ON**TARGET**

BY PAT CANNON

Competition Q & A

As an active competitor and competition columnist, I'm often asked about the material I write. For this issue, I decided to address two of those often asked questions.

The first deals with the idea of rules violation and the protest process. We have talked a little in the past about rules and some of the violations that commonly occur, but not with the whole concept of penalties and what you do when you receive one. So here goes...

What happens when you walk with confidence to the score posting area, only to find that you have received penalty points for some violation of the rules? Remember that there are many references in the rulebook that outline the reasons you may receive penalty points. You must be familiar with the penalties and where they may apply in order to stay away from them. If you don't know you violated a rule, you will truly be surprised when you are assessed the point reduction. This all comes under the heading of being confident that you and your crew chief have reviewed the applicable rules for each task and that you have studied the other rules that apply to your conduct and that of your crew.

So, let's say you find a penalty attached to your score and in your opinion, you did not violate the referenced rule. Now, I know how I feel when this happens. My first reaction might be confusion followed by anger, but I have learned not to succumb to that second emotion. It will make you look bad to the other competitors and officials alike. Letting your emotion take over will only hurt you in the long run. Believe me, I have been there once and will not go back.

Take a minute to review the task in your mind. Go back over every part of the flight to see if an official observing your flight might have a different perspective than you. You might just be able to see where you made a mistake. In fact, I will submit that most competitors will admit to the violation, once they are past the emotional reaction part.

If, after reflection on the imposed penalty, you are still not convinced that you are in violation, there are a couple of ways to deal with it. These are spelled out in the rules in section 5, but I will reiterate some of the important points.

If you are not familiar with the complaint or protest process, then the first step is to get to the event director or his designated official to ask for assistance in making the complaint or protest. They should be more than willing to help, even though you are calling to question one of their decisions. As a general observation, every director that I have known was willing to reverse a penalty decision if I could prove that the decision was in error. But as I said before, if the director explains it to you from a different perspective, you might just have to agree with him.

The first step is to verbalize your complaint to the director or his designated representative. You need to do this between the time the scores are posted and the beginning of the next task briefing. The director has an obligation to get back to you in 4 hours with an answer. Your complaint can also be in writing. It will be posted near the scores for general reading, and the director will answer this one in writing, posted with the original complaint for all to read.

If you don't agree with the director's answer to your complaint, you still have recourse. You may formally protest. A protest is different from a complaint in two areas. Your protest must be accompanied by a crisp $100 bill. You may get the money back, if you prevail, but count it gone if you lose.

Remember how at all sanctioned events, a jury is announced. Ever wonder what that was for? It's to deal with your protest.

The jury is made up of three members, chosen by the competition director, and their decision (done by sealed ballot) is final. Win or lose, you have now been through the gamut and if you are still not convinced, well, get the rule book out and look in the Appendix A, Section V.

Most complaints never get by the initial phase before resolution, but the other steps are available if needed. Just remember that you must conduct yourself as a professional. Do be courteous and respectful of the scoring officials, observers, and the director. Do not be abusive, use foul language or let your temper get the best of you. Your image and reputation as a competitor is at stake.

Next Question. Can and will GPS become the standard for official competition scoring? Yep, you heard right, no marker drop, just a fly-

Pat Cannon is a past US National Champion

by and zap, you are scored. This is a completely new process and is still in the development phase.

My first experience with the use of these devices in national competition as a sole means of determining scoring was in Waco. The unit in use was the E Trex, made by Garmin, and it was programmed to the altitude and track recording modes. We flew with them on all tasks, but they were generally used to determine things like altitude and track in the area of PZs.

At the end of the task the GPS was turned in at the hotel and forwarded to the scoring personnel for evaluation and recording. The tracks and altitudes were downloaded into a central computer for safekeeping and evaluation, based on it's use during the task. In one case, it was used to determine track and distance from a goal/target placed at a road intersection. This raised a little controversy as to accuracy.

The complaint raised was that GPS is still not accurate enough to tell who actually flew closer to a known goal coordinate. Since, without a ground GPS reference station, much like those that will eventually be used by airplanes to execute precision approaches solely on the satellite, GPS has known accuracy faults. While those accuracy deviations may only be a few feet since the military improved the previously skewed accuracy, ten balloons passing through the same airspace over the goal will probably produce an accuracy question.

When this question was raised in Waco, the event officials provided a very detailed explanation of the E Trex capabilities relative to the task in question. They showed several examples of how the task was scored and how the information recorded by the GPS was evaluated. I believe that both sides learned from that experience. The data acquired by the GPS was fairly accurate, but it was easy to see that a few feet of discrepancy was a possibility and could skew the results.

The GPS as a tool used in competition will have its place in the future of competitive flight. It may be used to create new types of tasks, with a futuristic, 3D goal in the air to fly through. It will certainly be used as an honesty tool as it relates to PZs and sensitive areas and will be used to define take-off and landing rules violations.

However, I believe that we are still some distance from using GPS as a definitive judge of accuracy as it relates to ground goal coordinates. Even a few feet of inaccuracy can call to question the results of a task where a number of competitors are too close to make an electronic call.

The question of whether the GPS will ultimately replace the observer has also been raised. I don't think we are there yet. Observers are still an important part of the competitive process. If you tried to run a multiple task structure where two or more tasks are PDGs, it could become ugly.

I don't believe that there is any more competitive task in national competition than getting a task sheet with PDG, PDG, PDG on it and the competition map as the area in which to choose the goals. It is truly a test of each individual competitor's skill and ability. That task cannot currently be called with GPS as the ultimate judge of accuracy. That day will come, but not yet.

Personally, I like the GPS concept. I believe that we can vastly expand the structure of tasks in 3D. A multiple gateway task might be very interesting, using both vertical and horizontal measurements to determine altitude and ground track accuracy. This could certainly be used when a task would take the competitors over a congested area. The next few years will set the tone for the future of GPS tasks.