



Fostering a More Active Flying Club in the Modern Era - Part 1

A Cause-and-Effect Approach to Understanding Thriving and Declining Club Trends

By Dave Scott. Instructor, 1st U.S. R/C Flight School

Introduction

Starting approximately 15 years ago, many model airplane clubs started seeing a decline in membership, fewer new people joining, and interested visitors to the flying field often not returning. This trend continues to this day. Whenever this subject is brought up, the usual justifications related to the economy and peoples' changing interests are given as to why this is a sign of the times, as if nothing can be done about it.

I visit a lot of clubs throughout the Midwest and elsewhere on behalf of my flight school, and despite all the standard reasons people give to justify their club's decline, I know of several clubs that are currently thriving, and most importantly have a large percentage of members that actively fly. Whether large or small, near cities or rural, the successful clubs that I visit all display very similar (easily copied) characteristics that the struggling clubs I visit do not, if not the opposite. The aim of this 2-part article is therefore to highlight the tendencies on display at clubs that do well at acquiring and retaining members, and conversely, why others are in a state of decline. By doing so, I hope to present several easily adopted solutions to help stem the decline and promote club growth.

Of course, those who feel that the membership has no role in their club's decline will probably take offense to some of the club behaviors that I will shine a light on, whereas I'm certain that those who are members of thriving clubs will think this article merely states the obvious.

Before anyone decides that what works for other clubs won't matter because your club members are older and you can't get new members, for the sake of discussion, let's say that your club sponsor's a model display at a mall or hardware store. As a result, 5 enthusiastic new people show up at your flying field the following weekend expressing interest in joining the club and flying. Is your club prepared to accommodate them and thereby retain them as members? Or, is your club stuck in a pattern of telling newcomers that they'll first have to learn how to set up an airplane, then, depending of the availability of the instructor(s), they can expect some crashes and to make any number of trips to the flying field before they'll be able to fly on their own. Of course, to the veteran members of the club that all sounds perfectly normal. However, as many clubs are finding out, that no longer works today in our instant gratification society where so many other activities are vying for peoples' discretionary time and promising to deliver immediate fun.

1. Thus, the first significant trait on display at successful clubs in the modern era is that their leadership is constantly promoting flying! For example, when a potential new member visits the flying field, the club leaders do everything they can to get that person in the air as soon as possible, or at least ask him or her to accompany them while they fly. The point is, an interest in airplanes and flying is what primarily draws people to the sport, and it is what R/C aviation offers that they can't get anywhere else (especially since the training requirements and cost of full-scale aviation have become prohibitive for most people).

The typical busy person today enters the sport to have fun, as well as for the freedom that flying represents and as an escape from stress and real life. The reason for joining a club is mainly to have access to a well kept dedicated flying site and access to more experienced modelers for help. The camaraderie and everything else that goes with being a club member is always secondary to flying at the beginning. Furthermore, to the consternation of many veteran modelers, the typical R/C pilot today looks at the process of setting up an airplane as mainly a means to fly, and would prefer to not spend a lot of time working on their airplanes.

Recognizing all this, effective club leaders focus on “accentuating the positives” whenever they encounter a potential member or interested spectator, such as, a dedicated runway to fly off of, experienced members to help answer questions, and the fact that technology is making it easier and cheaper than ever before for people to enjoy the sport. I.e., they’re like any good car salesman who smartly pitches the cars best features in order to elevate a person’s enthusiasm before getting into the weeds of price, fees, etc.. Failing clubs, on the other hand, tend to jump right into bringing up dues, prohibitive rules, duties, costs, etc., whenever an interested visitor/potential member shows up at the field, and then wonder why the person never came back.

2. It has to be said that if the reason for the club’s existence (a dedicated environment to fly model planes) becomes no longer the main focal point, the primary reason to join or remain part of the club no longer exists. In these cases, the non-flying majority wing of the club will invariably steer the focus and resources of the club to activities not related to flying, such as club politics and alike, causing people who were originally drawn to the sport to have fun flying to have little reason to come back. Of course, there will always be conflicting interests and politics in any organization, but they are far less noticeable when there’s a lot of flying taking place in the club.

Herein is the rub; For a variety of reasons, such as seldom having a plan before flying and the de-emphasis of fundamentals in favor of the latest technology and design, the flying skills of the average club flyer typically plateau within 3-5 years. As a result, those who don’t become discouraged or lose interest often turn to constant tinkering and acquiring new equipment to get their kicks. That would be fine, except when constant tinkering is presented to the average newcomer as standard operating procedure, what they mainly see are an endless series of obstacles that get in the way of flying and fun. As these perceived obstacles chip away at their enthusiasm, or as the result of a negative experience like a club member disassembling their airplane rather than helping get it in the air, reasonable people will start thinking about other activities that don’t involve so many hurdles. The conundrum that many clubs are therefore facing today is that while the veteran membership acts as though it would literally take the fun out of the hobby if everything worked and nothing needed to be changed, that would be an answer to prayer as far as newcomers and those trying to improve their flying skills are concerned.

