

Light Sport, Year Three

Building on the promises

By Alton K. Marsh

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Three years after FAA approval of the light sport aircraft (LSA) and sport pilot certificate, the industry has begun the hard work of making good on promises made when the industry started. It's slow work. Although most of the top manufacturers interviewed say they are pleased with new aircraft sales, sales numbers are lower than expected. The falling value of the dollar against the Euro has played a role, since most light sport aircraft are made in Europe.

LSA FIRM DATABASE

Explore a database of Light Sport Aircraft (LSA) businesses that offer flight instruction, rental, or maintenance. By [Dan Johnson's FIRM list](#) includes more than 100 entries, and new companies are added daily. Users can restrict or sort the information to rearrange how the data is displayed.

"I have a good sense that we are on the right track, but it might take longer," said Light Aircraft Manufacturing Association (LAMA) President Tom Gunnarson.

Sales slowed in October, leaving unsold aircraft on the ramp from those manufacturers who increased production to meet a market demand that nobody seems able to accurately predict. Yet few, if any, manufacturers dropped out of the market. We're not in a market shakeout yet.

A shakeout?

Last year, predictions called for a shakeout that would reduce the 21 companies now making LSAs ([according to the Web site](#)) to five or 10. It didn't happen, and the number of companies is growing, as is the number of LSAs available for purchase—59 models. Six more models have been approved but are not yet available for delivery. Dan Johnson, the chairman of the board of LAMA and a public relations consultant to LSA companies including the market leader, Flight Design, thinks the shakeout timing is unpredictable but will reduce the number of companies to between 10 and 20. "Some of the players can remain small, surviving on only 30 aircraft sales a year if they successfully corner a niche market," Johnson said, "but a handful of leaders will reach much higher production rates."

Last year, dealers and manufacturers were doing everything short of a rain dance to encourage Cessna to enter the LSA market and legitimize the industry. Not only has that happened, but Cirrus Design promises to offer a modified European LSA design. LAMA expects those changes to help, not hurt, smaller companies. "Cessna has a very focused niche market and won't take away from current manufacturers," Gunnarson said.

There are still missteps by manufacturers who face a steep learning curve to meet robust but agreed-upon industry standards. "For some companies this is the first venture into an environment where we have robust standards," Gunnarson said. "They are working with models that came from kits. There is a huge difference between selling a completed airplane and sending out a box of parts." Gunnarson is on a committee that inspects companies to make sure they meet manufacturing standards. A light sport aircraft is limited to two passengers, a maximum gross weight of 1,320 pounds (1,430 pounds for aircraft intended for operation on water, a single reciprocating engine, and a maximum speed in level flight of no more than 120 knots calibrated airspeed.

"While some manufacturers don't have a complete grasp of what is required by the new system, and may be hampered by language translation problems, it is true of inspectors as well," he said. "We have a long way to go to educate our own industry and the public as to how this all works."

New designs

Aircraft are taking on a more sophisticated appearance as manufacturers listen to the market and make changes. Most notably, several models at the Light Sport Aircraft Expo in

Sebring, Florida, in January had redesigned wings. Dealers said the new wings were designed to soften the ride through turbulence and improve landing characteristics. Fit and finish are improving along with cockpit interiors. Most LSAs have seats that do not adjust, so an increasing number of manufacturers are adding adjustable rudder pedals.

"Younger pilots and nonpilots are not yet targeted as they must be if the LSA movement is to succeed," Gunnarson said. Manufacturers are preaching to the choir, so to speak—the age 55-and-up crowd is the primary LSA market. Some of those customers want a second airplane that offers more simplicity and fun than their high-performance, traveling airplanes. LSAs may only carry two people and are limited to 1,320 pounds gross weight (seaplanes can be 100 pounds more) and a cruising speed of 120 knots. Other customers are concerned about meeting FAA medical standards in the near future, or the rising cost of fuel and maintenance for larger, more complex aircraft.

The biggest promise was for a \$60,000 airplane, yet the majority of LSAs cost \$100,000 or more. Johnson said that when the LSA movement started, the Euro was on a par with the dollar. If that were still true today, he said, the average LSA price would be \$75,000 to \$80,000. A half-dozen new aircraft were introduced at Sebring with attractive base prices, but popular options raise the price range from \$110,000 to \$137,000.

During the LSA Expo, retired Senior Circuit Judge Daniel True Andrews of Lakeland, Florida, placed a deposit on a Cessna 162 SkyCatcher. "I bought a used Cessna 150 in 1976 when I learned to fly for exactly the same amount as the \$5,000 deposit on the SkyCatcher," Andrews said. He said Cessna 150s are now too old to interest him. He owns a sophisticated twin-engine aircraft for business but wants a second airplane for fun.

