

Head in the clouds

Westbank resident soars to international fame

By **DANE ANDERSON**
Staff writer

No one ever questioned that Ron Tabery would become a champion glider pilot. As a young boy growing up in Houston, he drew pictures of gliders and imagined flight paths in the sky. He built models of sail planes and read everything he could find on soaring. His first instructor was Neil Armstrong, who took him on his first flight in a glider plane when Tabery was only eight.

"There has never been a moment in my life when there wasn't a glider in the family and when I didn't think I would fly sail planes competitively," he recalled.

Ron's father, George Tabery, was a pioneer in the sport of soaring. A charter member of the Harris County Soaring Association, George Tabery invented and developed a number of instruments for gliders that are still in use today. He was the first glider pilot to add water to his plane to increase its weight in flight.

George Tabery would be very proud of his son today. Ron Tabery has won the United States National Open Class Soaring Championship five times and has represented the United States in World Soaring Championships in Austria, Hungary, France, Italy, New Zealand, Germany and Czechoslovakia as well as in the United States.

He currently holds almost all of the Texas Open Class speed records. His triumph in last summer's national championship held in Uvalde qualified him for one of six positions on the national team and will send him to Poland to compete in the 2003 World Gliding Championship.

Soaring is an unusual sport not well understood in the United States. It started with the Wright brothers in the early 1900s. In fact, Wilbur Wright made his living as a soaring instructor for many years after his historic flight at Kitty Hawk. Soaring competitions began in the



Ron Tabery is at home near the cockpit of his ASW22 open-class glider, which has a wing span of nearly 90 feet.

1920s, but really took off in the 1930s.

"People think we jump off cliffs," said Tabery. "They think we have contests to see who can stay up the longest or to see who can go the highest. Those would be pretty uninteresting activities."

Tabery's wife, Gena, offers a simple description of the sport.

"These are the best pilots in the world who go up in the air without engines and stay up there a long time flying very, very fast," she said.

Most glider planes are towed into the air by other single-engine planes. Once he or she reaches about 2000 feet, a glider pilot releases the tow rope and immediately begins to look for a strong rising air current to gain altitude. In order to go anywhere without a motor, pilots must climb up in pockets of rising air. They move across the sky traveling from updraft to updraft like bees going from flower to flower.

"Updrafts are typically like bubbles in a champagne

glass," noted Tabery. "Imagine that you swirled your champagne a little with a swizzle stick. You get a column of bubbles. Imagine that column of bubbles blowing around in the wind and you get a pretty good idea of what a thermal is like."

Of course, thermals are not really as easy to see as bubbles in a champagne glass, but there are clues that help pilots locate them. Birds look for rising air currents too, and they very good at finding them. Clouds are created by the updrafts underneath them. Most pilots navigate to thermals by reading clouds.

Once a thermal is located, the trick for a pilot becomes staying inside it for just the right amount of time before bouncing out and heading for the next thermal.

"Navigating inside a thermal is like riding a bicycle in a tight circle on a one-lane driveway," noted Tabery. "You are flying slowly upward in that tight pattern, drifting whichever way the wind takes



Tabery poses at the 1999 World Soaring Championship in Bayreuth, Germany, amidst nearly 100 glider pilots from countries around the world.

you."

To get a good mental picture of what flying in an updraft is like, keep in mind that the air around the glider weighs thousands of tons and is moving upward. A pilot's job is to stay in the whirling mass of air while navigating a plane that weighs less than one ton.

"It's a challenge," said Tabery. "You are like a tiny piece of lent being picked up by a Hoover vacuum cleaner."

When a pilot decides the optimal time to leave a thermal, he or she rolls out and heads in whichever direction appropriate. Once out of the

thermal, the air is no longer moving upward and the glider begins going downhill. The faster a plane flies, the faster it heads downhill and the farther the pilot has to climb up when he or she hits the next thermal.

The slower a plane flies, the slower it goes downhill and the higher it is when it hits the next thermal. The pilot then has less of a climb in the new thermal to reach enough height to fly again.

The trick is to decide whether to make a fast run and face a long climb or a choose a slow run and have a short climb. In order to

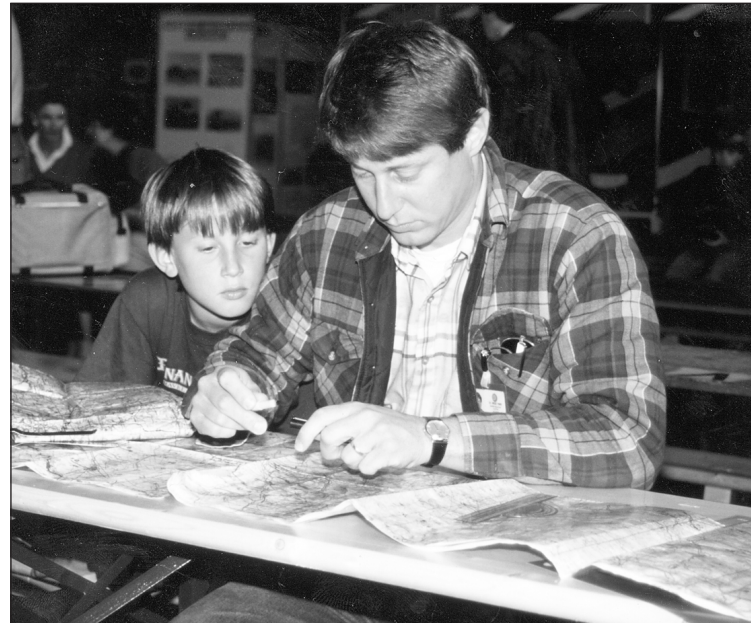


Photo by Chuck O'Mahoney

Poring over area maps, Tabery and son, Cyrus, make flight plans for the World Championship in Austria in 1989.

decide, a pilot has to be pretty good at predicting the strength of the next thermal.

