

# ONTARGET

BY PAT CANNON

## R-E-S-P-E-C-T!



All along, we have been talking about the pilot, crew chief and event directors. Now we need to talk about those unsung heroes that keep the large national and international events together with their expertise. We could not do it without them. So, we will call this segment “The Care and Feeding of our Observer”.

Now don't get me wrong. The last thing that I would ever do is to belittle the tremendous job that the observers do to keep the whole competition program on an even keel. They are the dampener on the system that levels the playing field for us as competitors, and they are rarely recognized for it to the extent they should be.

In my days of competition, I have met every kind of observer imaginable from the novice, first timer, to those that spoke little or no English, to Annie Prine, who taught me a thing or two about fair competition, while schlepping through the muck in Baton Rouge to find a baggie. I believe that it's an honor to be associated with this hard working group. They get up earlier than the pilots, rarely get a nap in the afternoon and are debriefing after the evening flight, well into their beverage time. In other words, they work harder than we do. While we are flying, they are riding along bumpy roads, covered in dust; wading through swamps, streams, or worse; running across fields of bull nettle; or just plain trying to keep a truck from running over your crew chief while they watch you throw your marker.

What I hope to do here is to instruct you on the proper attention to be given to your observer in the short time they will be with you. Let's do this by the numbers. We will call it our rules of thumb for the “Care and Feeding of our Observers”.

1. When meeting your observer for the first time, introduce yourself and your crew chief. Let them know, right away, about any particular procedure you have, like having them sign

the markers right in the briefing room. As every pilot is different, so are the observers. The more information you give them up front, the less apt you are to make a technical error as a result of bad communication.

2. Show courtesy when introducing them to your crew. They are going to spend several hours with you and they should know the names of everyone on the crew. Let them know what jobs are being performed by each as it might relate to the observer's responsibility. An example of this would be the person who will help with the tape measure, or who is responsible for road navigation and current position.

3. Don't over-crowd the chase vehicle, so that the observer is crushed against the window sill. Nothing is as disturbing to the observer as a gaggle of crew, all bunched up in the back seat of the truck, yakking away about last night's party. Could be that the distraction might cause the observer to miss an all-important event, like observing the marker leave the basket during a min-distance task. OOPS!

4. Don't attempt to skew the rules in your direction. Yeah, you all know what I'm talking about. For you politicians out there, every rule has an alter ego, and I would bet that you would be pretty good at finding it when it's in your favor. Don't do that. It ruins it for everyone, especially for a fairly new observer, who might just be swayed by your persuasion. They will invariably find out about it later and feel just awful. A more experienced observer just might write you up for unsportsmanlike conduct.

5. Be communicative about your intentions in flight. The observer is listening to the radio as well and will better understand and be able to anticipate your actions. If the observer is needed to verify a drop, measurement, or other rule related action, be clear about your request and make sure that your crew chief understands as well.



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6. Never, ever, abuse, or yell at your observer. They are volunteers. They do this because of their love of this sport and their dedication to the competition. If you do this to a brand new, starch pressed observer, they might just never come out again. If you did this to Annie, she would dump your scrawny butt in the nearest ditch. The only thing that happens when you get upset and abusive to an observer, is that they are less likely to do a good job and that will hurt your chances in any competition.

7. Let them help. I have never met an observer who didn't want to help on inflation and pack-up. Many of them are pilots or crew chiefs and quite a few are budding student pilots. They will soak up anything they can learn from you and will use it to be better pilots and observers. While it is not the job of the observer to bond with you, you can be very influential in

their growth within our sport.

8. You may not ask the observer for rules clarification, interpretation or amplification during the conduct of the task and flight. They may, at their own responsibility, help in the road navigation during the retrieve, but not to the extent that they are interpreting the position of goals. The observer is just that. They are responsible for the impartial recording of particulars of position, times and distances achieved during a task.

9. If you are so inclined, let the observer fly with you. In fact, this is a pretty good idea if you are flying a task that requires the observer to verify the exact time of the actual marker drop. If your observer is in the truck and out of sight of your drop, or has misplaced the binoculars, you could be in big trouble in the penalty department.

10. When you are done with the tasks, packed up and finished measuring your

results, work with the observer in the completion of the observer's report. If you have a question about anything that has been recorded, this is the time to ask about it. I usually do this in front of the debriefing area, while returning the observer. By the way, don't linger in the field. Get the observer back in as timely a manner as possible. They still have huge job to do before they have breakfast or dinner.

11. Lastly, as the title suggests, be nice to your observer, and always have chocolate on board. Observers lo-o-ove chocolate. Never met one that didn't. We like to call these "Observer Treats". We keep Hershey Kisses in the cooler and bring them out after the flight. Of course, when we're done, it usually ends up all over the observer report form, but it's worth it. I am a chocolate freak and most of my observers have been too. Now, after the flight, it's OK to do a little bonding and socializing.

It's good for the soul and your relationship with your new friend, the observer. One thing about competing in a foreign country with an observer who speaks no English. They all know the word "Chocolate". Just try it.

The observer has always been an integral part of competition, but their numbers are growing smaller. Fewer and fewer competitions are using observers and are substituting GPS for measuring. That's a little sad, and besides, have you ever tried to feed chocolate to your GPS? I have many, many observer friends and have developed personal relationships with some. I think that if we, as competition pilots, take a little extra time to provide the recognition and respect that the observer deserves, we would retain those that would otherwise leave the sport and maybe attract a few new ones as well.