"The industry started out at the top [model], but we'll see aircraft in the future that are more ultralightish," Gunnarson said. "We'll see light sport aircraft in the future at the \$49,000 level." At least two LSAs meet that price criteria today, but they appeal to a limited segment of the general aviation market, Johnson noted. Gunnarson predicted a new type of aircraft. Such aircraft will be greatly simplified, something that he feels has to happen if the industry is to grow. "They'll be more like a car. The traditional cockpit [looks like] a scary place," he said.

How's business?

So how are things in the trenches? Business has slowed a bit at one of the pioneering flight schools using two Sportstar trainers, St. Charles Flying Service, in St. Charles, Missouri, but that's because there are more LSA training centers offering competition. Owner Dennis Bampton said the trends in sport pilots seen last year continue: the average student age at his school is still 55 with the youngest student being 40.

Bampton has certificated 39 sport pilots. Three to five of them have gone on to obtain private pilot certificates. His Sportstars still rent for \$81 an hour, \$12 more than the school's trusty Cessna 152, but customers say they are willing to pay more to use a newer airplane. Bampton got a shock in 2007 when the lone Sportstar distributor went out of business, but the Ekvator company that makes the aircraft said it would open an office in Melbourne, Florida, near the Liberty Aerospace company. He hopes to switch to Cessna SkyCatchers.

Business is good at Chesapeake Sport Pilot at Bay Bridge Airport in Maryland. Tim Adelman said he has 50 to 60 active students training in two Sky Arrows and two Tecnam aircraft, but by the time you read this he will have five Tecnams, including two Tecnam Eaglets and two Tecnam Sierras (see "[Tecnam Aircraft: Peppy Companions](#)," November 2007 *Pilot*).

Students are booking weeks and months ahead to be sure of getting an aircraft for their training. Adelman began purchasing all-metal Tecnam aircraft after an incident involving a damaged landing gear on the composite Sky Arrow. The only shop that could perform the repairs was in Arizona, and Adelman swore off buying more composite airplanes. Johnson said LSA repair shops for heavy maintenance are generally more available than the one composite shop he found, but he says they still aren't easy to find.

Johnson has established a list [on his Web site](#) of maintenance shops, sport pilot flight schools, and LSA dealers.

"Our student base surprisingly encompasses a broad range of pilots," Adelman said. "We

have former pilots who have been out of aviation as long as 10 years. We have pilots that started private pilot training that subsequently became nervous about their medical. "We have pilots that just don't want to risk applying for a medical. And we have pilots that were looking for a low cost way to get into the cockpit. Some of these pilots have indicated that they will use all of their sport pilot time to convert to private pilot [certificates] at a later time. If I had to guess in terms of a breakdown, I would say 60 percent are over 55 and have some form of a concern about their medical or ability to get a medical, and 40 percent see us as an inexpensive and easy way to get into aviation."

If you find yourself among one of those groups, you may wish to give the LSA world a try.

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Special Light-Sport aircraft market shares through December 2007				
<i>Only fixed-wing airplanes given a rank</i>				
Rank	Manufacturer	Main model	Number of aircraft	Market share
1	Flight Design	CT LS *	226	20.2%
2	American Legend	Legend Cub	120	10.7%
3	Evektor	SportStar	81	7.2%
4	Tecnam	Sierra *	68	6.1%
5	CubCrafters	Sport Cub	66	5.9%
6	Interplane	SkyBoy	57	5.1%
7 tie	TL Ultralight	StingSport	55	4.9%
7 tie	Jabiru	J-250 *	55	4.9%
8	Fantasy Air	Allegro	49	4.4%
9	Aircraft Mfg & Dev (AMD)	CH-601XL	47	4.2%
10	Czech Aircraft Works	SportCruiser *	45	4.0%
11	Remos	G-3	34	3.0%
12 tie	Aeropro	EuroFox	25	2.2%
12 tie	IndUS	Thorpedo *	25	2.2%
13	I.I.I.	Sky Arrow	21	1.9%
14	Jihlavan	KP-5	16	1.4%
15	Rans	S-7 Courier *	15	1.3%
16 tie	Skykits	Savannah *	13	1.2%
16 tie	Aero	G700	13	1.2%
17 tie	Dova	Skylark	11	1.0%
17 tie	Zlin	Savage	11	1.0%
17 tie	Aeroprakt (FP&A)	A-22 Valor	11	1.0%
All others, less than 10 aircraft each **			54	4.8%
TOTAL AIRPLANES			1,118	100.0%
<i>with weight shift, powered parachutes, & gliders</i>			1,395	TOTAL
* Company has multiple models certified and counted here				
** Not all companies have registered aircraft with FAA				
Source: bydanjohnson.com				