If thermals are very strong, a pilot can afford to fly faster knowing it will take him or her less time to climb up again. Soaring is often characterized as three-dimensional sailing.

"Actually, it's more a game of aerial chess," said Tabery. "You get to determine whether you are going to be a pawn or a king. You have to make constant strategic decisions based on a multitude of changing factors all around you. If you haven't made a decision in a couple of seconds, you are just getting lazy."

Soaring races

There are two main types of soaring events. The most common is an event where pilots race against time on an assigned course. They might fly from Austin to Kerrville to Waco and back. Whoever runs the course the fastest wins the day. Timed courses are generally designed to cover 200 to 400 miles.

The second type of soaring event is based on a block of time. Pilots are given four hours to rack up as many miles as possible during the time period. They are allowed to go anywhere they choose between established points.

Tabery finds tranquility in soaring. "There is an equanimity or peace I get from flying high tech gliders," he said. "It's very cerebral. I don't really overcome Mother Nature. I work with her to get the most from each day with what I have been given."

"Soaring is just a part of the way I think," he said. "Even when I am on the ground, I am really in the air. When I swim or switch gears on a bicycle, I am thinking of flying."

Watching the sky

Gena Tabery noticed something a little different about her future hus-



Tabery skips a rock across a stream on his Barton Creek property. The land is an oasis of woods and water and provides the Tabery family with a quiet retreat right in its own backyard.



Above, Ron and wife, Gena, enjoy some quality post-flight time. At left, new dad, Ron, relaxes with his four sons: (from left) Pete Caponi, Cyrus, Maff Caponi and new arrival Julius. Cyrus is a qualified glider pilot and Pete has already flown with Dad on many flights.

band early on.

"It has always surprised me that Ron is not a very good driver," she said. "Then it dawned on me. He isn't looking at the road – he is looking at the sky."

Upon hearing his wife's comment, Tabery looked a bit sheepish and added, "I do better at night."

Tabery has always looked at the sky.

"I did the same thing with my dad," he said. "We would drive around looking at the sky and talking about it."

It was that habit of looking up that helped Tabery put Uvalde, Texas, on the international map. Transferred from California to Uvalde to take over the management of a synthetic fuels plant, Tabery thought he had been

sent to the end of the earth.

"Then I started looking at the sky," Tabery remembered. "It looked pretty good to me."

Before long, Tabery began soaring from the small Uvalde airport. He even got the airport manager involved in the sport. That manager, Mark Huffstutler, eventually got his own glider and competed against Tabery at nationals this year.

Tabery organized the first glider competition in Uvalde, which eventually led to the small town hosting the world championship in 1991. It went down as one of the great international soaring races of all time and made Uvalde a household name in gliding circles around Europe.

"When I travel in Europe to compete, I tell people I live in Austin, Texas," said Tabery. "They say, 'Oh, OK . . . is that anywhere near Uvalde?'"

When Tabery heads to Poland to compete in next year's world championship, he will be taking with him a crew of family support. Ron and Gena Tabery are the parents of four sons spread over 22 years. The eldest, Cyrus, is a research engineer at Advanced Micro Devices in California. He graduated first in his class with a chemical engineering degree from the University of Texas. Not surprisingly, Cyrus is a glider pilot.

His second son, Pete Caponi, is an eighth grader at West Ridge Middle School and has already picked up the soaring bug. The third son, Maff Caponi, is a sixth grader at WRMS and an avid football player. The newest Tabery addition, Julius, is only two but his smiling face can be seen in many photos taken at soaring

events.

Gena Tabery gave up an envious tenured position as chairman of her department at the University of Texas in San Antonio in American Studies.

"She changed academics and a Fullbright for diapers and a dishrag," joked Ron.

"After Julius was born, I felt I just needed to be with the boys," said Gena, who owns and runs Botanica Landscapes, a landscape design business with a growing reputation among Austin businesses and homeowners.

Tabery has a chemical engineering degree from UT and makes his living with an engineering firm he started in 1985. Turnpoint Engineering is primarily involved in the development and installation of septic systems and rainwater collection units.

Soaring is not an inexpensive sport. The stipend Tabery won for his most recent national championship did not even cover half his entry fees for the event. The Taberys will incur thousands of dollars in expenses to ship Ron's glider plane to Germany this year to compete on behalf of the United States in the world championship in Poland. In 1997, the U.S. military supported the American soaring team by shipping member glider planes and passengers back from the world event held in France. Such government support is unlikely in 2003.

"Sometimes I look at our plane and think, 'There is our new car and our vacation home on the beach,'" joked Gena.

"The payoff is that you get to travel in the French Alps and New Zealand with the best pilots in the world," added Ron.