

By Leslie Johnston

Greg Koontz's Field of Dreams

You can't get much more successful than Greg Koontz. He has realized not one, but two, of his youthful aviation dreams. With more than 20,000 hours flying time in 155 different types of aircraft and 6,500 flight instructor hours, Koontz is now a multi-talented entrepreneur whose love of aerobatic showmanship and flight instruction led him to open a one-of-a-kind business.

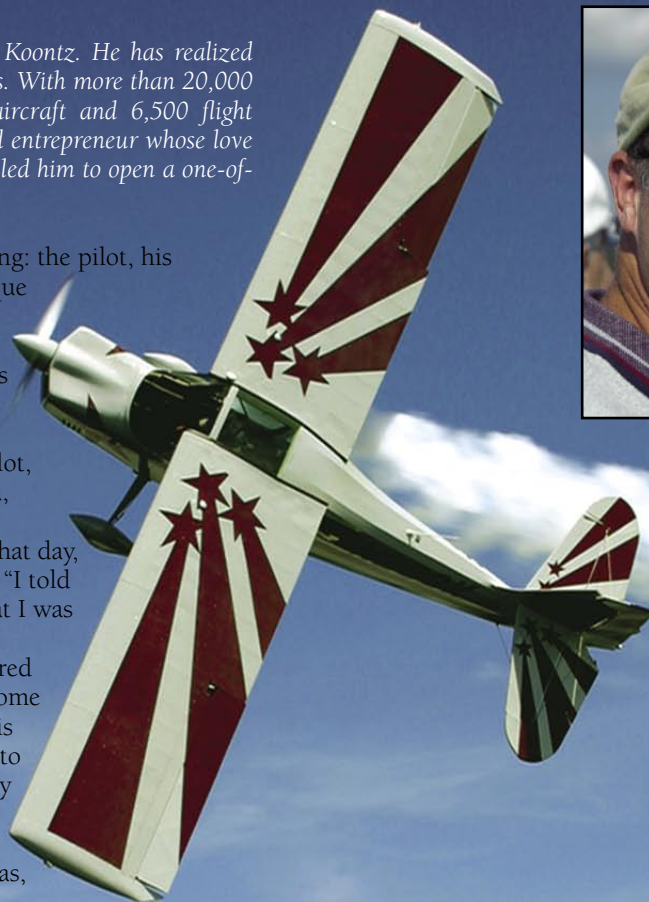
It's hard to decide which is the most interesting: the pilot, his often breathtaking skill in the air, or the unique business — the only one of its kind in the country — that he operates in a rural Alabama community that is bringing students from all over the U.S. and Canada.

The son of a Birmingham-based corporate pilot, Koontz recalls visiting the Gadsden, Alabama, airport at the age of 7 to see an air show. He watched several aerobatics legends perform that day, including the Flying Professor, Dick Schram. "I told my dad on the flight back to Birmingham that I was going to be an air show pilot," Koontz says. Learning how to fly at the age of 15, he restored a Piper Cub in the basement of his family's home his senior year in high school and received his pilot's license on his 17th birthday. "I used it to build my flying time," he says. "Then I got my commercial license when I was 18. With the money I received from selling the Cub, I got my flight instructor's certificate and there I was, a professional pilot at age 18."

The young Greg Koontz couldn't get enough of planes or of flying. Wanting to buy another Cub, he located one with his dad's help in St. Augustine, Florida, which was owned by Colonel Moser, who had a Flying Circus. "He sold it to me, and then he called and told me that he didn't know why he had sold it because he needed it in the air shows. So we struck a deal. I told him that I really wanted to be in air shows, so I would fly comedy acts for him, and he could use the Cub in some of his other acts."

In 1974, Koontz performed in his first show in Colonel Moser's Flying Circus. A year later, he moved to St. Augustine to work for Moser, which he did for seven years, learning the air show business. It was during this time that he found a plane that really suited him — the Super Decathlon. "To this day, it is my airplane," he says. In 1981, he left for a corporate job (by coincidence back in Birmingham), but by 1992 he was feeling established enough personally and professionally to return to aerobatics.