Of course, if a newcomer is himself inclined toward tinkering, he won’t find a better outlet than R/C aviation. However, all too often veteran flyers forget how intimidating it is to be newbie and how much more there is to learn than anyone expects. Thus, the temptation early on to impress your newbie audience by sharing the setup expertise you developed over many years can prove highly daunting for the newcomer who entered the sport hoping to start flying right away.

Therefore, effective club leaders, motivated by wanting each member to have a positive experience and thereby raise the likelihood of them remaining active in the club, make every reasonable effort to keep things simple and remove obstacles that would get in the way of people enjoying flying at the club field. Consequently, anytime a member brings a new airplane to the flying field, the leadership refrains from pointing out all the things they don’t like or would do differently, and instead performs the essential checks to ensure that the plane is airworthy (e.g., CG, correct travels, batteries), and then does their best to get it into the air as soon as possible.

Don’t misunderstand me. If you’re familiar with 1st U.S. R/C Flight School or my training and setup manuals and articles, you know that I’m a big proponent of doing everything possible to improve performance and therefore speed of learning. Even so, the reality is that many of the improvements that I make to the planes used in the school would barely be detectable by the average club flyer. So the point is, whether it’s a recreational club environment or commercial R/C flight school, the main thing is to get the basics correct, knowing that refinements only help to fine tune airplanes that are fundamentally sound to start with. Hence, effective leaders know that it is wise to not bring up all the minute ways to “make things better” until a person first has a good handle on the fundamentals. I.e., what good is a slightly more capable radio or gadget going to be if the majority of club members haven’t yet mastered the basic setup and operation of the equipment they already have!

3. Another factor contributing to declining club membership is the tendency of the people that everyone looks to for advice to recommend the latest-greatest equipment and setups that line up more with their own interests and ways of doing things, rather than what best lines up with the skills and interests of the members asking for advice. The problem is it won't matter how valid your advice is if it's beyond the abilities of the most of the membership and causes them to become discouraged or give up on flying before realizing any benefit from your advice. On the other hand, effective leaders try to make practical recommendations that they feel will give each member the greatest likelihood of success (sometimes for the simple reason that they're busy and wish to focus on their own stuff rather than having to continually correct peoples' mistakes).

Consider the E-flite Apprentice basic trainer; Veteran modelers typically advise any newbie buying an Apprentice to forgo the basic radio offered with the plane, and instead buy a radio with more features. However, the radio offered with the Apprentice is pre-set by the factory, so all the newcomer has to do is charge the batteries and fly. Those who "upgrade" to a more capable radio now have to overcome the challenge of learning a lot of confusing terminology and how to program it, rather than experiencing the immediate gratification of flying. We all know that learning to program radios has taken over as one of the greatest challenges in the sport, and it is often counterproductive to thrust that daunting task on any newcomer whose motivation for getting into the sport was to have fun (and already has so much else to learn). Of course, at some point they'll have to learn to set up a plane and radio, and possibly even enjoy it, but setting the precedent of expecting to face a complicated process of programming before flying is very intimidating for any newbie, and often erodes their enthusiasm before even getting to fly.

Furthermore, despite many clubs struggling to get and keep new members, many older members continue to frown upon airplanes like the Apprentice that utilize modern 3-axis stabilization technology aimed at making learning to fly much easier and less likely to involve significant repairs. Because some of these planes require unconventional control techniques compared to the way the newbie will eventually fly, veteran modelers will often frame stabilization technology as a crutch and subsequently convince the newbie to turn it off. However, what good does it do to point out that those who learn with the stabilization turned on will have to learn different control techniques in the future, if before they get to that point they become discouraged and quit the sport!

Conversely, active clubs today with a high retention rate never discourage, but rather encourage the use of anything that helps new members get to the point of being able to safely fly on their own whenever they wish. Plus, those systems aimed at speeding up success in the air can usually be diminished or turned off as the pilot's confidence increases and they're no longer needed. Furthermore, since Safe technology often enables new pilots to solo the first day, it solves the biggest challenge facing clubs for the past 40+ years of finding committed instructors who are available to train on a regular basis.

This concludes Part 1. Next month we'll continue highlighting the tendencies on display at clubs that continue to thrive in the modern era, and conclude with a summary list of actionable strategies aimed at stemming declining club membership and promoting growth.

