezny predicted back at the beginning, when he noted that the ultralight pioneers were simply reinventing aviation in much the same way that aviation's first pioneers progressed early in the century: by trail-and-error, science and experimentation, innovation and piracy.

"They eventually will come full-circle back to simply being very light airplanes for using that vast ocean of air above us," he said back in the early 1980s. "Every generation has its pioneers, and the people that are reinventing aviation today will be the pioneers we look back on years from now."

Watching the variety of styles and designs and configurations flying The Farm this week, it seems Paul hit it right on the head.