

The May Family's
Spectacular
1936 Sportster



BY SPARKY BARNES SARGENT

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“Rearwin popularity is proof of Rearwin superiority”



Dressed in a custom black-and-white scalloped paint scheme, replete with gold trim and chrome accents, the May family's Rearwin Sportster conjures a spectacular image of dapper 1930s black-tie formality, from its classy cowl right down to its wheel spats. It's an aeronautical treasure that just keeps improving with age, thanks to the efforts of one Nebraskan family.

Rearwin Sportster

It's estimated that Rearwin Airplanes, which was based at the Fairfax Airport in Kansas City, manufactured approximately 50 of the Model 8500s, and today, only seven are listed on the FAA Registry. The Model 8500 was similar to the earlier Model 7000, except it was powered by an 85-hp LeBlond 5DF engine and was endowed with a few extra features. Marketed primarily as a sportsman's airplane, the tandem design measured 22 feet 3 inches from spinner to tailskid and had a wingspan of 35 feet. The Sportster's gross weight was 1,460 pounds, it had a useful load of 830 pounds, and with its roomy tandem cabin, its baggage compartment carried at least 50 pounds. A 12-gallon fuel tank was in each wing, and with a 5 gph fuel burn, the Sportster could cruise 103 mph at 1900 rpm, thus offering a 480-mile range.

A 1936 advertisement for the

Sportster Model 7000 proudly announced: "Rearwin popularity is truly international. The shipment of two Rearwin 'Sportsters' now on the way to Air-taxi Company, Lt., Cape Town, Union of South Africa, proves international endorsement of Rearwin engineering skill, Rearwin craftsmanship and Rearwin high quality. The Modernistic lines of this marvelous plane represent streamlining at its best."

In 1937, Rearwin Airplanes' marketing slogan declared: "Rearwin popularity is proof of Rearwin superiority." As touted in era advertising, a Rearwin pilot's letter to the company stated: "Everywhere the smart appearance, efficiency and economy of the Sportster elicited most favorable comment."—Capt. Wm. W. Ford, Richmond, Ky." The company also highlighted the Sportster's capabilities by stating that it had the "...fastest take-off, quickest climb, highest ceiling, [and] slowest landing in the \$2000-\$3500 class...[and a] roomy, luxurious cabin with unexcelled visibility in all directions.... And it's easy to own a Rearwin for you need pay only one-third down."

N16473

The May family's Model 8500, N16473 (serial number 502), flew away from its birthplace in Kansas City in September 1936, its LeBlond radial purring happily with a Flottorp birch propeller spinning on its nose. Landing in Hastings, Nebraska, under the care of Frank Cushing, its lustrous red factory finish, highlighted by a dark blue stripe and gold pinstriping was admired by onlookers. The Sportster changed hands again in July 1937,

when Dr. Otto Kostal purchased it. Kostal kept it in good stead until April 1945, when he sold it to Ed Swan in Kearney, Nebraska. By then, the tailskid had been replaced with a castoring tail wheel. Swan, who was a good friend of Jerry May, enjoyed the airplane until he sold it to Harold Olson of Minden, Nebraska, in 1952.

Jerry, who had become well-acquainted with the Sportster, recalls, "The aileron ribs were rotted by that point and had to be replaced. So they decided they'd switch over to metal Piper Cub ribs, since that would be easier to do than making wood ribs—but the inspector said, 'No, you can't change the design of the aircraft.' They got disgusted, and finally they pushed the airplane outside and tied it down, where it sat for almost three years. Anyway, I asked him about the Rearwin one day, because I had known this aircraft almost all its whole life. We got together on a price finally, and I went ahead and bought it in June of 1954—I've had it ever since."

At first, Jerry figured he might end up using the airplane for parts, but he was instead admonished by his knowledgeable father to restore it. Together, they brought it back to flying condition. The Rearwin was, in retrospect, the first member of Jerry's own family, for he wouldn't meet and marry his lovely bride, Vivian, until 1963. "I rebuilt it and flew it for 20-some years," says Jerry, a gentle-mannered man with a pleasant, unassuming personality. "Then we decided it needed to be re-covered, because it had cotton 'A' on it," he explains, "but this time, all kinds of projects of everybody else's got in the way for all these years. I didn't get it done as soon as I wanted to, but about three years ago, I said, 'It's got to get finished now!' So we started in on it and put in actually about a year and a half of really serious work."



JAY TOLBERT



SPARKY BARNES SARGENT

Three generations of the May family (L-R): Mark and daughter, Amelia; Mike; Vivian; Jerry; and Mike's son, Josh.