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Fostering a More Active Flying Club in the Modern Era - Part 2

A Cause-and-Effect Approach to Understanding Thriving and Declining Club Trends

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Starting approximately 15 years ago, many model airplane clubs started seeing a decline in membership, fewer new people joining, and interested visitors to the flying field often not returning. A trend that continues to this day. That said, I visit a lot of clubs throughout the Midwest and elsewhere on behalf of my flight school, and despite all the standard reasons people give to justify their club's decline, I know of several clubs that are currently thriving. The following article continues contrasting the tendencies on display at clubs that do well at acquiring and retaining members compared to those that have been experiencing declining membership. By doing so, I hope to present several positive strategies to help stem the decline and promote club growth. Note: If you haven't read Part 1, you will need to do so in order to understand the full context and shifting attitudes of R/C pilots in the modern era, and why despite the economy and peoples' changing interests, certain clubs enjoy a large percentage of members that actively fly and therefore continue to thrive.

4. One of the biggest contributors to clubs struggling to retain active flyers is the tendency of the leadership at the field to continually push members to purchase more advanced equipment and increasingly larger airplanes, under the guise that doing so will help them to fly better. While that might be partially true, this has contributed to the phenomena of people leaving their clubs after 4 or 5 seasons when the sport is no longer enjoyable. FYI. These are the former members that no longer attend your club, but they continue to fly parkflyers close to home strictly for fun.

While the club's more experienced members are pitching radios with more features, bigger flies better, and "what the pros use", seldom brought up is the additional complexity associated with those components. Hence, one can visit clubs all across the country and see large numbers of people pre-occupied with learning how to program their radios and operate their equipment instead of actually using it to fly! You'll also notice that within weeks of any member giving into getting a substantially bigger "better" airplane, their attendance tends to drop off. If you question them about it, they'll have a list of excuses about how it's been too windy, they've been too busy and/or it's become more convenient to fly helis and parkflyers closer to home. Yet, the only thing that's different from when they used to attend the club field on a regular basis is that their equipment became appreciably more expensive and complicated to operate, and thus the excitement about going to the flying field has been replaced with the fear of jeopardizing their substantial investment.

We can reassure them that the fear and anxiety does subside and they'll eventually enjoy an elevated sense of satisfaction if they stay at it. Yet, for the vast majority of flyers who got into the sport as a fun hobby, it is rare today to see someone who will remain active in the club when flying is no longer fun. Therefore, another important characteristic of successful clubs is that the leadership never makes members feel as if they are operating inferior equipment or tries to push them to purchase equipment that is out of their comfort zone. If the members are successful with what they have, eventually the grass is greener effect will kick in and they'll choose on their own to take things to the next level, or not. A.k.a., if it ain't broke, don't fix it!

The new reality is that while technology can be wonderful, it has also made people's day to day lives a lot busier. Thus, clubs that are thriving today recognize that many people simply don't have the time to methodically learn all the technical aspects of the sport the way that veteran modelers have always sought to do (heck, a lot of people today don't even have a dedicated place to work on their planes). So, rather than trying to return to the old ways, successful clubs in the modern era are open to all types of flying and support the fact that the only/best option for a lot of people is to fly mainly Ready-To-Fly setups that are easy to store and transport.

As an aside: I know of several clubs that attribute a large part of their decline to RTF parkflyers and helis making it easier for people to fly near home instead. On the other hand, the existence of low cost easy to fly parkflyers has made it much easier for people to get into the sport, and thus more people are flying R/C models today than ever before. That means that the pool for clubs to draw members from has never been larger. For example, when people reach the limits of what they can do with their simple parkflyers, most guys will start looking at larger more capable airplanes that can also handle more wind, and therefore need to find a bigger flying field as well. It's no different than people saying to me that because it's becoming easier for people to teach themselves, there will no longer be a need for an R/C flight school. In reality, interest in the school has tripled in recent years thanks in part to more people entering the sport. Thus, rather than eliminating the need for clubs, in many cases parkflyers are helping to stem the decline and making it easier for more members to get stick time. So, although it may appear to the veteran members that parkflyers are contributing to less club participation, it is more likely that those clubs simply don't offer much more than what flyers have access to closer to home.

