

# **Expanding the Judging Community Through New Approaches to Training and Certification**

## **A Proposal to the IAC Board**

**Jim Ward, February 2014, Rev. 1**

### **BACKGROUND**

At its fall 2013 meeting, IAC's board of directors asked me to propose a streamlined way to train and certify judges at contests as an alternative to – though not a replacement of – the club's longstanding weekend ground-school program.

Informing that request was news of a 10% decline in the number of current, certified judges in 2013 as compared with the prior year. Also behind it was a desire expressed by some members and directors for a more time- and cost-effective way to become a judge that does not consume a weekend away at a ground-school.

IAC's most pressing need for judges is to fill middle seats at regional contests. Reports reach board members each year of contests struggling to staff the minimum three judges required to grade each flight program. It stands to reason that, if IAC makes it easier for members to become judges and regain judging currency, it would increase the judge population and make it easier for contest officials to field fully-staffed judging lines.

### **SCOPE**

This document introduces two proposals to increase the number of judges certified to grade at contests.

The first describes an expedited means to recertify judges who have lost currency due to lack of recent experience. The second proposes a new, entry level "Grading Judge" certification that enables holders to grade at regional contests.

Common among them is that all required training takes place via self-study and at contests.

As these ideas represent a substantial departure from forty-plus years of IAC practices, only concepts and broader descriptions are presented here. Should the board and key volunteers find sufficient merit, subsequent work will establish the necessary syllabi, rules and other content needed to realize these initiatives.

## **AUDIENCE**

The audience addressed by these proposals comprises:

- IAC judges who are no longer current to grade
- Experienced competitors who need only some abbreviated form of training to grade effectively
- Newer competitors and others who wish to become judges, who need to undertake a complete training curriculum

## **RECERTIFYING EXISTING JUDGES**

Proposed is a new means to recertify IAC judges who, solely for lack of recent grading experience, are no longer qualified to judge.

### **Current Requirements and Assessment**

Today, a judge who has lost currency is required to attend either an IAC Advanced Judging seminar or the second (“recurrency”) day of the IAC Introduction to Aerobatic Judging course.

Topics scheduled on that second day of IAC’s 2013 introductory course are:

- Contest Flight Programs
- Checking a Free Program
- Judging Criteria
- Judge Certification and Currency

Setting aside its value as a refresher, requiring a classroom review of each of these topics – at the level of detail presented in the curriculum – is probably excessive for someone who has lost currency solely due to lack of recent grading. Here are a few reasons why:

- The structure of contest flight programs rarely changes; the Known selection and approval process – also presented on day 2 – is of little consequence to the practical duties of a judge.
- Knowing where to look up K-factor limits and maximum numbers of figures is important; memorizing what they are is not.
- A judge never loses currency because he has not checked a sufficient number of Free Programs. Annual R&C exams regularly test knowledge about validating Frees.
- Similarly, judge certification and currency requirements are amply covered in the Official Contest Rules and R&Cs.

This leaves the review of judging criteria as the most significant, practical value delivered by IAC’s judge recertification effort.

## **Proposal Synopsis**

An IAC judge may reestablish currency via a combination of self-study, examination and at-contest review.<sup>1</sup>

A judge wishing to regain currency arrives at a contest on practice day, having already reviewed grading criteria (sections 7 and 8 of the rulebook), the current year's rules changes and passed the corresponding R&C exam. On a contest practice day, he attends a "Grading Review" offered in either classroom format or one-on-one with a Judging Instructor.

Upon completion, the judge is immediately qualified to serve – at the present contest and for the remainder of the season – at his original (Regional, National, or perhaps in the future, Grading) judge certification level.

## **Grading Review**

A Grading Review is a seminar, led by a Judging Instructor, that takes place on a practice day of a contest. Its primary purpose is to provide the refresher needed by non-current judges to satisfy the currency requirement of the rules and to enable them to grade effectively. As it also delivers practical value to competitors, judges and judges-in-training, it is open to all contest participants.

The review focuses on a pair of upper-category sequences, one Power and one Glider, containing a rich sampling of base figures and roll elements from the Aresti Catalog. With flimsies in hand or projected on a screen, participants first discuss the grading criteria, figure by figure.

Participants are then given or shown the same flimsies annotated with judging observations, such as "+10° up, 2x longer after," etc. They are then asked to score each figure in the sequence and then to discuss their scores with the group. Mingled with these errors are observations that don't warrant downgrades and others that require cumulative or hard zeroes.

The instructor serves to keep the seminar focused, encourage all participants to contribute, and ensure that the discussion includes and reinforces all proper grading criteria and rejects any incorrect criteria raised by participants.

This interactive style of review scales well from one to many participants. It's similar to the judging review held at the 2012 U.S. Nationals, which was positively received.

A well-run Grading Review should consume 60 to 90 minutes.

In the future, all or some portion of the Grading Review could transition into a field exercise akin to the Judging Clinics run throughout west coast contests a few years ago.

## **Administration**

Upon completion of each Grading Review, the instructor informs the Judge Certification Committee of the names of attending judges who have completed recertification.

