

# The gender gap

BY THOMAS B. HAINES

## WAYPOINTS

**WE** are awash in numbers:

power and altimeter settings, flight time, accident statistics, number of aircraft produced, wind correction angles. As pilots, we can spout off a series of numbers to satisfy any question—approach speed is  $1.3 \times V_{SO}$ ; standard ILS minimums are 200 feet and a half mile; 29.92 inches of mercury and 59 degrees Fahrenheit are standard conditions at sea level. And yet there's one stalwart number that none of us can explain, an embarrassing statistic that refuses to budge. It's not an accident statistic—we've been successful in trending those down over the years (but there's still lots to be done). Yet this stubborn stat may be just as deadly to this thing we call general aviation as a high fatal accident rate.

Six percent. Why is it that women represent a bit more than 50 percent of the population, yet only six percent of pilots are women? For decades, the percentage of female pilots has hovered between four and six. At the same time, the number of women physicians and attorneys—two other once-male-dominated professions—has shot up dramatically in the last 20 years.

If you consider aviation an avocation rather than a vocation, use golf and skiing as examples. There, too, women have made great inroads—far greater than they have in aviation. Although the percentage of female pilots has remained low, the number with airline transport pilot certificates has increased significantly in the last decade.

Last month in this column, I wrote about the dismal number of student pilots these days and how the industry organization GA Team 2000 has set a goal to reverse the declining pilot population. There is a modicum of success to report. Through the first six months of the year, the number of student starts is

up more than six percent—the first upward trend in years. While GA Team 2000's fledgling advertising campaign may have had some impact, a bigger factor is probably the steady economy.

Still, there's no ready explanation for the flat percentage of female pilots. Surely the environments at the flight schools have changed from the good old boys' club to something inviting to women. Most instructors these days are young people who have grown up in a time when women have been treated more as equals than in generations past.

Several new and student women pilots I've talked with lately have felt no discrimination or intimidation from men. Joni Fisher, a new pilot from Auburndale, Florida, didn't find any discouragement from the men who hang out at the airport. At first she noticed that the conversation sometimes stopped when she walked up. Only later did she find out that she had interrupted a joke or story the men were not comfortable finishing in front of her. "People have treated me like an equal. Some are a little surprised when they find out I'm a pilot, but my husband [also a pilot] gets the same reaction."

Fisher believes that more women of her generation are not pilots because when she grew up in the 1960s, "girls were exposed to fewer career opportunities." Men were pilots and women served drinks in the back.

Like many women whose husbands are pilots, Fisher started taking lessons because she was worried about what she might do if something happened to her pilot. "I was concerned about what all those things [in the panel] were for," she remembers. A few tentative lessons soon fired up a real passion for flying. "After I was into it for a while, I discovered six other women I already knew who were also pilots. So now we often

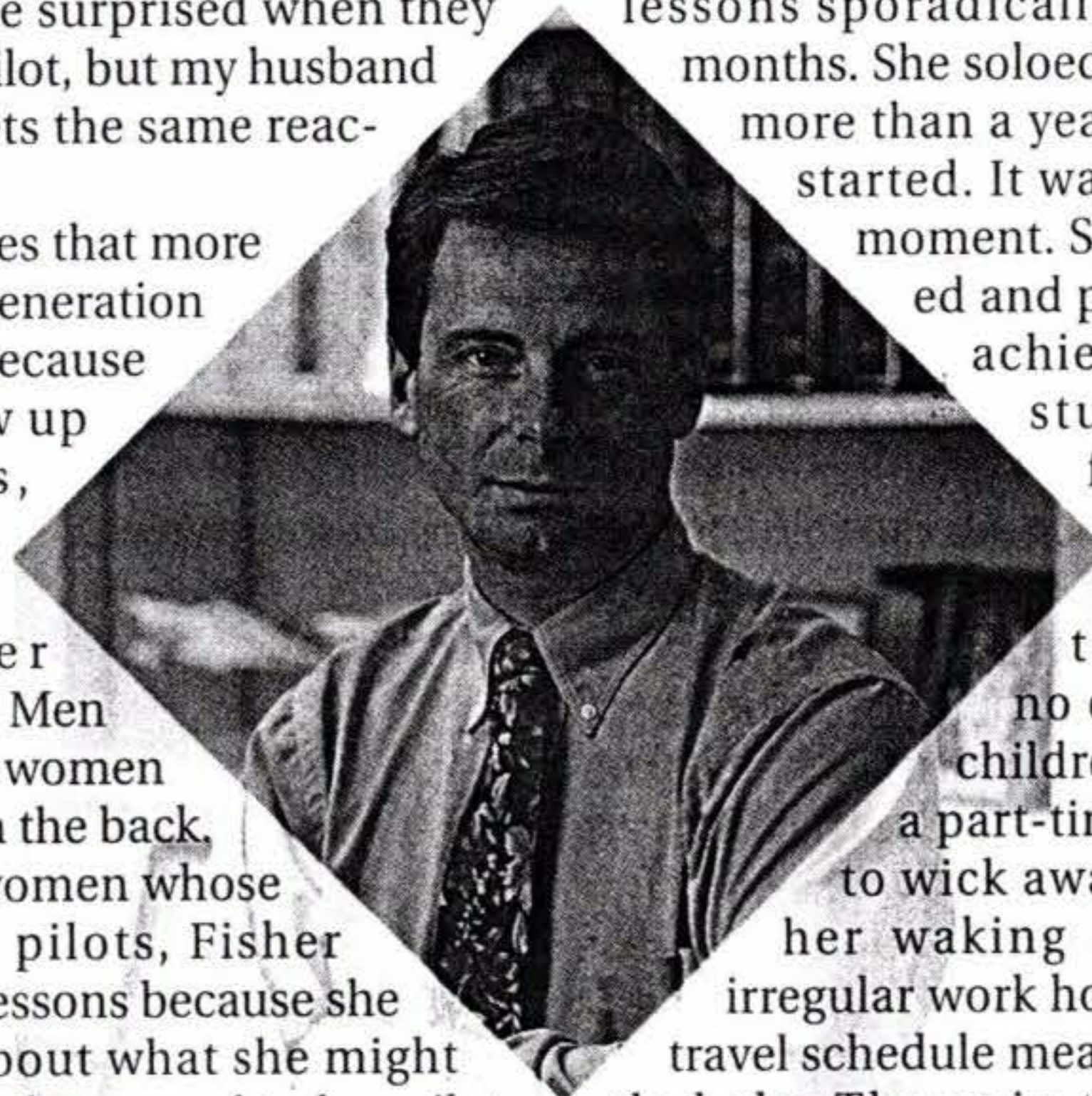
go out for \$100 hamburgers."

