

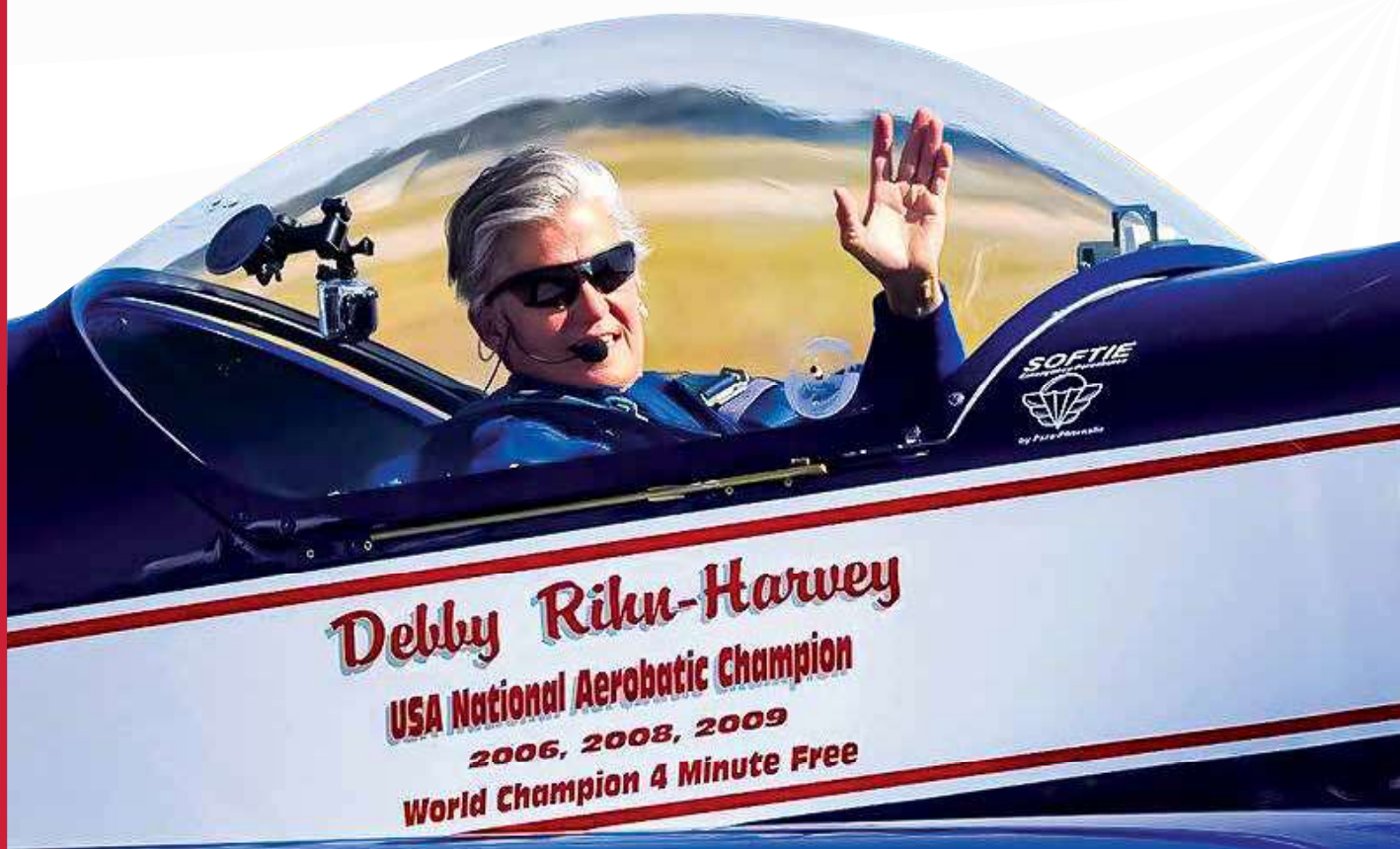
PUTTING A

Spin

▶ ON AEROBATIC TRAINING

Handling the Airplane in any Situation or Attitude

BY RACHEL ASHLEY





EBBY RIHN-HARVEY is arguably recreational aviation's greatest advocate. She's done it all, from being a top aerobatic competitor to volunteering with Women in Aviation and the Ninety-Nines.