5. Even though I'm a 3D pilot myself, it is easy to see that another major contributor to club members losing interest in flying is the tendency of 3D pilots to encourage those around them, no matter their ability, to purchase 3D airplanes and equipment. Add to that, much of what people read and view online is also aimed at enticing pilots to pursue 3D. The unspoken reality is that learning to fly 3D requires such lightning fast reflexes and endless hours of practice that most flyers will never achieve 3D flying skills. Plus, no one mentions that the tradeoff for setting up a plane for 3D is that it becomes more difficult to fly in general. Furthermore, due to the manufacturers' fixation on maximizing 3D performance, planes have become so lightly constructed that the average sport flyer often can't make it through a weekend without breaking something on landing. Consequently, with so many pilots basing their equipment and setup choices on flying 3D at some point, many end up struggling or hitting a plateau instead, especially when the complicated process of learning to program and trim for 3D turns out to be much easier said than done. When these realities mount up, those who don't become discouraged and quit can often be seen flying less and less, preferring instead to spend their time making changes to their equipment and getting involved in non-flying club activities.

Now that all this has been said, the following is a summary list of some of the most productive tendencies on display at many of the country's vibrant clubs. Just remember, assuming that there is a willingness to take steps to increase flying activity at your club, don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good! That is, just because you can't do everything that has proven to work for other clubs, giving a few of these strategies a try is certainly better than doing nothing at all.

- All successful clubs promote a policy of never allowing a spectator to sit off to the side by themselves, but rather encourage its members to introduce themselves, and if the spectator expresses an obvious interest, invite them to check out the planes and to sit with the members. Furthermore, it's counterproductive to send a new visitor/potential member home with instructions to search for the information they'll need to get started in the sport. Obviously, newbies don't even know what questions to ask yet, so all the printed forms needed to join AMA and the club (even if they'll be joining online), and if possible a printout of a RTF basic trainer, are ready to hand to any interested spectator before they leave.
- When talking with a potential member, members refrain from airing dirty laundry and tales of failure. Instead, they accentuate the positives of how technology is making it easier to fly than ever before, and by joining the club he or she will have access to a dedicated flying site and experienced pilots who can offer advice when needed.
- As long as a person's equipment is airworthy, leaders of clubs with high retention rates hold off on pointing out everything they would change or improve upon, but do their best to help that person experience the thrill of seeing their airplane in the air as soon as possible.
- Unless it's appropriate, leaders of active clubs avoid framing members' equipment as inferior and trying to persuade them to purchase ever more complex/expensive equipment under the guise that it will make them better flyers. Instead, they emphasize that the main things are to have fun within their individual comfort zones, and while good equipment is important, correct practice is a lot more important. (Remember, what someone might refer to as an inferior radio today would have been state of the art a little over a decade ago and entirely capable of fulfilling the needs of 95% of flyers!)

- Rather than promoting 3D flying and complex 3D equipment setups as the end all after learning to fly, leaders of successful clubs try to give practical recommendations based on what they feel gives each member the greatest likelihood of success based on their immediate skills and interests. I.e., effective leaders correct the impression that the route to becoming a better pilot is to try to mold yourself after the club's best 3D flyer, but instead hype the fact that the awesome (unique) thing about the hobby is that there are so many different options available to pilots, and that they can change their interests any time they want.

Maybe my efforts to highlight these tendencies and help stem the 15 year trend of declining club membership will prove to be wishful thinking. However, I make my living in the sport, and I fly large aerobatic airplanes that require well maintained runways, and therefore I have much more than a casual interest in clubs doing well. That said, I have to bring up a couple final observations: Although I'm sure there are exceptions, I know that if a club does not appoint leadership that actively flies, and therefore has a personal stake in maintaining a pilot friendly club, club politics almost always takes over until eventually so many people have been turned off that there are barely enough members to sustain the club.

Furthermore, in order for a club to experience growth, it must have an individual or two in positions of leadership who possess the initiative and/or natural inclination (often as a result of their career backgrounds) to map out a club mission statement along with a step-by-step plan of action aimed at cultivating an active fun flying club. Thus, whenever people in the area hear about the club and decide to check it out, they will encounter an appealing club that looks like it would be fun to be involved with. The reason that it takes this type of leader is because the turnaround or growth often doesn't happen right away. Consequently, throughout the process, some members will likely try to sabotage the leadership's efforts because, from the sidelines, they think they know better. That's when having a plan in place helps keep things moving toward the club's stated objectives, rather than allowing the diversions common to any group undertaking from sapping everyone's enthusiasm. Of course, there are many other things that successful clubs are doing, e.g., attractive websites, community involvement, etc., but it all starts with getting the basics right of fostering an environment that promotes flying and encourages people to have fun and pursue their own particular interests. Hoping you have a great flying season!



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About the Author: Dave Scott is a 40+ year veteran of the sport with over 12,000 hours of RC flying experience. He has worked in the development of several full-scale aircraft and has designed nearly 50 radio control planes. He is a champion full-scale aerobatic competitor and professional airshow pilot. Dave founded the world's longest running commercial RC flight school. His manuals and articles feature the accelerated training techniques that he developed instructing thousands of pilots of all skill levels.