



New Flying Club NOW Ready for “Take Off”

by Sydney Sinks, News Reporter
September 18 2023 1:55 PM



BETHALTO - It's been almost six months in the making, but the Piasa Flyers are ready for Take Off. Members of the club are now proud owners of a 1968 Piper Cherokee 180D.

The plane has low hours, is in good shape and should be a great first plane for the club, said member Don Hill. “It has a 180 HP engine that is capable of flying cross country at 145 miles an hour and still meets the needs of a trainer aircraft.”



The plane was purchased from a private seller in Baltimore, Maryland, and flown back to the St. Louis Regional Airport by member Rob Kurtz this past Monday. The Search Committee, formed about a month ago, included Joe Rather, John Hentrich, Rob Kurtz, Paul Malcharek, Ron Jones, Vance Stutz and President Cody Peckham.

“I think we got pretty lucky,” said John Hentrich, treasurer of the organization. “Buying a 55-year-old plane located halfway across the country with no real experience was both tricky and a little stressful. None of us on the committee wanted to disappoint our fellow members, but we also had to move fast. Good deals don’t last long and so we had to rely a bit on faith in people, and the man upstairs. Hopefully, our luck will continue.”

Don Hill, a flight instructor for Lewis and Clark Community College, inspired the startup of this nonprofit club now incorporated under the name Piasa Flyers, Inc. Hill explained that most flying clubs have approximately 50 members and three aircraft. The Piasa Flyers group is currently capped at 25 members with the purchase of this first plane, but it has a waiting list and plans to allow more members soon.

“Once we have about 10 guys on the waiting list, we should be able to afford our second plane,” said Hentrich. “For me, the club is about relationships. It’s cool that we have two brothers in the club (Cody and Connor Peckham) and a father/son team as well (Jeff Helle and his 17-year-old son Trent). There are people from all kinds of different backgrounds and different skill levels. I’m enjoying learning from them all and getting to know them. It’s a great group of guys.”



Hill added that half of the club members are active or rusty pilots. Student pilots make up another fourth, followed by a few members who have no experience but are eager to learn. Most of the members are trying to meet the requirements to receive a private pilot'

s license from the Federal Aviation Administration, including 45 hours in the air. The club helps them reach that goal while connecting over their love of aviation.

Hill himself is fascinated by the history of flight and how aircraft like the club's classic 1968 Piper Cherokee 180D developed over the years. He explained that he loves flying because it allows him to travel more easily, adding that "you don't have to take your shoes off" at airport security.

"The first people that wanted to fly like birds gave that a try. They tried to build bird wings, and many failed," he said. "The overall purpose of getting into general aviation is to be able to develop a freedom where you can go when you want to go."

Club member Matthew Donaldson can appreciate Hill's passion; Donaldson has been flying since he was 15 and received his solo license on his 16th birthday. He had to set the hobby aside for a few years, but he treats himself to a flying lesson every year on his birthday. When he learned about the Flyers Club, he decided it was an affordable way to log his required hours and spend time in the air.



“When I was a little kid, I just always loved airplanes,” Donaldson said. “I just always wanted to fly. I had some extra money from working on a farm when I was 15 years old. My dad said, ‘What are you going to do with that?’ I said, ‘Take flying lessons.’”

Donaldson celebrated his birthday this weekend with another flying lesson, bringing him a few hours closer to his private pilot’s license. He is also excited to say that he’s a 1/25 owner of an airplane. As the club grows, Donaldson and his fellow members hope to connect with more pilots and expand the Piasa Flyers, the only flight club in the area.

If you are interested in attending meetings or joining the waiting list please visit PiasaFlyers.com for more information or email john@riverbender.com. The club meets on the second Wednesday of every month at 7 p.m. at St. Louis Regional Airport.