

My Southwest Classic F5J 2021 Experience

I'm already dreaming of attending again in 2022.

[Ryan Woebkenberg](#)



A gaggle of F5J models and the majestic mountains in the background during the practice day

For years I had followed the Southwest Classic RC Soaring contest that was conducted in the Phoenix Arizona area in the February timeframe and had longed to leave cold and snowy Indiana for the warm and sunny southwest for a few days of RC soaring competition. With the benefit of a bit of

unused airline credit I traveled to Phoenix, Arizona for the Southwest Classic F5J 2021 held February 20 and 21, 2021. I had a fantastic time at this very well organized contest. Because I had such a great experience I am writing this article to hopefully inspire other RC sailplane enthusiasts to make their own trips to future RC sailplane competitions.

My trip started a few months prior with some travel planning. I recently acquired a 3.1 meter Graphite from an estate sale and with a bit of measuring I noticed that when fully disassembled it would just fit inside a custom made box that would be under the 62 length + height + width airline class for "standard luggage". My brother in law agreed to make a custom wooden box for this plane so that I could use it to airline transport the Graphite. To protect the Graphite in the box I made up bags from aluminized windshield reflectors, bubble wrap, and spare packing materials from various different consumer items to keep the parts of the plane centered in the box and to keep the plane parts safe.

I brought a large hiking backpack as my carry on bag. I made a box from chloroplast that just fit my transmitter, stopwatches, transmitter charger, and spare receivers and F5J switches. In addition to the transmitter box my backpack also contained my laptop and its charger, a lipo charging bag and 3 sets of motor packs for my Graphite, a

Hyperion charger, my hiking GPS, and a small jump pack intended for jump starting automobiles that I use to power the Hyperion charger, and 5 days worth of clothing.

Thursday February 18, 2021 I flew from Cincinnati to Phoenix on Frontier using airline credit that I had previously been granted by Frontier. My flights were without any problems, delay in my checked model box, or damage to it. The checked bag attendant quickly accepted the wooden model box and my backpack made it through security without any concern or delay. My friend and fellow RC soaring pilot Ed LaCroix picked me up from the Phoenix airport Thursday evening and served as my host. In preparation for the next day's practice session I inspected my Graphite Thursday evening to confirm there wasn't any damage during transportation and partially assembled it for the weekend's flying.



Photo 1: This field is unbelievably massive by the standards of residents east of the Mississippi

We arrived at the event field on Friday about 9 AM for practice. After greeting some of the local pilots we quickly set up Ed's popup canopy, chairs, and table. After setting up our workspace for the weekend, Ed assembled his Vertigos and I completed field assembly of the Graphite by attaching the wing and wing tips.

The contest organizers had already started setting up the landing tapes and I spent the day getting comfortable with the Graphite. Having acquired the Graphite just a few months prior to the contest I had only about 15 flights on the model given the weather in Indiana this winter. The first thing that was obvious to me upon flying it in Arizona was how difficult it was to see. The Graphite's wing is transparent blue and the fuselage is white and in the sunny conditions in Arizona I quickly lost orientation on the model. The issues I was having seeing the plane meant I didn't range the plane out very much on Friday.

I eventually made thirteen practice flights during which I focused on testing out each of my batteries and making sure I was adjusted to the huge open space that is Arizona when making my landings. I have known that pilot's who are used to fields with trees, buildings, etc. around to use as visual indicators of distance find making the same precision landing in a featureless wide open space to be more difficult. By the end of practice, I had only made one 10 minute simulated contest round. But since the thermals had started to pop I was able to fly the entire flight close and worked multiple bubbles.

On the drive back to Ed's place we discussed the issues I was having seeing the plane. When making the practice flights I discovered that when I could see the bottom of the

Graphite's wing I could easily make out the two yellow sections of trim Monokote the previous owner had applied. Since Ed had several types of self-adhesive trim Monokote in his shop, we made plans that evening to add more to the tops of the wing tips to try to help my seeing the plane. I ended up adding a bit of yellow and black trim Monokote to the tops of the wing tips and also added some squares of trim monokote to the rudder of the Graphite to try to help with the fuselage disappearing into the sky when viewing it from the side.