He bought a Decathlon, opened an aerobatics school and began to hit the air show circuit again. "My aerobatics school was getting popular and I was working it around my corporate flying," Koontz explains. "I was participating in about eight or nine air shows a year." Three years ago, feeling that his corporate job was becoming "too corporate" for him, he took a chance and



Greg Koontz

quit. Taking the gamble paid off. Soon afterwards, hearing that he had gone into aerobatics full-time, American Champion, the manufacturer of the Decathlon, contacted him to represent its sport and aerobatic aircraft on the show circuit.

With the sponsorship came student interest in his aerobatics school from across the country. Then, in 1997, he stumbled upon a place in rural Ashville, Alabama, that was the realization of another youthful dream. Koontz and his wife, Cora, also a pilot, had been high school sweethearts. As teenagers, they had talked of moving to the country and having a house on a grass strip. Immediately, he knew he wanted to relocate the aerobatics school to Ashville. But what would he do about his students? Where would they stay in this rural area between Birmingham and Gadsden?

With their two children off to college, Greg and Cora Koontz decided to modify the house they were planning to build and turn it into a bed and breakfast. Not only was Koontz involved with an aerobatics school and a new air show schedule, but, in October 2004, he and Cora opened Sky Country Lodge. It is a concept that has already proved immensely popular. "I think that it's being able to take a two-day aerobatics course out in pleasant, comfortable surroundings, away from the big airports.

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You don't go to a hotel room in a big city and go out to an FBO. People are coming to a warm, friendly place here where we have meals with them and where they are working personally, one-on-one with me," he adds.

Each of the lodge's rooms has a private bathroom and an exit door to the wraparound porch that encircles the house. Just outside the guest rooms is the hangar, the 4,000-foot runway and a spectacular view of the northeast Alabama mountains. Sky Country can accommodate two guests. "People often come together," Koontz says. "We have a lot of father-son teams and, of course, pilots who know each other and want to come at the same time."

The basic aerobatic course, which is the one he conducts most often, is a four-lesson, four-flight program that covers the four fundamental maneuvers of aerobatics: loops, rolls, hammerheads and spins. Ground school is conducted on the porch when the weather permits, followed by two flights each day, starting again on Sunday morning in order to finish by early afternoon. When students are ready for a break from flying, or if spouses want to come along, horseback riding is available, as is bass fishing in the lake.

Typical students are relatively new pilots with an average of about 150 hours of flying time, according to Koontz, who finds, he says, "something has been missing from their training. They realize their shortcomings and feel that aerobatics will give them more control. That's what most people come for, a little confidence, the confidence to recover from all kinds of situations



Rural Ashville, Alabama, was the perfect spot for Koontz's nationally renowned aerobatics school.



Sky Country Lodge offers comfortable surroundings for pilots in Koontz's aerobatics school.

and to feel that they have more control over the airplane, that it is not taking them for a ride, but that they are controlling it." A graduation certificate from the basic aerobatics course will earn students a 10 percent discount on their insurance.

As an extension of the aerobatics school, Koontz also offers two clinics at airports for groups such as aero clubs, flight schools and EAA groups, an upset clinic and a spin clinic in group sessions, with a ground school and one-on-one lessons. "The group doesn't have to travel, and they get a discount for being part of a group," he says. "It brings a little aerobatic training to people who might not otherwise get it."

Koontz remains active in air shows, with several big ones scheduled this year. He has several acts that he can offer air show organizers. The Super Decathlon act is his main act. He also flies a Model 12 Pitts, which with its 360 horsepower Russian engine, has as much power as it has weight, and he has a new Piper Cub act, in which he appears as Clem Cleaver.

The air shows, he says, sell the school and bring pilots to his course who want to fly the Decathlon. Still doing a little corporate flying, performing in air shows, and launching the bed and breakfast keep Koontz busy. "You've got to keep progressing," he says. "If you build it, they will come."

For more information about Greg Koontz, visit www.gkairshows.com.

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