She's kind of a big deal in general aviation for everyone, both women and men, which makes perfect sense when Debby tells you she's passionate about promoting the diversity of aviation.

Since she retired from being a captain at Southwest Airlines, Debby has been at Harvey & Rihn Aviation almost every day. Harvey & Rihn — Debby's flight school — teaches everything from private to ATP, including CFI, tailwheel, upset recovery, and aerobatics. And it has been doing it for 41 years in La Porte, Texas.

When I was finally able to steal an hour of her time at EAA AirVenture Oshkosh 2019, Debby had just wrapped up two solid weeks of promoting aviation. She was also midconversation with one of the many IAC members trying to catch up with her before the week was done. The hour she spent with me was the longest I've ever seen her sit still.

Debby has been flying pretty much her entire life. Her grandfather, father, and brothers were all aviation enthusiasts and pilots, but even though she was flying in her teens alongside them, Debby took a nonaviation route with her career at first. Flight was calling, though, and she couldn't ignore it. "It's in my blood," she said in the *Skydancers* documentary film shot in 2013 at the World Aerobatic Championships in Sherman, Texas.



Harvey & Rihn Aviation, La Porte, Texas. Est. July 1, 1979.

After doing some instruction in her free time, she left her career in health care behind and joined Southwest Airlines, where she would stay for the next 27 years, operating the flight school on the side.

ACCORDING TO DEBBY, THERE ARE THREE THINGS THAT CAN MAKE YOU A BETTER, SAFER PILOT: LEARNING THE FULL ENVELOPE OF YOUR AIRPLANE, DISCOVERING YOUR PERSONAL CAPABILITIES, AND FIGURING OUT HOW TO CATCH A PROBLEM BEFORE IT BECOMES CRITICAL.

THREE ELEMENTS OF BEING A BETTER, SAFER PILOT

Aerobatics is part of Debby's school and her life as a pilot because safety is important to her, she said. According to Debby, there are three things that can make you a better, safer pilot: learning the full envelope of your airplane, discovering your personal capabilities, and figuring out how to catch a problem before it becomes critical.

"We encourage all of our students to do spins and a little bit of upset recovery," Debby said. "It's hard not to do aerobatics or want to do some if you're surrounded by it. You see people out doing it, coming back smiling and happy. People don't get that false impression that it's scary and dangerous and it'll hurt you."

The school teaches all kinds of students, both local and just passing through the area. She said it's listed in overnight books in Houston, and some students drop in for a couple days of instruction or a few lessons.

Debby learned aerobatics from her late husband Eoin Harvey. Her first lessons were in a Cessna 150 Aerobat just a year before the school opened. As soon as she had the basics mastered, she began teaching and spending time on the weekends coaching away from her home airport.

Over time, she developed a pretty straightforward philosophy about aerobatics: Even a little bit of aerobatic training makes a more proficient pilot. And beyond that, competition aerobatics grows and stretches pilots in new ways.



PERSPECTIVES ON LEARNING AEROBATICS

CONFIDENCE AT THE CONTROLS

Jerold A. Greenfield wrote an article about what he learned from aerobatics training, and said it helped him build confidence at the controls. "The real advantage of this training is that it demonstrates the gravitational forces that act on your airplane, requires you to understand them, and shows you how to deal with them," he said.

ELIMINATING DISCOMFORT OF DIFFICULT LANDINGS

Rick Durden wrote in an AVweb.com article that he took an aerobatic lesson in order to improve his landings. "Part [of training] is learning where to look to get the information you need as to where the airplane is going — you establish reference points that allow you to make the airplane go where you want it to," he said.

REDUCING FEAR OF THE UNKNOWN

California air show performer Spencer Suderman told AOPA that unusual attitude training takes the fear out of the unknown. "If you learn unusual attitudes you will be comfortable when there are unknowns," he said. "When you don't know what it's like to be upside down in the airplane, you are fearful."