Photo 2: My Graphite after adding some trim Monokote to help with orientation and keeping it in sight

We arrived at the field on Saturday for the first day of the contest and I quickly put the wing on the Graphite and made a test flight. The addition of the trim Monokote greatly improved the Graphite's visibility and my ability to see it and discern orientation. I observed during the test flight and from watching other planes of pilot making practice flights that the air appeared to be fairly flat. If there were thermals they were too weak to effectively work with my older generation plane.

During the pilots meeting it was announced that the contest had 35 pilots which were organized into three flight groups. Since this was only my third F5J contest and there would be 11 pilots launching at once with me, I decided to take advantage of the Graphite's very strong powertrain to stay out of trouble. Immediately after the start horn sounded I powered the Graphite and climbed near vertically to stay clear of the other planes while aiming at a height where I thought I could make the 10 minute task. In the first two rounds I launched to 219 and 258 meters and just barely had enough height to make the 10 minutes and score landing points. Unfortunately in both rounds one pilot launched to about 130 meters which meant my scores in those two rounds were 798 and 634 points. In round three and four I launched a bit lower but was only able to make about nine minutes leaving me with 750 and 800 point rounds.

By the final two Rounds of the day the wind had started to increase and I was only able to make about six minutes from 200+ meter launches. In Round 6, I flew in the third flight group and only managed a six minute flight from a 229 meter launch as the wind had been steadily building. I did score my best landing of the contest on this round, a 50. I wasn't the only pilot in this round to suffer from the strengthening winds. Three pilots had landings beyond 75m from their launch position. Unfortunately, as required by the F5J rules, landing further than 75 meters from the launch position means a pilot scores zero points for that flight.

Video 3: Mass launch of first flight group of Round 1.

After the third flight group of round 6 the contest organizers wisely chose to stop flying for the day. By then the wind had increased to about 15 miles per hour but with higher gusts. As soon as it was announced the contest was being stopped for the day we all packed up our planes and lowered or packed up our sun shade canopies. By the time we had packed our planes and lowered our canopy the wind and the gusts had increased to the point where lowering the scoring canopy was legitimately scary. Fortunately we were able to disassemble all the planes and sun canopies without issues.



Photo 4: Pilots ready their planes before day two.

Day two started similar to the previous two days with soft conditions in the morning but with a bit more wind. I had my only real major mistake of the contest in the first round of day two. I missed my landing and also fumbled shutting off my motor at the end of the motor run causing me to have a temporary off then on throttle blip resulting in the dreaded "dashed lines" display on the ALTI because of the in flight motor restart resulting in a zero score for round seven. It was entirely my fault and something I will work harder to really drill in the muscle memory of motor operation going forward.

Within a few hours strong organized thermals started to appear for the first time at this contest. In the last three rounds most of the pilots made the ten minute target time and the launches were starting to get lower with several

launching sub 100 meters and making the task time. For me round ten was my best round of the contest making a 9:56 from a 201 meter launch and scoring a 45 landing. I finished the preliminary rounds in 28th place. My objective at this contest was to have fun and learn a lot and that objective was definitely accomplished. My friend Ed finished the prelims in fourth place which meant he would be participating in the flyoffs.

Flyoffs for F5J are conducted similar to preliminary rounds except the task is fifteen minutes instead of the ten minute task used in the preliminary rounds. Contest scores start at zero for the contestants competing in the flyoffs. The CD announced that the flyoffs would consist of three rounds for the top twelve pilots and they would let each pilot pick which launch spot he would launch from in order of highest scoring prelim score. My friend Ed chose the fourth lane closest to the flight prep area and he chose to have me serve as his timer/caller/helper.

