

RICK VOLKER



Rick Volker is an unlimited category International Aerobatic Club pilot and has competed in aerobatic competitions for many years in high performance aircraft such as the Pitts and Sukhoi. Rick has won numerous regional aerobatic events. He is a former competitive swimmer, speed skater, bicycle racer, cross-country skier, and body builder. Such is the type of conditioning required to fly at this level, as Rick alternates between plus 11 and minus 6 Gs, often in the same maneuver.

Rick is a practicing dentist in Niagara Falls, New York and currently teaches advanced aerobatics to local pilots in their own aircraft.

WAN: What inspired you to learn to fly?

RV: I have had a long history of launching myself into the air to get a thrill. It started with competitive springboard diving, then pole-vaulting, snow ski aerials, hang gliding, jumping motorcycles, cars, and snowmobiles. I found I kept hitting the ground a little too soon with all of those activities. Then one day, I watched a Pitts Special doing tumbles and the light went on. I could do that. I went to my first airshow and Patty Wagstaff was the first performer and the most amazing pilot I had ever seen. I had to learn to fly like her.

WAN: When did you learn to fly?

RV: Eleven years ago, my family gave me an introductory flight as a gift. As a student pilot, I had my first aerobatic flight with Eric Haagenson in a Pitts. Bill Thomas taught me aerobatics in a Pitts S2B. I was his last student. I spent the next five years in aerobatic competition. The last two years were in the unlimited category.

WAN: Why did you choose aerobatics as a career?

RV: It provides me with the opportunity to continually chal-

lenge myself. No other activity has provided me with such a straight-line learning curve. With most things, the curve flattens after a few years. In flying, the learning seems to continue at the same rate, even after 11 years. When it flattens, I'll fly warbirds or do some air racing. Part of the challenge is to minimize the risks.

That means practicing my act at typical airshow altitudes and at extremely high density altitudes to prevent surprises. I never improvise at an airshow.

WAN: You have two careers, are also very athletic, and you fly every day; where do you find time to do all of these activities?

RV: I am fortunate to be able to manage my schedule so that I can fly during a daily two hour lunch break. I hit the gym in the evenings. I throw in some biking, ju jitsu, or cross-country skiing. I am a person who never sits down. I thrive on personal challenge and participation.

WAN: Please describe your aircraft and why you chose it?

RV: I fly a Sukhoi SU26M. It is Caterpillar tractor tough. It has the best looks of any aircraft, demonstrates great gyroscopics, has perfect speed range/G limits, and a radial engine sound. I loved my Pitts S1, which enabled me to learn faster than any other aircraft, but the way I fly, I push right up against every limit it has. I beat it up too much having fun. The Sukhoi can give ME a beating. That's fair isn't it?

*Rick in front of his Sukhoi
(photo by Askin Taner).*

WAN: What do you think have been your best and worst airshow experiences?

RV: My best experience was entering the box over the water at the Canadian International Air Show in Toronto for the first time. Over the three day show I performed in front of over 1,400,000 spectators and felt pumped, focused, flew my best, and was not nervous. I realized then that airshow flying is where I belong. The worst experience was flying four times at a two-day show this year, only to discover that the promoter was unable to pay me.

WAN: In the 12 minutes of your show, what would you say is your favorite part?

RV: A vertical roll up into a multiple knife-edge spin up into a rolling hover with a micro-loop finish. It just feels so "Sukhoi" as does my knife-edge loop. The hardest is a loop with continuous rolling all the way around. When it is perfect, it feels like a signature. Speaking of signatures, I've been doing a cartwheel that draws an "R" in the sky. Any gyroscopically dominated figure combination really lights me up.

WAN: Are there any changes to your act for 2007?

RV: In addition to my solo act, I have a formation aerobatic act with Tery Lebel, formerly of the Canadian Forces Snowbirds. We have a truly innovative act with a Sukhoi and a Decathlon. It's not another squirrel cage. Think of it as "Sesame Street meets an Airshow." I will not say any more, except that these disparate aircraft are amazing together.