

SNOW JOB

Runway conditions in a New Hampshire winter

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By F. Paul Russo

On a Friday some winters ago, my family and I decided to spend the weekend at a house we have in a flying community north of the lakes region in New Hampshire.



Illustration by Alex Williamson.

Windsock Village (NH69) has a 4,000-foot grass runway, but it is plowed in winter, which is convenient, providing residents flight access year-round. Leaving from my home base at the Concord, New Hampshire, airport (CON), it is about a 25-minute flight up to Windsock in my Super Decathlon.

But, as family plans normally go, especially on a Friday afternoon, my departure out of Concord on this day got pushed later and later, so much so that I was now racing to launch before losing the light of the day.

After finally arriving at the airport with my 16-year-old son (who chose to fly with me rather than drive an hour plus with his mother), we pushed the Super-D out of the hangar, threw our bags in behind the rear seat, shoe-horned ourselves in (son in the back seat and me in the front seat), and fired up.

Taxi and takeoff were uneventful, but shortly after we were airborne, I realized that, in my haste, I neglected to call one of my resident friends at Windsock to ask about the condition of the runway. In addition to my failing to perform this normal preflight protocol, I then remembered that we had a moderate snowfall four or five days prior. But I convinced myself that this was more than enough time for the contractor to have plowed the runway. So, on I flew.

By the time I got to Mount Whittier, just south of the runway, and started down, the light was really beginning to fade. Entering on an extended left base to Runway 33, I peered intently at the cut in the pine trees where the runway lay, looking for anything that would reveal the condition of the runway surface. I couldn't make out the characteristic wind rows of new snow that would be built up on the sides of the runway from a recent plowing event. At my approach angle, the trees blocked my view.

Rounding the corner onto final and starting my forward slip, I struggled to pick out signs that would reveal the status of the runway. Finally, in the now faded and very flat light remaining of the day, what came into view looked like fresh snow wind rows bracketing the runway. "OK, I think I'm good," I mused to myself. "The runway is plowed."

I threw the Super-D into a hard slip, bleeding off more airspeed as I descended steeply to miss the trees on the approach end, and noticed two people running out from the left side of the runway, their bodies silhouetted against the white snow, frantically waving their arms. In that moment I knew: The runway was not plowed!

But now I was committed.

What happened next was one of those very rare instances when one's intuition supplants rational cognitive thought.

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I held the hard slip as long as possible to bleed off every possible bit of airspeed. At the very last moment, I kicked out the slip and planted all three wheels in the standard three-point

configuration firmly onto the end of the runway. In the instant the tailwheel and mains hit the snow, I pulled the stick full back and jammed the throttle full open.

The Super-D shuddered to a stop. I pulled the throttle back to idle. There we sat. Me, a bit dazed, with my mind desperately trying to sort out what had just happened. Off to my left, a surreal image completed the scene. The two people who ran out onto the runway now stood frozen in place with their arms out stretched.

Reality broke in when I heard my son's voice through the headset saying, "Well, that was interesting," to which I responded with a long, "Yeeeah." Then, the two figures off to my left began to move.

It wasn't until that moment that I was able to process what I had done.

I was told later there was a good six inches of unplowed snow on the runway. Had I elected to wheel land the Super-D, the instant the main gear hit the snow, we would have most assuredly nosed over and onto the Super-D's back. The only chance of salvaging the approach and keeping the Super-D upright was to keep the tail down.

Somewhere in the deep recesses of my mind something subconsciously told me that once the main gear bit into the snow, the snow's resistance might be enough to slow the aircraft's forward motion. The challenge, then, would be keeping the tail down to keep from flipping upside down. The only chance of doing so was to create maximum air flow over the tail surface with the elevator in the full up position. That could only be accomplished with full throttle.

I'm sure having my son in the back seat and a couple of bags behind him also helped in keeping the tail down.

But, there was no time to think all this through. It all happened in a matter of seconds. Again, one of those rare instances you read about where one's intuition takes over in a moment of crisis, generating actions that lead to a favorable outcome. Maybe this was my one moment.

So, there we sat. Engine at idle. Now what? Do I shut down here and come back with a shovel party in the morning to dig out? Or do I see if I can move under my own power? I chose the latter.

With the stick held firmly back, I edged the throttle forward. We began to move. Ever so slowly at first, but then with a bit more conviction to the point where we were mushing somewhat successfully through the snow. From where we came to a halt, just a short way into the runway's length, we now had to go about 200 yards to the first taxiway, which was paved—and by the way, was plowed.

As I approached, I hooked the left gear onto the cleared pavement, then the right gear, and finally the tailwheel. We had broken free of our snow-bound milieu.

As we rolled off to my hangar, my concern turned toward the condition of the fiberglass wheel pants. I thought if they were still attached, their condition would be dire. But, to my surprise and

amazement, not only were the wheel pants still attached to each gear leg, they were completely intact. No cracks or missing chunks.

Ever since that day, when it comes to flying up to my place in Windssock during the “New Hampshah wintah,” I can assure you, never again do I launch without calling and obtaining a runway condition report.

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