

Arguing for Tail Draggers

By Alexander Burton

For many years, the thought of learning to fly on an airplane with its third wheel located at the back has been discounted in mainstream aviation training. The infamous “taildragger” or conventional gear aircraft has come to represent a throw-back to times past and gone. They’re too hard to fly; you’ll ground loop; or you’ll end up upside down and backward.

“Modern” aircraft are configured with the tricycle gear, third-wheel-in-front configuration: what the Cessna Aircraft Corporation referred to as, “Land-O-Matic” landing gear when they introduced the C-150 trainer. In the last few years, however, more and more people have revisited the idea of learning to fly on a tailwheel aircraft and a number of flight schools across Canada and in the United States have begun to offer basic, advanced, and transition instruction on these interesting and delightful machines.

Since the 1950s we have come to consider the tricycle gear and the “normal” configuration for an aircraft and have almost ceased to give the topic further consideration. There is, however, a good argument for the continued use of conventional gear aircraft for basic training, and it’s worth consideration as a serious option when making decisions at the beginning of a flying career.

Training on a taildragger makes you a better pilot.

With a tricycle gear aircraft, as it taxies down the runway, touches down on landing, or lifts itself into the air, the center of gravity assists the aircraft to track straight. This simplifies the pilot’s efforts to achieve simple and easy maneuvering. It also allows a lower level of perfection in use of the rudder, elevator, and aileron controls. The aircraft does more of the work and allows the pilot to achieve safe ground handling and flight with a lower level of skill. If the pilot gets a bit sloppy on his or her controls, the aircraft will, most of the time, bail itself out of the potential mess.

Taildraggers, on the other hand, require a higher level of skill to achieve safe ground handling, takeoffs, and landings. And herein is the argument for the use of conventional gear aircraft in training. The pilot must develop a higher skill level in aircraft control to achieve safe ground handling and flight. He or she must become very proficient in fine control. The consequences of lack of skill are immediate, embarrassing, and, sometimes, worse.

The bottom line is that no ground maneuver, takeoff, or landing with a conventional gear aircraft can be taken for granted. The machine is “in flight” from the moment you cast off the tie-down ropes until you have them, once again, firmly tied at the end of the flight. The pilot must be in control.

Your student will develop those critical aircraft handling skills—use of rudder, aileron, and elevator—to a high level of proficiency. They will have learned and earned a high level of confidence in their abilities to handle an aircraft. Students will emerge from their training more skilled, more focused, and better qualified as a stick-and-rudder airplane driver.

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