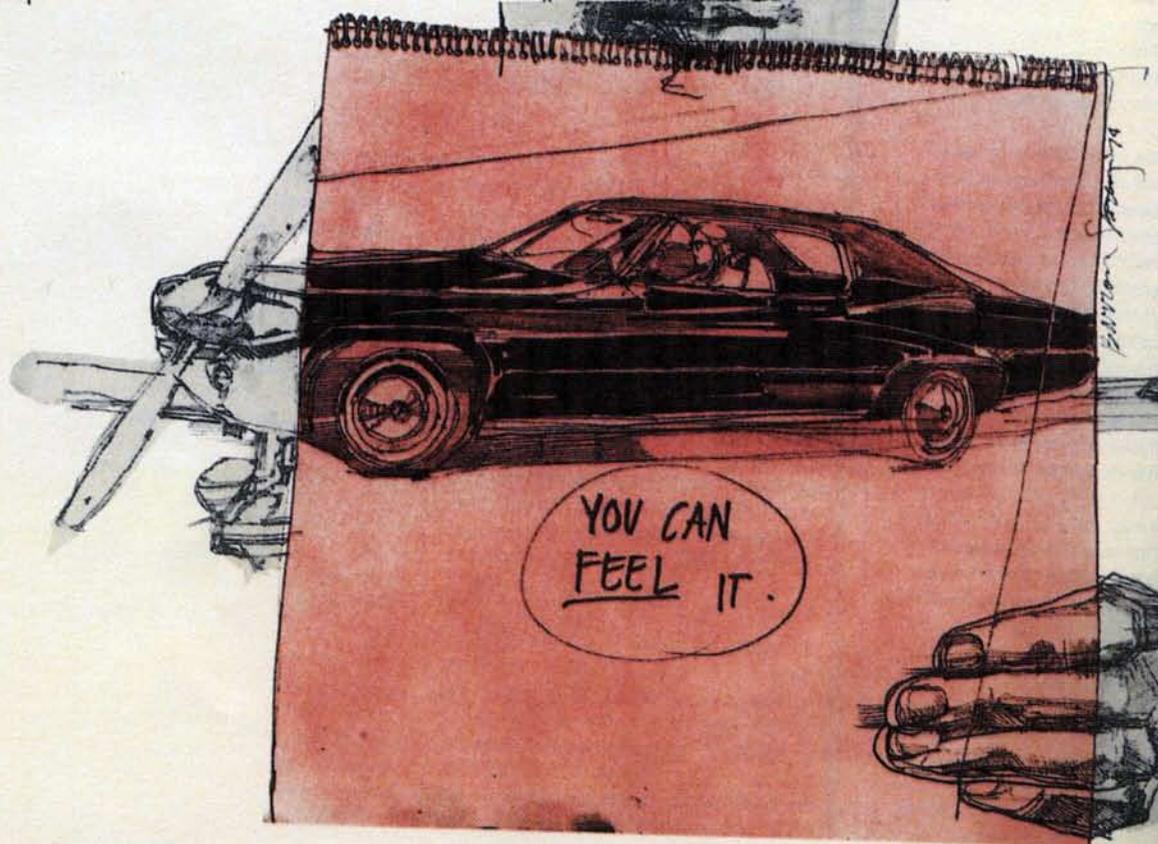


# Student Pilot

## Bench Mark

by Tom Benenson



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"HOW DID IT GO?" my wife asked as I dropped my logbook on the dresser in the bedroom.

"Okay, I guess," I said on my way to preflight the liquor cabinet in the dining room.

"You don't sound very enthusiastic," she said as she followed me into the dining room. My wife can be very perceptive.

"It was okay," I said, draining some of the liquid from one of the containers to check for contaminants and octane rating. It was 80 proof.

"What does your instructor say?" she asked.

"He says I do okay. But I bet he says that to all the students," I added with a smile.

"You don't know yourself how you did?" she asked.

"No, I really don't. I can't tell how I'm doing. What's for dinner?"

I was at a point in my flying where it was difficult to know how I was doing. I was roughly halfway between my private and commercial ratings, and I had lost my perspective. There were times when I was convinced I had been a better pilot before I took my private check ride. Since that had been both a long time and a lot of money ago, it was discouraging.

In almost anything you do, there are ways to measure yourself against others, or even more importantly, against yourself. You can measure distances you've thrown things, times it's taken you to get from one end of a track to another, measure how high you've jumped, how much weight you've lifted. The things you can't measure you can compare: a picture to a model, one shape to another.

