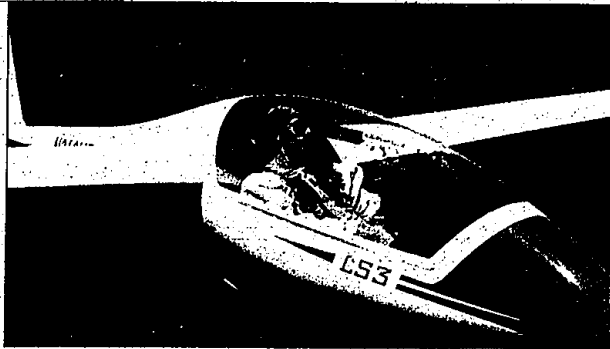


Sean Franke, 20, of Redford is right at home in the cockpit of his fiberglass sailplane, often competing against people twice his age in the sport of soaring.



High in the summer skies, this sailplane pilot goes for the big soar

By LARRY O'CONNOR
STAFF WRITER

AT 3,000 FEET IN THE AIR, a loud snap should elicit dire panic and a few prayers. The content look on pilot Sean Franke's face, though, reveals he's already in heaven.

The loud noise is the disconnection of the tow line from Franke's 600-pound fiberglass sailplane to an engine-driven aircraft, which serves as an umbilical cord of sorts as both climb into a vast blue sky.

Almost begrudgingly, the line exists. The rope symbolizes the contrast of an individual conquering the environment with the engine plane while the sailplane allows a person to be one with nature.

Far once severed, the Redford resident will navigate his craft without the mechanical means of a propeller or fuel.

Franke's flight is a rendezvous with the atmosphere where rising heat from the ground, known as thermals, provide an spiral staircase of elevation. Some have soared as high as 47,000 feet using the earth's solar lifts.

"You know," says Franke, 20, preparing for another one of his more than 350 flights, "it still amazes me what you can do in a sail plane."

Franke's statement seems like a contradiction when compared to the business-as-usual way he goes about the sport.

He's a National Junior Champion in soaring circles and has already won four contests and holds three state records. Often, Franke finds himself competing against people twice his age.

THE BLOND-HAIRED Michigan State University junior smiling behind the aviator sunglasses looks like he should be masterminding some fraternity prank, not navigating an engine-less craft across the horizon.

Sometimes, it takes convincing. Last year, Franke traveled 240 miles while reaching heights of 13,600 feet at the Sports Club Nationals in Texas.

"When I came in, they said 'You decided to quit and come back to the airport, huh?'" Franke recalls. "I said, 'No, I finished the course.' They all stopped talking."

Talk recently has centered on the Junior European Soaring Championships June 22, in Sweden. Franke was one of two Americans to compete in the event, which is for people 25 years and younger.

This would serve as a mighty dose of ego for any 20-year-old. Franke rattles off his accomplishments as matter-of-factly as a librarian checking in books.

Part of the reason is Franke comes from a line of soaring competitors. His father, Manfred, is an avid participant in the sport as well as his grandfather, Herbert.

HIS WHITE SAILPLANE with a 15-meter wing span has been in the family for 12 years. Soaring is in his blood.

After World War II, the use of engine-powered aircraft was restricted in Germany. People like Franke's grandfather, Herbert, yearned for flight and turned to gliding instead.

After emigrating with his son, Manfred, to the United States in the late 1950s the tradition continued. Sean Franke received his first sailplane ride

when he was a year old; took his first flying lesson at 13 and soloed on his 14th birthday.

"In a way, it was kind of expected with grandfather and my dad both being pilots," Franke said. "Eventually I fell in love with the sport."

In one sense, it's an unrequited love. Soaring receives very little media coverage and few people are aware of the sport.

According to Mark Kennedy, editor of Soaring magazine, there are 24,000 soaring enthusiasts in the country. Sailplanes can run anywhere from \$4,500 for ones designed for hobbyists to \$75,000 for high performance ones engineered for competitions.

