



BETH STANTON
COLUMNS / BRILLIANCE AND BUFFOONERY

90 Percent Mental, 10 Percent in Your Head

"Oh, I'm scared all the time! I just act as if I'm not."

—Katharine Hepburn

We joke that whitewater kayaking is 90 percent mental and the other 10 percent is in your head. I am finding this true in competition aerobatics as well. Once you have mastered relative competency in flying your sequence, it totally becomes a head game.

I have been onstage since the age of 5. The majority of my life has involved music, dance, and the-

ater. I am no stranger to stage fright. I have never not been scared before going on stage. For that matter, I have never not been scared kayaking. Oddly enough, I have never been scared flying. I have been afraid of screwing something up, like a landing or a competition sequence, but I have no fear of actually flying.

On the morning of my first

contest, a sensation of cold fear began to grip me. Familiar with this phenomenon, I took deep breaths and tried to ignore it. This did not work. During the briefing, a feeling of numb detachment blossomed. As the hustle of pilots, planes, and gear commenced, I was drowning in a cresting river of panic.

I knew I must get my head in order or I would not be able to function. I needed to call upon my mad yoga ninja mind control skills. PRONTO.

I did not look up and watch the first contestants flying in the box. I beat a retreat to the FBO, put music in my earphones, went to a quiet room, and closed my eyes. I became inwardly focused. I visualized. I breathed. I stretched, relaxed, and concentrated on being absolutely present in the moment.

By go time, I had calmed down. I had decided to pretend that this was just a practice flight. No one was watching me. I was not being judged. This was just for fun. I would strap on the plane and go fly me some loop de loops like I had dozens of times before. Just for the sheer joy and exhilaration of it. I felt a little nervous excitement, but in a good way, like I always do when I fly. This strategy worked. I won the contest.

The best way to achieve something is to help someone else achieve the same thing. The second morning of the contest, I recognized fear on the face of a fellow



pilot. I sat down to chat with him. He was so nervous; he looked like he was going to throw up. Performing in front of peers and being judged can kick our fight-or-flight response into high gear. Looking stupid or failing publicly feels downright excruciating and can be paralyzing. But once you figure out that mistakes are how we learn and everyone makes them, it takes the pressure off.

I have come to realize that lightening up and getting ego out of the equation is a huge relief. You can relax and enjoy the contest. You can laugh at the buffoonery and revel in the brilliance of both your and everyone else's flying. I take solace in Wayne Handley's observation: "An original way to screw up a contest has yet to be invented."

To fly in a competition is ridiculously demanding, physically as well as mentally. I'll admit, sometimes I wonder, "What the hell

am I doing?" I still get little stabs of fear, but now I know how to manage them. That thrill of elation when you absolutely nail a figure makes all those hours of practice, all that avgas burned, so totally worth it. **IAC**



Editor's Note: I'd like to welcome Beth Stanton as a semi-regular contributor to *Sport Aerobatics* over the coming months under the department of "Brilliance and Buffoonery." Beth is president of her IAC Chapter 38.

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... the engine failed at low altitude and the accident investigators said that my fundamentals saved me. Thanks my friend. -Maynard H.

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