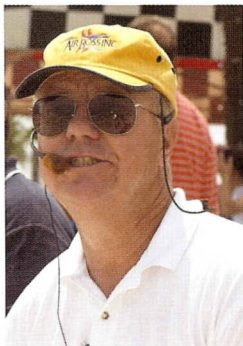




# The Safety Debate—Again



**T**he terrible accident in Selmer, Tennessee during which an out-of-control drag racer killed six spectators has once again brought the debate about motor sports safety to the national attention. Well-meaning citizens have again called for the abolishment of such events and have included airshows in their sights.

Any airshow-knowledgeable observer who has seen the news reports or reviewed the YouTube

videos of the Selmer accident must be in shock due to the unbelievable negligence on the part of the spectators, participants, and organizers of this event. There is enough blame to keep a battalion of lawyers pointing fingers for years.

Spectators lined the side of the street while a dragster made a high speed run mere feet away. One could well ask “Where was the FAA?” And that is the difference between other motor sports events and airshows – peer review of participants, a well-developed and enforceable set of Federal regulations, and on-site monitoring to ensure compliance.

We love to “hate” the FAA, but they have kept United States airshow spectators safe since September 15, 1951. That was the day in Flagler, Colorado when Air Force 1<sup>st</sup> Lt Norman Jones lost control of a T-6 and crashed into the crowd killing 20 spectators (13 of them children). Dozens of others were injured. See <http://proairshow.com/Flagler%20Lions%20Club%20Airshow.htm> for the complete story.

As a student of airshow safety, I have long been a strong advocate of spectator safety. (Some would say overbearing, obnoxious, and with parents who were not married at the time of my birth.) My position has cost me airshow bookings and a leadership position within ICAS. But just as this industry is justifiably proud of its spectator safety record, I am proud to have drawn a line in the international sand to protect that record.

Our spectator safety record is the envy of the motor sports industry. The entire airshow family needs to protect and defend that record. We must be proactive in informing the aviation fraternity and public (including local and national regulators) of our continuing and

successful efforts to protect our spectators.

I would like to point out one individual who is proactive. Skip Stewart has been criticized from within the airshow industry for his innovative, hard charging, and entertaining style of flying. I have watched him entertain thousands of spectators and, yes, I have seen him fly to the fine feathered edge of his own safety, but he never endangered the spectators.

Living only 70 miles from the Selmer drag race accident, Skip replied to those well meaning citizens with a thoughtful and well researched OpEd in the statewide, Nashville *Tennessean* newspaper. I think you will enjoy reading what Skip wrote, below. Thank you, Skip.

## FAA, Aviation Industry are Keeping American Airshows Safe

By Skip Stewart

How safe are airshows? All aspects of aviation are extremely safety-conscious, and the airshow industry is no different.

While still quite dangerous for the pilot, airshow spectators in the United States have been well-protected by rules in place since well before the accident in Ramstein, Germany, in 1988, where a military jet crashed into the spectator area after being struck by another aircraft.

The two areas of concern to which these rules apply are the aircraft’s distance from the crowd and the energy vector of the aircraft as it relates to the spectator area. The Federal Aviation Administration has requirements for a minimum distance from the spectator area, and there are three categories defined by the speed of the aircraft. Slower aircraft are allowed to get as close as 500 feet, while faster military jets are required to be three times that distance.

In addition to this distance requirement, there exists a rule that limits the aircraft’s energy vector from causing a trajectory toward the spectators. In the event the pilot loses control of the aircraft, or the aircraft experiences a mechanical malfunction, the resulting flight path must not be such that it would go toward the spectator area.

It is the “airboss” who is responsible for monitoring these rules, as well as others, at each airshow. Safety is the primary concern

of airbosses, and if they see something that may be a safety hazard, they will immediately radio to the pilot.

### Special licensing for pilots

In addition to the rules implemented by the FAA, the regulation of the airshow pilots themselves is the responsibility of the International Council of Air Shows. ICAS has been given the authority by the FAA to regulate how the airshow pilots go about acquiring a “Statement of Acrobatic Competency,” which is the license to fly in an airshow.

There were a string of airshow pilot deaths in the late 1980s, which raised questions as to how such pilots were regulated. The amount of money and training required to ensure that FAA inspectors were educated about the intricacies of airshow issues was reduced by the creation of ICAS.

There was an immediate increase in airshow pilot safety as a result of this shift in responsibility, primarily due to the industry being regulated by a peer group sensitive to the issues.

So, how safe are U.S. airshows? There has not been a single spectator death in well over 50 years!

You are more likely to be injured by a baseball or hockey puck than by an airplane at an airshow. I used to say that the safest bet was not to leave your living room, until I recently read of a woman killed by a car when it lost control and entered her house.

For me, there is no better pure family entertainment than a good, old-fashioned day at the airshow!

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