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<sup>1</sup> To simplify language, proposals here are described in the present tense unless clarity demands otherwise.

## **Implementation and Timeframe**

This program rightfully falls within the purview of the Judge Education and Certification Committee, which would be charged with creating and operating it.

With support from the board and contributions from other member-volunteers, IAC could introduce contest-based judge recertification at the outset of the upcoming (2014) contest season.

Key elements required to implement this proposal and rough approximations of times to complete each are:

- Creation and publication of promotional materials 20 hours
- Solicitation of National Judges to serve as Judging Instructors 8 hours
- Preparation of sequences to review 20 hours
- Writing and vetting guidelines for Judge Instructors 30 hours
- Initial publication of a roster of Judging Instructors 4 hours

With effective project leadership and tasks distributed among three likeminded volunteers, no one person should need to invest more than about 30 hours to get this program underway.

Ongoing maintenance through the contest season is needed in small units of time to keep the Judging Instructor roster current and to update the records of judges who have completed a Grading Review.

## **TRAINING AND CERTIFYING GRADING JUDGES**

### **Synopsis**

Proposed is a new judge certification level called “Grading Judge”.

A Grading Judge is permitted to grade flights at regional contests. No other Regional or National Judge privileges are conveyed.

Grading Judges are trained via self-study, at-contest instruction and one-on-one mentoring.

A newly certified Grading Judge should perform at least at the level of an equally new Regional Judge.

## **Program At A Glance**

### *Benefits*

Key benefits of the Grading Judge Program are:

- *Self-paced:* The judge-to-be studies written course materials as his schedule permits
- *Modular:* The tutorial is broken into several modules, each of which has a common structure and takes a similar amount of time to complete
- *Focused:* Training is focused on making the judge-to-be a competent grader; it excludes ancillary learning that is unrelated to grading
- *Integrated:* The student can accumulate judging line contest experience and participate in Grading Reviews while undertaking the self-study curriculum
- *Mentored:* The student is paired with a mentor, who serves as a point of contact to provide additional guidance, assessment and feedback
- *Interactive:* Regular communication between the judge-to-be and his mentor deepens and personalizes the learning experience
- *Flexible:* A member with previous contest experience can leverage his knowledge to advance quickly through that portion of the course material he's already familiar with

### *Certification Path*

An IACer takes these steps to become a Grading Judge:

- Allying with a mentor, who will serve as the student's guide throughout the training process
- Studying each module of the written training curriculum (available online) and:
  - Seeking explanations as needed from his mentor or other resources
  - Working the review exercises at the end of the module
  - Completing an end-of-module assessment with his mentor<sup>3</sup>
- Attending contests to volunteer on the judging line, participate in Grading Reviews and, when ready, serve as an Assistant Judge
- Taking written and oral exams, akin to today's Regional Judge exams but focused on grading

## **Becoming a Grading Judge - Details**

### *Self-Study*

A member wishing to become a grading judge may begin to do so at any time by studying the Grading Judge tutorial on the IAC website. The entire tutorial leads the student from the

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<sup>3</sup> Regardless of completing the assessment, a student is never blocked from continuing his study of subsequent modules.

fundamentals of competition grading through the advanced knowledge necessary to judge upper category flights.

The tutorial is parceled into 60-90 minute modules that the student may study at his own pace. At the completion of each module are study exercises that reinforce the material covered to date.

### *The Mentor*

Upon undertaking the tutorial, the new student solicits (or is assigned) a mentor, an experienced judge of whom the student may ask questions – and receive guidance and encouragement – throughout his course of study. Student-mentor contacts usually take place via email, telephone or other electronic means.<sup>4</sup>

### *Assessments*

At some point after the student completes each module, a mentor takes on an assessment role to determine whether the student sufficiently comprehends and can apply the material. Should the student need additional instruction, the mentor may recommend further review, provide the instruction personally, or refer the student to other resources within the club.

A mentor's sign-off indicating successful completion of each module is one component required for the student to complete Grading Judge training.

Completing assessments and obtaining sign-offs are never required to continue studying subsequent modules. The mentor and student may establish any mutually agreeable schedule for conducting each assessment.

### *Testing Out of Grading Judge Modules*

A member with previous contest experience may “test out” of any Grading Judge module by satisfying a mentor that he possesses a working level of knowledge relevant to the module's content. This offers a fast path through the self-study tutorial for experienced competitors and others who previously attended a judging school but never attained judge certification.

### *At-Contest Activities*

By the mid-point in the self-study tutorial, the student will have practiced exercises calling individual figures and entire sequences for a mentor. At this point, he'll be ready to serve as an Assistant Judge.

The student is required to call some minimum number of different sequences in order to satisfy the “Assistant Judge experience” requirement to become a Grading Judge. A student with previous contest experience may “test out” of this requirement by satisfying a mentor that he can properly call any Aresti sequence.

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<sup>4</sup> If logistics recommend it, a student may have multiple mentors.

At any time after completing the entire tutorial – and before being considered current as a Grading Judge – the student must participate in a Grading Review. Doing so will provide additional reinforcement about grading criteria in a setting that reinforces previous learning, invites questions and offers clarifications.