The sport is safe. In 1990, there were only four deaths resulting from soaring.

THE NUMBER of fatalities is relatively small, considering it's a sport that involves flying engine-less craft at high altitudes. Most pilots wear parachutes as a precaution.

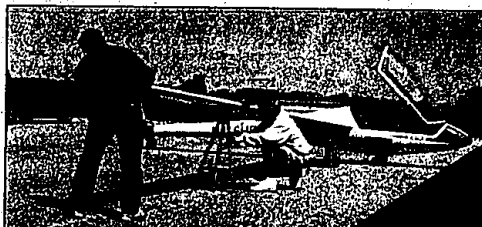
Soaring can be very intense. The game doesn't pit pilot versus pilot as much as pilot against the elements. Split-second decisions can mean the difference between winning or losing.

Pilots compete on a course, sometimes stretched out over hundreds of miles. They must photograph certain points along the course to verify completing it.

Once airborne, the frustrating part can be finding the thermal. Hard terrain in soaring temperatures provide ideal conditions for rising air. In mountainous regions, wind deflecting off the side of the hill also provides an uplift of air.

In Michigan, finding either is like looking for quarters on Skid Row. Franke

Follower of the fast wind



With the help of another pilot, Franke adjusts one of the wings on his sailplane that has been passed on through three generations of his family.

land and lakes can absorb the sun's heat instead of deflecting the air upward. As a result, heights of 5,000 feet in the state are considered a good day, although the drought in the summer of 1988 increased altitudes. Another key figure in soaring is the lift-over-drag ratio of the plane. For example, a plane that is 1,000 feet in the air has 40,000 feet before it has to land.

A SAILPLANE with a 40-to-1 ratio is considered a high-performance craft. Most planes range between 28-to-1 and 35-to-1.

Then there are days when the only hot air around is the pilot's exasperated breath.

"One time I couldn't find a lift," said Franke, recalling one flight to the Thumb area. "Thirty-five miles later I landed in a farmer's field. It just so happened his daughter was having a graduation party, so they invited me in for some food."

When a sailplane pilot finds a thermal, he's in his element. Rising air can lift a plane 1,300 to 1,500 feet per minute in hot climates such as Texas. An engine plane averages 500 feet a minute.

Also, there's the sense of accomplishment. Once airborne, a sailplane pilot doesn't depend on mechanical means. His flight is his own. Inside the glass bubble of the cockpit are a few gauges to measure altitude

and rate of descent. A home gel cell battery powers both the radio and the instruments.

Hand-operated controls operate wing and tail flaps. Franke examines everything before taking a visitor up for a ride.

IN THE SKIES over Ionia, the serenity of the moment is interrupted by the whir of the engine plane that tows the two-seater craft. Once reaching heights of 3,000 feet, Franke disconnects the line.

As if an act of defiance, the sailplane turns away from the power plane and cuts its own yet-to-be determined course.

Except for a few sudden dips, the ride is smooth. A whistle of wind against the Plexiglas bubble offers the only sound. Franke remains quiet, focusing instead on finding the ever-elusive thermal. A clear blue sky offers no red carpet to the stairwell on this day.

Slowly, Franke maneuvers the craft closer to the ground. The plane lands smoothly, almost effortlessly on the grass.

"There are a considerable amount of engine pilots who, if their engine fails, they wouldn't be ready to handle it," said Franke, who is also a licensed engine pilot. "You always have to consider the possibility of landing all field in a sailplane."

In soaring, though, you get to wing it.



Sean Franke (above) adjusts his parachute in preparation for a flight in his sailplane. The Franke plane (right) hovers 3,000 feet over Ionia as the pilot searches for the ever elusive thermal that will send his craft soaring into the blue skies.



Always curious and helpful, Franke towed another sailplane back after landing at Ionia Airport.

Franke's flight is a rendezvous with the atmosphere where rising heat from the ground, known as thermals, provide a spiral staircase of elevation.