Have you ever tried to compare two lazy eights you've done, or looked back at a chandelle to see how it looks? Not so easy.

Even those things that take place in time and space, like diving, figure skating or dancing, are a little more tangible than flying. They can be photographed or videotaped, studied, compared and evaluated.

The early challenges of flying—landing without being returned unwillingly to the sky, keeping to the centerline when you taxi, staying right side up—all are easily measured and progress in them sensed and recorded. For a time, these goals are more than enough to contend with. But what happens when you pass them? What happens when you have your private ticket in your wallet and you're on your way to becoming more than just an airplane driver? How then do you measure yourself?

I remember the first time I flew with my instructor after I passed my private check ride. As we were taxiing out to the active, he yelled something over the sound of the engine.

"Huh?" I said.

"Where you going?"

"Huh?"

"You're all over the taxiway. Get the nose on the centerline and keep it there!"

"Huh?"

"You can fly safely—you got a ticket that proves that—but now let's see if you can learn to fly precisely, proficiently and professionally!"

I get discouraged easily. Unless I can see some improvement or progress, I become disinterested and give up. Days went by. I'd go up by myself, and, like a dog chasing its tail, I never seemed to get anywhere. I couldn't tell if one flight was better than the last, whether I was improving or getting worse.

Occasionally I'd go up with my instructor and he'd point things out to me. "Watch your turn, you're slipping a little."

I'd glance down at the ball and sure enough, it would be nudging out of the cage.

"How could you tell that?" I asked.

"You can feel it," he answered, smiling.

"Maybe you can feel it, but I can't," I said.

"You will."

"When?"

"One day."

I felt like a kid asking his mother, "When will I grow up?"

"One day!"

Over a cup of coffee I asked my instructor, "Seriously, how can you tell when something's not right?"

"You can feel it."

The corners of my mouth turned down.

"Really. Remember, I've been doing this a little longer than you have," he went on. "When you have as many hours as I do, you'll be able to feel it too."

It wasn't long after that talk that I was weathered out of a long flight to Kentucky, so I was forced to go inefficiently by car. On the way, I let my sister drive for a while. She'd recently gotten her driver's license, and I figured it would be good practice for her.

Her driving was the best thing that had happened to my flying in months.

"Hey, watch your speed, you're going a little fast." (Airspeed)

"Ooops, you're right."

She glanced at the speedometer and the car started to drift toward the side of the road.

"Hey, watch where you're going!" (Heading)

"Oooops, right"

She kept her eyes on the road and forgot to downshift going up a long hill.

"Listen to engine; it's trying to tell you something." (Power)

"Oooops, right."

She was so busy thinking she got behind in the doing.

"Hey, what are you doing now?" I asked as she pulled the car over on the shoulder and braked to a stop.

"Letting you drive."

"Me? Why? You're doing fine."

"But you're not. You drive. We'll both be more comfortable."

I drove then and we talked about it. As I spoke, I could hear my instructor's voice echoing in me.

"Don't worry, with time it will come automatically. Without even thinking about it, you'll scan the dash (panel) without staring and you'll relax on the wheel (controls) and you won't tend to oversteer, you'll learn to judge your speed without looking at the speedometer (indicator) . . ."

Watching her drive, remembering how I drove when I had first started, I knew that my instructor was right: With time I'd begin to ease up, to feel and anticipate instead of analyzing and reacting. I knew soon I'd learn the skills and be free to develop the flying as an art.

And then this morning it happened. I was flying early, before the turbulence and winds were around as excuses for sloppy moves, and suddenly I felt it! was climbing out and without even thinking about it, I was holding right rudder!

It didn't happen with every turn or every maneuver—it still doesn't—but it had happened. Without even looking at the ball, I had sensed and centered it.

When it goes right, you *can* feel it! It takes a while but if it didn't, flying wouldn't be the special thing it is. Now when my wife asks me, "How did it go?" I can tell her. Sure, there are times when I expect to draw like Picasso with every sketch and get very depressed if I don't: but when I'm honest with myself, I can tell how it went by how it felt. Was I precise and professional? Did I keep the nosewheel on the centerline? Did I nail the altimeter needle where I wanted it? Did I accept tolerances for "Government work" or did I make the plane do what I wanted it to, when I wanted it to?

As an artist, I have to be the judge of my own work. I can feel when it's right. I know when I can and should do better. I know!

Nevertheless, every once in a while, just to remind myself, I like to take my sister driving.