One Generation After Another

The May family comes by aviation honestly—it's just in their genes. Jerry's father, Walter, learned to fly in 1926 and barnstormed with Harold Warp [of Minden, Nebraska's "Pioneer Village" fame, and the founder of Warp Brothers Plastics—Editor] in matching Swallow biplanes. Jerry's eldest son, Mark, shares additional highlights of his grandfather's aviation career: "My grandfather was an A&E, and was an excellent mechanic and welder, and also a machinist. ... He was a great pilot, and was friends with

Amelia Earhart and Charles Lindbergh. He was a [welding instructor] for Swallow Aircraft. He worked with Walter Beech, Lloyd and Waverly Stearman, and all the wonderful people at Swallow Aircraft. He also worked for my great-uncle Glen Morton, of Morton Aircraft, in Omaha. Later, he started May's Aircraft Service Inc. with my father in Minden, Nebraska. My grandfather was instrumental in my father buying the Rearwin, and both of them restored it the first time."

When Jerry and Vivian had their own sons, Jerry happily influenced the youngsters by taking them

down to his shop at the airport at an early age. Vivian lent a helping hand when needed with the airplane projects and laughs good-naturedly when she explains, "I just go along with them, and do a lot of cooking and praying for them! And keep them happy—they have strong wills, all three of them."

Aviating and working on airplanes naturally evolved into a way of life for the sons. Mike, the youngest son, reflects, "Since I grew up with it, I thought everybody had airplanes—then I'd go to school, and they were like, 'What's an airplane?'" Mike works with the family business, May's Aircraft Services, and is working toward his inspection authorization (IA) rating. His son, Josh, also does aircraft maintenance for the family business. Mark, who has his IA, has his own corporate maintenance facility, AOG Aircraft Services in Watkins, Colorado—and shares his love for aviation with his young daughter, Amelia.

Teamwork

The family worked together as a team to breathe new life into their languishing Sportster. Fortunately, they didn't have to do any extensive hunting for parts, since the airframe and engine were complete. As for paperwork, Jerry says, "I have all of the

airframe and engine logs all the way back, even the service bulletins from the factory. I had everything for the project, which is very rare, and the airplane has never been wrecked in its whole life.”

Still, wood and fabric deteriorate over time, and various parts needed repair. New wood ribs for the wings and ailerons were made by using a rib fixture based on the original rib patterns, and the original spars were stripped and inspected for cracks and dry rot. Surprisingly, they were found to be in airworthy condition and were reused, along with the original brackets, fittings, and drag wires. The wood turtledeck was repaired, and all of the wood components received three coats of spar varnish. New aluminum leading-edge skins were installed, new control cables were fabricated, and new tinted Lexan was used for the three-piece windshield (later models had a formed, curved one-piece windshield). Finally, Cecnite fabric was installed and finished with Air-Tech Coatings.

“The instruments are all original,” says Jerry, “and it doesn’t have an altimeter, because it has a nonsensitive Zenith height meter—there are very few of them around. The compass was missing; somebody had put a little Airpath compass in it, so Mike found this bubble-faced one in California, which is the original type for the aircraft.”

During the Rearwin’s previous restoration, it was painted green. This time, Jerry decided upon the black-and-white paint scheme. “I thought

it would be more attractive that way,” he says, adding with a gentle laugh, “and not being much for the red paint, I figured that would be the thing to do! That is the original kind of stripe that was on the aircraft, and the lettering on the fin is also in the exact location and what was on it from the factory. I painted it with a stencil, and had a friend do the gold pinstripe around the stripe. Then I decided to spruce it up a little more by adding the scalloping, which I did on every fourth rib, and of course on the tail section.”

Custom Touches

In addition to those scallops, another detail that really dresses up

the Sportster is the chrome—which, Mark readily admits with a big smile, “is my fault.” He just likes chrome—and you’ll see it on the rudder pedals, the custom kick plates on the new wood floorboards just below the pedals, the control sticks, the door handle and step—even the vented fuel caps. There are custom-made chrome cowling washers, as well, which bear the Rearwin name.

Another shiny touch is the custom gold lettering on the varnished wood baggage compartment door and the wing root area surrounding the fuel gauges. Over the front seat, a skylight lights up the plush, soft gray leather upholstery and highlights the first-class interior..



The simple and original instrument panel includes a Zenith height meter.



The lettering on the tail is in keeping with the original.



The large windows, skylight, and original-type three-piece windshield provide excellent visibility.



The Sportster uses easily available 800x4 tires, thanks to a special ring that sizes the original 3-inch wheel to a 4-inch wheel.