### *Exams*

Once the student has completed the self-study tutorial and has been signed off on each module by a mentor, he may take the Grading Judge written exam. This exam, offered online or on paper, includes the Regional Judge written exam questions pertaining to grading. Additionally, it asks about the privileges and currency requirements of Grading Judges.

With the written exam passed, the student meets with two current judges for an oral exam, similar to what's done today for Regional and National orals. One examiner must be a National Judge; the other may be a judge of any certification level. To help assure an objective assessment, one examiner must not have served as a mentor of the student, as formally defined above.

Upon successful completion of the oral exam, the student is certified as a Grading Judge. If he has not yet done so in the current contest season, he must attain currency by participating in a Grading Review.

### **Grading Judge Tutorial**

The Grading Judge tutorial is organized in bite-size modules, each taking 60 to 90 minutes to complete.<sup>5</sup>

Each module:

- Briefly reviews prior learning on which new material is based
- Introduces new material, explains each element at an appropriate level of detail and relates each to its practical use
- Concludes with a set of study exercises that ask the student to integrate prior learning with new content to solve problems and answer questions

Some four to six modules, representing five to eight hours of self-study, should cover the knowledge transfer necessary for this portion of the curriculum.

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<sup>5</sup> It's reasonable to expect a member to be willing to schedule 60-90 minute time blocks to pursue this avocation. Moreover, as much of the content is dry, we're challenged to hold the student's focus. The better we succeed at that, the more effective the knowledge transfer will be.

Two substantial sources exist today from which to create self-study training content:

- IAC's own Introduction to Aerobic Judging slide set, which provides an excellent outline and instructor notes covering the 2-day introductory weekend ground-school
- BAeA's Judging Tutorial, which is available online as a set of interlinked web pages or rolled up into a single PDF, viewable offline<sup>6</sup>

As the single most time-consuming activity in establishing the Grading Judge program is creation of self-study material, we should strive to leverage as much existing work as possible.

### **Implementation and Timeframe**

The Grading Judge program falls under the purview of the board's Judge Education and Certification Committee, which would be charged with creating and operating it.

No meaningful consideration has yet been given to the program's implementation details, staffing or schedule. However, as the deliverable envisaged here is a significant piece of work, deployment is unlikely before the 2015 contest season.

## **NEW ROLES**

### **Judging Instructors**

As it's impractical to expect that one or more of today's small group of weekend ground-school instructors will attend each contest to provide the training proposed here, expansion of the instructor community is needed.

IAC's Judge Education Committee would solicit and designate a corps of Judging Instructors to include its present staff of ground-school instructors plus all National Judges having some minimum experience level who express a desire to teach at contests.

Any organizer wanting to offer an at-contest Grading Review or Grading Judge training could do so providing he could attract one or more such Judging Instructors to volunteer his services.

The Judge Education Committee would maintain an up-to-date a list of Judging Instructors on the IAC website.

### **Mentors**

Mentors are experienced judges of any certification level who provide one-on-one support to aspiring Grading Judges, especially as they work through the self-study tutorial. The majority of that support involves answering questions and explaining details about grading on an as-needed basis.

Mentors are also called upon to assess the working knowledge of a student as he completes each module of the self-study curriculum. Using publicly available guidelines, the mentor will lead a

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<sup>6</sup> BAeA's Nick Buckenham has offered IAC the use of their excellent Judging Tutorial as source material for this program.



discussion to ascertain the student's retention and understanding of the material and its applicability to the real world. Once satisfied that the student has a practical understand of the module content, he "signs off" (electronically), attesting that the student completed it.

IAC's Judge Education Committee would publish contact information for qualified judges who've expressed a desire to mentor others.

## **OTHER CONSIDERATIONS**

### **Written Exams**

Proposed is a restructuring of all judging written exams to limit the scope of each to a specific level of judge certification.

Among its effects:

- A Grading Judge would not be tested on service as a chief judge or checking Free Programs
- A Regional Judge would not be asked about currency requirements for National Judges

However, as a National Judge is considered an authority on topics related to rules and judging, no narrowing of scope for testing the knowledge of National Judges is suggested.

The restructuring described here can take place at any time; it is independent of other proposals offered in this document. However, to support the focus of Grading Judge training, it should occur by the time the Grading Judge program is established.

### **Performance Measurement**

Use of numerical performance tools to assess the efficacy of this program is desirable, but beyond the scope of this proposal. Unless and until IAC adopts such tools, we're forced to rely on a qualitative appraisal.

Since the advent of our sport, judges have developed reputations within the contest community conveying their accuracy, knowledge and fairness. Those same characteristics will undoubtedly envelope Grading Judges from the moment the first grades a flight. However unscientific, those reputations will serve as the best telltale of the program's success in the near future.

### **Author's Notes**

This paper is a rough, first pass that conveys a handful of ideas about advancing IAC's judging programs.

Several ideas presented here are not mine alone. Some sprouted from judging clinics operated at west coast contests a couple of years ago. Others came from current IAC board members, who personally mentor new judges and judges in training at contests. Thanks to all who shared your wisdom and experience.