



Indoor Electric Festival

By Michael Ramsey



*(Left) Angelo Lomeli coaches his 3-year-old son Sebastian while hovering an E-flite Blade CX.
(Right) This well-advertised event had the floor filled with spectators. Among the products displayed the G3 flight simulator was popular.*

Every hobbyist owes it to himself or herself to go to at least one fun-fly a year. If you can commit to only one, I highly recommend that you consider going to a different one each year. You never know who you might meet or what events might be in store.

A fun-fly is like your favorite restaurant; find a good one and you'll be back often. What I wouldn't give for a good Chicken Marsala and a little tiramisu with a cappuccino right now. Yummy! I've visited many restaurants, and each one does things slightly different; sometimes that can be part of the fun.

When you find a flying event that is well organized and entertaining, your tummy gets full and you just know you want to come back for more. Many clubs host fun-fly events, and the mix of games, contests, and prizes combine to obtain a critique with many stars as the rating.

Consider how good a flying event could be if the biggest manufacturers and distributors in the country hosted it. It would be like going to New York City and knowing 100% that you were going to find a great Italian bistro, complete with fine wine and candlelight (okay, the candle depends on the guest[s]).

February 11-12 in Champaign, Illinois, was the opportunity to experience an indoor flying event hosted by the largest hobby distributor in the country: Great Planes Model Distributors (Hobbico).

Are your eyes popping yet? They should be; just imagine the door prizes. The first 50 registered pilots received a free Great Planes FlatOut kit.

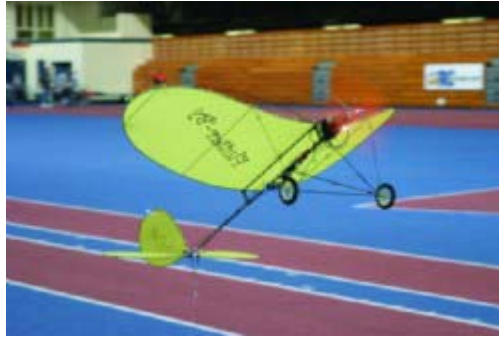
However, Great Planes didn't hog all the glory of this event; after all, it isn't the only quality hobby distributor in town. Horizon Hobby was welcomed to display at and participate in the event, and other top companies in the hobby joined in as well; check out the sponsor list.

The camaraderie between manufacturers at the event reminded me that we're all in this for the love of aviation. Sure, everyone is competing to make a buck, but when you get down to it that little bit of competition is the incentive from which everyone benefits. New ideas and technology are what keep this sport so vivacious and enjoyable. It was rewarding to see these friendships flourish.

The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Armory field house is enormous. The arched ceiling over the approximately 100- x 300-foot open space tops out at 100 feet. The floor surface is a textured rubber-type material—not so hard if you crash your model.

Skylights in the ceiling rain daylight down while large, arched windows flank the ends of the facility. Three large light fixtures are spread across the length of the walls, and their bright light is about the only inconvenience; flying past them can make a pilot squint.

There were enough vendors and experts at the event that if you wanted to get started in the hobby, by the end of the two days you'd be flying 3-D aerobatics solo. The back wall of the building reminded me of the Toledo Weak Signals' trade show, there were so many vendors.



AMA Education Director Jack Frost designed this Flutter-By electric model for three channels. It's a blast to fly.



An option for the E-flite Blade CX is a replacement body finished in blue.

More than 200 pilots were registered Saturday alone, and they logged more than 500 flights; that's judging by how many times the frequency pins went out. Count the pilots with Spektrum spread spectrum radio systems (there were a ton), and I'm sure the flight count takes a big leap.

The flightline was extremely busy, and there was a line of pilots waiting for a pilot station during many parts of the day. Officials at the event kept things rolling, and I admired their attention and consistency in fairly giving everyone a turn to fly. Flightline boss has got to be a thankless job. Lead organizers Frank Noll and Amanda Price did a great job of running things smoothly.

Many times during the day specific types of aircraft were scheduled their own times to fly; slow flyers, Scale models, helicopters, and jets got a turn to show off. Open flying filled time slots between and at noon and 5 p.m., and demonstration time premiered some of the hottest and newest aircraft. Great Planes, Horizon, and other companies had their share of surprises to contribute.

From a spectator's point of view the E-Fest could be described as a circus (not meant in a bad way). Center stage is a wild vision of flying artistry. All the while, "Mouth of the South" Bob Sadler is the ringmaster under the Big Top with impromptu interviews, humorous commentary, and insight that is simply brilliant.

Special events were scheduled for Saturday evening, beginning with Ultimate Combat. This hammerhead contest was fast-paced and gripping. The pilots didn't do anything silly, like try to cut streamers or something typical such as that. This was a full-contact event in which the last airplane to touch the ground was the champion. Rules like this separate the men from the boys; 20 pilots entered the contest for a single cash prize.

Combat lasted three rounds. The first five pilots to crash in the two preliminary rounds

ousted themselves from the money. In the third round the 10 remaining fliers battled until the last model was left. The event unfolded where each of the first two rounds was finished in less than a minute. It was over too quickly to really enjoy the thrill.

However, in the third round there wasn't a single contact made for at least the first three minutes of the heat. (Three minutes is like three hours in Combat time.) The crowd members began to let out their enthusiasm and really started cheering on the pilots. Soon the pilots began plinking each other out of the air, and it was down to just two.

Those two aircraft did everything they could but make contact with one another. The contract between them was as obvious as the battle between the tortoise and the hare. One of the aircraft was a foamie biplane (light and slow) and the other aircraft was a Combat flying wing (fast and sturdy).