JAY TOLBERT

SPARKY BARNES SARGENT PHOTOS

Jerry thought of a nifty way to add corrosion protection to two specific areas of the airplane. “A friend of mine applied a spray-on black coating—like you put in the bed of a pickup truck—behind the speed ring and also inside the wheelpants. It keeps it lightweight and stiffens that speed ring—it stays round when you mount it and tighten the bolts. It really makes a world of difference, and I’d recommend that—it’s the way to go!”

LeBlond

The Model 8500’s 85-hp LeBlond 5DF was manufactured by LeBlond Aircraft Engine Corporation of Cincinnati, Ohio. It was a five-cylinder, air-cooled radial, and an Eclipse Type Y-150 starter was optional, as was a Jones Motorola fuel pump. For lubrication, it had a dry-sump, double-gear-type pump with both scavenger and pressure gears in a single unit. It weighed 220 pounds and sold for \$1,250 at the factory.

Parts availability for such an engine is a primary concern these days. Years ago, there were a few parts still available. “I had bought parts for a 70-hp engine that I did for another aircraft, and when I did that, I thought, ‘They’re going to become sparse.’ So I bought extra valve springs, bushings, pins, pistons, and those types of items,” Jerry explains, “so I had my supply. Then when I overhauled it this time, I had them available to use—but now, there are no extras left! One thing we did add this time was an Airwolf filter, because we thought it would be beneficial.”

Flying the Sportster

To the family’s delight, the Sportster returned to the Nebraska sky again in September 2007. Describing its flying characteristics, Jerry says, “It has great visibility, and it’s a very stable airplane. On takeoff, it’s pretty docile—you just push the stick all the way forward, and it picks the tail up and doesn’t run very far. It will fly off the ground, fully loaded, at 40 mph. If you really want to climb, it will climb at about a 45-degree angle. During approach to landings, we

generally run about 40 to 45 mph on final. It’s slow, and it lands at 35 mph. It’s very easy to fly, and we make three-point landings because we like that better anyway.”

Speaking of landings, the Model 8500 originally had Goodyear 18x8-3 tires and standard Rearwin oleo shock absorbers. “Those balloon tires are nonexistent now,” says Jerry, “but Bob Lamb in California was making rings to put over the wheels to convert them to 4 inches—just like a Cub

wheel. He had the approval, and I installed the kit during the first rebuild. So we just reused those rings and used Cub 800x4 tires. It has multi-disc mechanical brakes—one disc is stationary, the next moves with the wheel, and so on. When you push the heel brakes with your feet, it pulls the arm out and squeezes them together—it has excellent brakes. Those pads are nonexistent now, too, but these are still in great shape, and I think they’ll last for many years. The aircraft was built way ahead of its time, really; there are a lot of things on it you see years and years later—so Rearwin had some really great ideas.”

Describing the landing gear, Mike says, “There is a coil inside the shock on the main landing gear—it’s a hydraulic spring shock. It has an orifice hole, a metal plunger, and rebound springs—and it’s the neatest, softest gear! You can bounce it hard, and it feels like you hardly touched.”

Warm Memories

Ask any member of the May family, and they’ll tell you that what they like most about their treasured Rearwin is that it’s a family airplane. “Mike and I remember the fuselage sitting in the garage on its landing gear,” says Mark with a smile, “and playing in it—so it’s always been part of our lives.” Josh, tickled by his uncle’s comment, chuckles and says, “It was in that stage when we were little kids, too!” To which the entire family laughs heartily.

Reminiscing, Mark says, “Back in the old days we used to all four go in the airplane. Mike would sit on Mom’s lap, and we’d trade in flight—I’d go to the back and he’d go to the front. I was 5 years old the last time that I flew it—we had a Sears catalog underneath me, and I was making landings. I’d flare, and Dad would do the rudder pedals. So I have a lot of good memories with the airplane. It was a big part of my grandfather’s life, too.”

At age 73, this Sportster Model 8500 has only 575 hours’ total time, and around 35 hours since its recent restoration. Jerry has logged 100 hours on it during the years he’s had it flying—and that number will no doubt increase as the May family enjoys creating new memories with their Rearwin. The well-deserved accolades that N16473 received contribute to those memories; it garnered the Customized Aircraft Champion - Bronze Lindy at Air-Venture 2009, and the Grand Champion, Rearwin Family, and Texas Chapter awards at Blakesburg 2008.

There’s one thing for certain—when Jerry embraces a new member of his family—whether human or airplane—it’s for keeps. He’s owned the Rearwin Sportster for 55 years and his Luscombe 8A for 51 years. “I do hang on to things,” he says with a broad, contented smile, adding, “My wife feels safe! We’ve been married for 46 years.” To which Vivian quickly laughs and responds, “The older you get around him, the safer you are!” With that said, the future of the May family’s Rearwin is well-secured. 