

Vicki Cruse

Perfect Is as Perfect Flies for U.S. Aerobatic Team Champ

“What is the point,” says 5-foot-2 Vicki Cruse, “of doing something half-assed?” Why spin and roll and tail-slide like a slacker; why laydown eight with only half a heart, or do the expected hammerhead like your own personal style is not forefront in your mind? “If you go into a contest saying, you know, dammit, I just have to beat the (competition) today, I just have to beat them, you are going to lose every time. That is not how it works. How it works is that every time you go out, your goal is to fly as close to perfection as you can that day.

“For me,” adds the U.S. Aerobatics Team champion, “it is all about how well I can fly to my standard. I am *such* a perfectionist.”

For perfectionists like Vicki, perhaps nothing juices the passions quite like the precision required by competitive aerobatics. Get her two hands on the stick of her beloved Zivko Edge and this spitfire of a flyer out of Santa Paula, California, proves to herself and judges at, say, the World Aerobatic Championships in Burgos, Spain, that nothing says Vicki quite like a job well – make that, *perfectly* – done. Oh, sure, aerobatic competition “is a hobby,” says Vicki, 38. “But I still treat it like a job. It would be really hard to have it not be. I mean,” adds the Missouri-born former marine biologist who owns Berkut Engineering kit aircraft company in Santa Monica, CA, “if you are going to do it, dammit, do it right. Do it the best you can.”

The best for this show-shunning pilot who chooses to flaunt her fine, fine flying in contests, not fly-ins, is very, very excellent. Impressive. The Accidental Pilot would be so proud. “That’s what I called my

aunt,” says Vicki, who grew up toted here and there to “odd places” – Mexico, Costa Rica, Canada – by parents who would vacation by hopping small charters to great fishing destinations. “She was a pilot but never enjoyed it. She was always uncomfortable in the air, but I thought, man, this is awesome! I loved it.” While earning her marine biology M.S. at Florida’s Nova Southeastern



University, Vicki befriended a flyer who frequently took her up in his Cessna. “It dawned on me, hey, wait a second!” she says. “Why the hell can’t I do this? Why? What? I should do this! If he can do this, I can do this.”

So she did. In 1993 Vicki earned her ticket. Her only trouble was not being able to reach her trainer’s rudder pedals or see

over the instrument panel, a matter ultimately addressed by having her sit on a Ft. Lauderdale phone book to fly. Still, this was not before failing one check ride and giving up altogether on what would turn out to be her life. “I had no confidence,” she says. “And the guy on my check ride didn’t like the way I landed. I more or less flew it on – kind of like what I do now in the Edge. You know, no flare, just kind of fly it on. I did that,” she adds, “because I couldn’t see over the instrument panel.”

These days, with her four-year flying hiatus forgotten, Vicki is fiercely committed to the fun and camaraderie of competition. Her rebirth from checkride failure to Team USA aerobatic champion (her various wins are many) happened around 1995 at Oshkosh when she was introduced to the International Aerobatic Club (today she is president of this EAA division otherwise known as IAC). “It was there I thought, wow, this is kinda neat.” In classic Vicki “why do something half-assed” fashion, she straightaway bought a Christen Eagle she couldn’t fly for lack of taildragger time. By the time she and later the plane moved to California, an emergency maneuver training course she took had, she says, “changed everything.”

“It gave me confidence to fly by myself. Once I started flying the Eagle I felt, man, this is incredible! This is so great. I learned about competitive aerobatics and didn’t really understand it, but thought, oh, this is so neat!”

Vicki’s enthusiasm for the sport – whoops, we mean, *job* – married her passion for perfection and soon the ideal match was soaring her off into the sunset of



a life totally immersed in aerobatic happiness. She became devoted to finessing all the finer points of spins and rollers and tail slides – all the “figures” that make for in-air dazzle and drama and awe for contest judges, on-ground spectators and, not least, the spinning-rolling-tailsliding pilot herself. “It is *so much fun!*” she says of her flying. “But my thing is work. It is not ‘fun’ flying; it is ‘work’ flying that is also fun because I am working toward something.” Don’t go looking for goals when wondering whether this world-class competitor (who made the U.S. Aerobatic Team in 2003, 2005 and, fingers crossed, is hoping to in 2006) is aiming for the moon in her sport.

There are none: She is reaching for the stars.

“I’m not a goal-setter,” says Vicki, who has little interest in the “ego-driven” pursuit of airshow performance. “Things just

happen. I don’t plan for things to happen. I just take steps and things come my way. When they do, I think, maybe this is a good opportunity. And then I do it.” She adds: “If someone had said, you will be president of IAC I’d have said, no way! If someone had said, you will own a kit aircraft company I’d have said, are you kidding?”

Like the girl says, things happen. “People close to me have always said I don’t know what I am capable of,” says the current US Women’s Champion whose next not-a-goal is to be the U.S. National Aerobatic Champion and “follow that with a shot at being the Women’s World Champion.” “They say that I just do something and don’t think about it, and later don’t even realize what I have done.”

Wake up, Vicki Cruse, so you can see it, too. That you are indeed doing it. And it looks pretty perfect from here. ✕

Cruse readies to flaunt a figure while at the controls of her spiffy Zivko Edge