

Earl C. Downs

Airplanes Cost Too Much

Another view

Airplanes cost too much; they always have, and they always will. The Wright brothers sold their first plane to the U.S. Army for \$5,000 at a time when new houses sold for less than \$500. Only the government, or a rich person, could afford a plane.

By the early 1950s, the price of a simple Piper Cub climbed to almost \$2,000, and a Beechcraft Bonanza went for the lofty price of \$13,000. EAA Founder Paul Poberezny had a dream we could put our hands and mind to work and come up with a more affordable way to fly. We know the rest of this story.

I've been flying for more than 50 years, and it has always cost too much, but somehow I made it happen. Sport pilot has opened up a way to enjoy flying at a lower cost. A sport pilot certificate is attainable for less than \$3,500; that's half the cost of becoming a private pilot. It has also changed the lament "airplanes cost too much" into "light-sport aircraft cost too much."

Do they? The answer is, it depends. Until sport pilot, you could count the number of new, ready-to-fly, two-place airplanes marketed in the United States on one hand. Now, it takes several hands. Before sport pilot, the availability of ready-to-fly, small, two-place aircraft was the issue, not the price.

Maybe we get mixed up when talking about price and affordability. Price for a product is set by the free

market system. Many manufacturers think there is a market for special light-sport aircraft (S-LSA) priced between \$80,000 and \$120,000. Witness that the annual production of most S-LSA are sold out in advance. Affordability is not just a question of price; it's a mixture of price, personal finances, and goals.

Perhaps we fall into the trap of picking a point in time when we think prices were right and products affordable. I could pick 1958 when my brother, Ed, and I bought our first airplane while in high school. We paid \$850 for a 1941 Taylorcraft and had to work two after-school jobs to support our habit. Owning a car was out of the question; we rode our bikes to the airport. The price was too high, but we made it affordable.


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I bought a new Cessna 150 in 1965 for \$10,500 and leased it back to a flight school to help make the payments; you can do the same thing with an S-LSA. I also owned a 1964 Cadillac that set me back about \$3,800. To be honest, I could barely afford any of this, but I was young, single, and making \$6 per hour as a

flight instructor. Let's take this reference point and move it to today.

I just flew a Tecnam Sierra (sticker price \$100,000). I drove to the airport in my 2003 Chevy truck (sticker price \$42,000). I drive this truck to pull my wife's horse/camping trailer (\$39,000 five years ago). The Sierra is a wonderful plane, and its performance and capabilities exceed those of my old Cessna 150. After flying the Sierra, I concluded it is a better value than my Cessna 150 was in 1965. Whether or not I can afford it is a separate issue. (Let's see, if my wife sells her horses...)

Paul Poberezny's option was to design and build his own plane. That option is still available, but it has expanded immensely. EAA members all over the country are scratch building, kit building, and restoring sport pilot-eligible aircraft. Hundreds of ultralight trainers (\$20,000 or less) are being converted to experimental LSA (E-LSA). I have been a member of EAA when I have and have not owned an airplane. I used EAA to help keep the dream alive.

Don't look at the cost of high-end LSA and throw your hands in the air in frustration. It is the American dream to want the best, but when I fly my Luscombe or my Kitfox ultralight, I don't regret I am not flying a speedy new sport plane. I experience the beauty of flight and hope I can stretch my 50 years of flying a little longer. Sport pilot may help me to do that. 

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