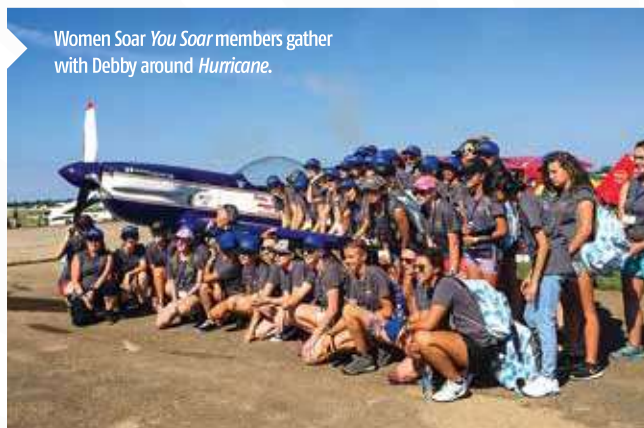
UPSET RECOVERY AND SPINS SHOULD BE MANDATORY TRAINING

Many flight schools, both foreign and domestic, highly recommend aerobatic training before students get into the habit of keeping the aircraft far from its performance margins. Students should have the opportunity to experience the limits of the airplane with the safety of an instructor nearby.

Debbly getting ready for takeoff with student and brother Scott Furstenburg.



Women Soar You Soar members gather with Debbly around Hurricane.



LEARNING TO GIVE YOURSELF A LITTLE GRACE

Debbly believes aerobatic training helps you become a life-long learner, competing against yourself, not other pilots. "I think competition really teaches you discipline. It's a discipline whether you do air shows or not," she said. "It can be fun and enjoyable for everyone even though we're all Type A personalities. Really, competition is a competition with yourself. You're putting your skills up against perfection."

When she's in the airplane with students, Debbly's goal is to help them see and understand their own mistakes. Many students don't look far enough outside of the airplane to have full situational awareness — they're stuck seeing only what's under their noses, suffering from tunnel vision. Once they relax a little and trust the instructor, she says their field of vision really opens up and allows them to execute maneuvers with precision.

Sometimes her students freeze at the controls and can't relax. Debbly carries a stick for such occasions when they need just a "little nudge," she said.

Harvey & Rihn Aviation prefers to give students more than what's required in their training, especially spin training. According to the FAA, more than half of stall or spin accidents happen in the traffic pattern when the aircraft is too low to recover. This is where aerobatic training may be beneficial, albeit not preventive. Rob Mark, author of *Flying* magazine's February 2018 article "The Persistent Threat of Loss of Control," argued that many pilots can't actually articulate the techniques for recovering from stalls, even though they may understand the cause. Many aerobatic instructors would probably argue that even a small amount of upset prevention and recovery training would mitigate and shrink this gap for pilots.

"Our flight school encourages everyone to do spins. We like them to understand what all the controls do and how they affect and aggravate spins. If everything fails, you know what you're capable of as a pilot," Debbly said.

I asked Debby what advice she gives to students who are considering aerobatic training. Without hesitation, she said not to learn aerobatics from YouTube, and I laughed nervously. As a millennial, I'm guilty of "learning" things from free amateur videos.

"It's hard to unlearn what was improperly trained," Debby said. "If they learn from someone that's qualified with a curriculum, they start the right way." And she said competition aerobatics gives students a place to use their skills and learn even more.

Debby has no problem keeping her skills sharp. She is still an air show performer, has competed multiple times in the Air Race Classic, and, as of this interview, planned to race at Reno in September this year.

Retirement from the airlines hasn't slowed her down one bit. If anything, she's looking forward to spending more time with her students.

"If I can pass on just a fraction of my experiences to someone else, I'd be happy, because mine have been great," she said. **IAC**



Debby completed the last flight of her 27-year career with stepdaughter Chris Dale in the right seat.

Debby performs at EAA AirVenture Oshkosh 2016 during IAC's "Grass Roots to the Top of the World" themed exhibition.