Jason Noll, with his father Frank (Frank's model shown), designed and built a pair of Shorts Sky Vans from 3mm and 6mm Depron. A pair of RimFire motors fly this 11-ounce model.



The Armory was spacious enough for a large number of models to fly at one time. This view depicts some of the Combat action.



The Butterfly from Plantraco Hobbies is slow enough to fly in an average living room. Ron McGrath gives it a light toss.

The Combat wing had a distinct advantage in that it could probably rip through anything it came up against and keep flying onto its next victim. However, the foam aircraft was basically floating tissue paper. And if that wasn't handicap enough, its battery was deeply drained.

All bets were in, and eventually the victor looked to be the Combat wing. Many "oohs" and "aahs" voiced the narrowness of the near-miss collisions. Just when you thought it couldn't go on any longer, crash! The Combat-wing pilot lost orientation and smashed his steed into the floor. Larry Marky won that joust and landed his aircraft safely.

In the spirit of good sportsmanship, Larry waved in acknowledgement of his triumph and then flew his foamie again. He took it high into the rafters and then pointed his winning airplane straight down on the far side of center stage. Bam! The gallant aircraft took its last bow. How's that for valor?

Following the Combat event, the evening moved into the Heli Smackdown: a freestyle contest in which six pilots put their best, and only, flight forward. The audience members were the judges. This is where I lost my voice, rooting for the pilots as their models did their dances.

All the helicopter pilots flew intensely, and in a few cases you could tell how hard they were pushing themselves; three of the six pilots had "incidents" with their machines. The top three fliers were the best of course, but they also finished with their helicopters in the same condition they were in at the start of the flight.

In addition to winning the contest, Nick Maxwell was honored by Wendell Adkins (Extreme Flight Championships [XFC] committee chairperson) with an invitation to fill the last pilot slot in the XFC Helicopter contest. Nick gladly accepted, and the best of luck to him in Dayton, Ohio, in June.

The E-Style event was special for me because the director of the contest—Mark Jorgenson—asked me to be one of the five judges. I was honored by the invitation and gave Mark some well-deserved reverence in appreciation. This was my chance to put all those IMAC (International Miniature Aerobatic Club) judging classes to work.

Ten pilots were invited to participate in this freestyle contest with their indoor electric-powered aircraft. Given one flight per pilot, they would perform a two-minute program with a diverse yet specific set of criteria.

This was like an RC Aerobatics contest, only the maneuvers weren't absolute. The pilots were responsible for composing a flight sequence that explored the flight envelope by demonstrating a variety of aerodynamic and gyroscopic maneuvers. If they spent the whole two minutes doing rolling maneuvers, a large part of their score would be lost.

The individual maneuvers had to be skillfully executed. You may be thinking, If you don't know what the flight is supposed to look like, how is a judge supposed to score whether or not it was done correctly?

The way I looked at it, if any of the maneuvers looked like they were aborted, they would get a downgrade. I wanted to see many upright and inverted maneuvers, as well as knife edge and vertical sequences. Aircraft equipped with variable-pitch power sources gained extra points, but only if the use of the system was well executed and emphasized the choreography.

Jason Noll devised a way to add smoke contrails to his flight sequence. That was a unique approach to personalizing his sequence, but a full two-minute fight with the smoke on was a bit much for me. He did earn top marks from me for his execution, versatility, choreography, and positioning; therefore, I feel his first-place standing was well deserved.

After the contests were completed it was time for some night flying. For one hour the lights were turned off and the "ghost" aircraft took to the air. The variety of aircraft didn't seem to change for the lack of sight. There were foamies, helicopters, slow flyers, and even a flying saucer. You name it, and if it blinked or glowed in the dark it was flown.

That concluded Saturday's events. Whew!

Sunday had a much more relaxed format. The flightline was a bit less crowded—perhaps because this was a traveling day for many people, including myself. I was even able to squeeze in a few flights with my Honey Bee helicopter.

Flying indoors will spoil you quickly, especially when hovering practice is planned. We all long for those calm-weather days, and where else can the conditions be better than inside?

Flying at the Armory didn't feel any different from flying at the local ball park; after all, the available space was as large as a professional soccer field.

The foamies and slow flyers were the most popular type of aircraft flown. There was surely was enough space in which to fly any of the GWS scale models and even some of the more popular Speed 400-sized models. Jets were a popular speed choice; many ducted-fan and propeller designs were flown with regularity.



Devin McGrath demonstrates just how “locked” his Nikitis Animal is in a hover; he needed only rudder and power to maintain position.



Mike Fuller’s Hydrofoil was built from a Hangar One Hobbies kit. The bottom of his Miss Hangar One is coated with a special Teflon material.



Jason Noll stole the show during his E-Style routine by incorporating environmentally safe smoke effects into his Eclipse biplane.

Many aspects of this event made me feel that it would be worth attending again. I liked that there was a large number of tables available at which pilots could pit and set up work stations. Along all the tables there were extension cords with power strips every 10 feet or so.

The most courteous pilot comfort was the two worktables at the flightline entrance designated the “Fix-It” areas. Depron-foam sheets and glue were provided so that aircraft involved in mishaps could be made right for flying again.

“Oh the weather outside was frightful, but inside it was so delightful ...” Although it wasn’t the holiday season, the cold winds and snow flurries made me glad to be indoors. This is a fun-fly event I’d like to make into an annual reunion.

Congratulations to Great Planes for organizing such a great weekend. Come summertime I hope there is thought about getting together for another fun occasion in Champaign. How about an outdoor fun-fly this time? MA

Michael Ramsey
michaelr@modelaircraft.org