As with the previous preliminary rounds thermals were developed and available for the flyoff rounds. That didn't mean that the fifteen minutes was guaranteed but it did mean that a number of pilots were able to launch to under 100 meters and climb out and work one or more thermals to achieve the target task. Each round of the flyoffs saw multiple pilots make the fifteen minute task time. The wind

had calmed enough by the flyoffs that the wind direction was dominated by thermal pull. This was evident by the launch direction as called out by the contest organizers for round one and two of the flyoffs being completely opposite of each other. Pilots also landed in completely opposite directions on at least one of the flyoff rounds. Because of these conditions most pilots had a similar read before the start of each round and typically most of the pilots launched to the same area where their observation of the shifty wind told them a thermal should be. The relatively obvious read of the conditions didn't guarantee a fifteen minute flight because as the thermals moved away from the launch area in at least some of the rounds pilots would need to work more than one thermal to keep the plane visible. Also with twelve planes often trying to work the same thermal from a sub 100 meter launch that meant that keeping space between planes to avoid a collision meant that it might not be quite as easy to climb out as it would be if there weren't as many planes all jockeying for position in the relatively low thermal.

The first round was won by Jon Garber with a 14:58, a 45 landing, and an 83 meter start. He wasn't the lowest launcher in round one to make the target time but his combination of a relatively low launch and landing at the 45 with just a few seconds left to go on the clock won him that round. Eight of the twelve pilots made the fifteen minute

target. Two of the twelve had seven minute flights and two of the twelve landed early and more than 75 meters from the start location for zero flights.

The second round was again won by Jon Garber with a 14:57, a 50 landing, and a 42 meter start. In this flight group all but one pilot got within thirty seconds of the fifteen minute target. Unfortunately, Matthew Aurand had a flight battery failure that caused his model to crash off field for a zero flight.

In the third round Jon Garber won it again for a perfect flyoffs. He went with the lowest successful launch height of the contest at 23 meters and capped it off with a 14:58 and a 50 landing. His low launch meant that he had to really work to climb out and was at times just a few feet off the ground before he was able to climb higher. Like the first round of the flyoffs eight pilots made the fifteen minute target with two pilots not able to climb out in a thermal and landing further than 75 meters and two additional pilots landing at the landing tape but not able to make the fifteen minute task time.



Photo 5: Ed LaCroix holding his Vertigo and 5th place award.

Since Jon won each of the flyoff rounds he obviously won the contest. Second place was Lenny Keer and third place was Ali Kahni. It was a real honor for me to time and call for my friend Ed LaCroix who finished fifth by launching conservatively high, between 100 and 145 meters, to assure he would be a little higher than most of the other pilots so that he could cover the air they were working and also have a little less congestion with other planes trying to climb out.

On Monday I flew back to Indiana and my trip back was a mirror of my trip out. Again the bag check attendant accepted my model box quickly and without issue and again I quickly went through security with my backpack without issue or delay. When I arrived back in Cincinnati my model box was waiting for me and arrived undamaged and with the

plane inside it safe and secure. I had a great experience on this trip and I hope my recap encourages other RC sailplane pilots to plan their own soaring adventures.

In conclusion, I would like to say some words of thanks to the folks that made this contest possible for everyone and this trip possible for me in particular. First, thanks to the management at Evergreen Sod for allowing the EVFF club to use this field. I would also like to thank Darwin Barrie for CDing this event and Randy West for scoring. Matt Mahoney, Bob Parks, Don Scegiel, Ed Olague, and Tim Thomas from the EVFF club also served important roles in making sure this contest ran smoothly, fairly, and all of the contestants were well fed. But most of all I would like to thank Ed LaCroix for serving as my host, chauffeur, teacher, helper, and overall great friend. Without Ed's support and encouragement I probably would still have the Southwest Classic on my "bucket list" of RC Soaring contests to attend. I'm already dreaming of attending the Southwest Classic F5J 2022!

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