She earned her certificate in June 1996, 10 months after starting training. She now often flies the family's Cessna 182RG with her husband and daughter. Aerobatics in a newly acquired Decathlon is her next goal, to be followed quickly by an instrument rating. The airplanes are a bigger expense than the family's ski boat, but they are also more fun and a decent investment, she says. "Flying is something I can do for the rest of my life; that's probably not true with water skiing."

While Fisher achieved her goal of learning to fly, she recognizes how hard it can be for some others. A friend of hers started taking lessons but dropped out—at least until her child starts school. "For me it was 10 months of working my flying around carpooling the kids, instructor and aircraft availability, and the weather." Her friend also had to arrange babysitting for her toddler every time she wanted to fly.

Certainly caring for children generally is a greater concern for women students than for men. It's been an issue for my wife, who has been taking lessons sporadically for nearly 18 months. She soloed last Labor Day, more than a year after she first started. It was a bittersweet moment. She was as excited and pleased with the achievement as any student, but the fact that it took as long as it did has frustrated her to no end. Two small children at home and a part-time job conspire to wick away almost all of her waking moments. My irregular work hours and regular travel schedule mean that I'm of little help. Throw in the occasional weather day and her instructor's busy flight schedule and weeks can go by between lessons.

The frustration over her lack of progress often culminates on the days that she actually can go flying. Usually a few words of encouragement from me





will get her to the airport.

After the lessons, though, she comes home pumped up about the flight. She always wants to sit down *right now* and tell me all about it.

Watching her struggle through the experience makes me often assess my own flying. If I had to start over again, would I? If I had to maintain the same schedule I do, only in some other line of work, could I squeeze flight lessons in? It's sobering to realize the level of commitment it takes to learn to fly. Through observing her effort, I have developed a

new level of respect for those who are up to the challenge of earning the certificate.

For Sara Miller, a 50-something-year-old English professor, learning to fly has also proved challenging. "I have a Ph.D. and I don't think getting that was this hard. All of those numbers you pilots have...that's very difficult for me," she says. "And I'm a good student; I know how to study." The ground school in particular has given her new respect for her older students. "We forget how difficult it becomes to learn as you get older.

I've learned a lot about teaching from my instructor." Her flight instructor is also the ground instructor at Northern Virginia Community College, where she also teaches.

Miller's husband, a private pilot, owns a quarter-share of a Piper Cherokee 140. It was his interest in airplanes that prompted her to learn to fly. Like Fisher, she was concerned about how she might land the airplane if something happened to her husband. She took a Pinch-Hitter course and found that she really enjoyed the flying. "My instructor and I laugh and have a really good time. Every time we take off, he says, 'The folks at Kings Dominion [a nearby amusement park] are paying big bucks and not having near the experience we are.'

"When I was eight, I spent an entire summer jumping from a barn loft with an umbrella, convinced that I could fly. But when I grew up, it just wasn't something that women did," she remarks.

Miller characterizes her motivation to learn to fly as the "empty-nest syndrome." Her two children are grown, and she finally has the time to do something for herself. "I've raised teenagers, so nothing scares me anymore," she quips. Flying has become a whole new chapter in her life. "I really like to fly, especially the takeoffs. I really enjoy the feeling when we're moving away from the ground. It's just a neat thing."

She hasn't exactly kept her enthusiasm to herself. She submitted an article about her flying experiences to *Newsweek* magazine for its "My Turn" column. Much to her surprise, her article, titled "Earning Your Wings," appeared in the September 29 issue. GA Team 2000 gave her a special award for the article, recognizing her contribution in spreading the good word about general aviation.

Those who struggle in relating what it's like to fly might borrow a few words from Miller, a woman who has been there. Her *Newsweek* article closes: "But whatever happens, being able to fly—even just a little—changes the way you walk on the ground, I've discovered. I frequently glance at the sky, since it is now an important part of my life. I feel lighter, as if I'm not so firmly planted here. The roads I drive on seem so much more crowded and threatening than before, and I understand something of what the poet must have meant when he wrote that he had 'slipped the surly bonds of earth.' I have, too." □

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