

Growing New Judges

One volunteer at a time

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Just as the airplanes we compete in have evolved through the years, the IAC Official Contest Rules has become a thicker book. In 2016, those volunteering for their first contest as grading judges have to be ready to look at many details—corners, lines, loops, rolls, etc.—of each of the many Aresti figures that they see flown in front of them.

Historically, candidate regional judges sit as assistant judges and try to learn to rapidly read and speak Aresti to the grading judge, while they also try to peek at the competitor executing those figures. Our assistants are learning to read and speak Aresti, but we are falling short when it comes to teaching them how to grade a figure that is being executed at 200 mph in front of them. We see that for the first two or three contests, our new judges tend to be a little too generous with the scores they award as their critical eyes and math skills come up to speed.

We need to teach grading figures. For 2016, we will be updating the practical experience requirements for candidate regional judges to include working with a current judge to observe a practice day or contest flight and to try calculating and speaking grades. This means that candidates will find a current judge to work with, and we will encourage current judges to recruit and mentor candidate judges.

So how will this work in practice? At the 2015 Kathy Jaffe Challenge, candidate judge John Fellenzer and national judge Rick Runnels volunteered to try working together as mentor-student. Here is what they had to say:

Rick: I mentored John in the Sportsman category, which I believe works best for many reasons. It provided more time, relatively speaking, to look at and discuss the different components of a maneuver in their basic form, in real time—very similar to critiquing pilots on their sequences. We were able to talk and see what

makes up the maneuvers and what was lacking, so we were able to discuss the downgrades and then total them up, working from 10 and keeping track of the current score as we deducted the downgrades.

I structured it by having him call the maneuvers for the first half of the first flight, with me stating what I was seeing to come down with a score. During the second half I asked him to come down with a score, then I gave my score to the recorder and told John why I scored the flight as I had. John found it amazing how much lower my actual score was than what he had given. During the second round of flights I did one flight and John did the next. Each time, I agreed or overruled his score with an explanation of why, and I gave the recorder my final score so I still held ultimate responsibility. As we did this, John's grading scores became lower as he understood why I gave a lower score than he did.

John: We judged 45 flights during the Kathy Jaffe Challenge contest held at South Jersey Regional (nine Primary and 36 Sportsman flights). Rick structured the program much like the "telling and doing technique" used in flight instruction (instructor tells, instructor does, student tells).

When it came time for me to make the call and provide a fair and unbiased grade for the competitor, I was very surprised at the level of pressure and the speed at which the figures were flown. As a competitor since 2005—several times a contest director, club officer, and as an assistant judge for many years—I felt I had a very good understanding of the figures, grading criteria, and the ability to call the numbers with little to no error and with good consistency. Well, I can tell you I overestimated my abilities. At first it all seemed a blur, as one figure morphed into the next. Lines, angles,

radius, pauses, aircraft attitude, trajectory, etc. were happening at a rate that was nearly impossible to keep ahead of—and we are talking Primary and Sportsman flights. On more than one occasion I fell well behind the power curve.

It's clear to me that without the mentoring program, my first few calls as a grading judge would have been well off the mark, and my lack of consistency would have resulted in improper results for the competitor.

I am highly impressed with the mentoring and how it has given me greater confidence in my abilities—and more importantly, a better expectation for proper grading.

Rick: On the third flight I had him score all the flights with me, basically agreeing with his score with few changes. So looking at the score sheets after the category, we seemed to be close to the lowest-scoring judge. Ha!

It was interesting seeing the progress John made and discussing why it is easy to give a higher score. Very common in judging. We want competitors to "feel" good about their flights, but that really does not help them become better competitors. John began to realize how a pilot could owe us points!

In summary, Rick and John's experience is one example of how we can help our candidate judges maintain their enthusiasm, get more from the training, and arrive at their first contest as regional judges ready to deliver scores just as accurate as those of their more experienced peers. We plan to add this activity to the requirements for 2016. Candidate judges can meet a current judge at a chapter practice day or a contest. For current judges, this is an opportunity to pass on all of the skills and experience they have gained. Everyone wins.

See you at the box.