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NOT ALL THE PRESSURE IS IN THE SKY

*Showing off your skills at Oshkosh is the holy grail for every airshow pilot. How do these paramount pilots deal with the pressure of everything that goes with it? LOOP spends a day with **Mike Goulian***

IT'S 12.45pm and Mike Goulian is alone, for the first time today. He's eating a Subway sandwich, thinking about his show and using techniques taught by his sports psychologist to slow down his body and breathing in order to fly safe in his upcoming show. Even his wife Karin and his eight-year-old daughter Emily, who've accompanied him everywhere up to now, aren't with him. "I eat alone in my trailer. When I'm performing I don't go for lunch with my family: they'll be talking to other people and I can't have that right now," he explains. "A few hours before a flight is the critical part of the day, as my safety is the most important point. I have to get ready for my performance and nobody else can help me with that – it's a solitary thing."

The day is just about halfway through, but has been hectic from the moment he got up at 5.30am. Seeing as Mike isn't only an air show performer and a RBAR pilot, but also serves on the Board of Directors of the EAA, the IMC Club, ICAS, the AOPA Foundation, and as an AOPA ambassador, it's non stop action wherever he goes. "Especially at Oshkosh, we could fill our schedule twice if we wanted to: we'd be

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nowhere without Google docs,” Karin says with a smile. “It’s crazy: it’s like a circus, but in a good way.” The Goulians came straight from Poland for the Red Bull Air Race to Oshkosh and are still a bit jet lagged, but they’ll travel to Europe again after AirVenture, meeting up with fellow RBAR pilot Nigel Lamb before the air race in Ascot (UK).

Oshkosh, though, is one of the highlights of the year for the aviator.

“Every year I can’t wait to get here,” Mike says. “Once I’m here I also can’t wait ‘til it’s over,” he jokes. Serious again: “There’s so much to see and do I can’t get to everything, which is a bummer.” One thing he does make time for is presenting the Redbird Flying Challenge, which is especially exciting for the family as one of the finalists, Avery Katz, is from Executive Flyers Aviation, their flight school in Massachusetts. Mike rehearsed his speech as Master of Ceremony at 7am, before the public was allowed on the show grounds. Over two hours later, he’s up on the podium again, this time surrounded by a dozen people who’ll be filming

and appearing on the show. Calm and focused he reads through his notes, but as soon as the camera is recording his megawatt smile appears, showing a very likeable ‘pilot-next-door’ who admits to coming, “nowhere near the candidates’ scores” when he tried the simulator challenge himself.

It’s not hard to see why Mike Goulian is one of the most liked air show performers. Despite his busy schedule, he always takes time for his fans. In some cases serious multitasking is needed: admirers come up to shake his hand even though he’s on the phone talking to his team coordinator. The five minutes that were planned as R&R at the trailer don’t happen: three novice aerobatic pilots walk by and ask for an autograph. Mike spends his time chatting with them about the delights of flying and the construction of his aircraft. Talking to fans is a big part of his day. However, never right before his performance: “Then I turn into a different person. For a short period of time it’s not about anybody else anymore, it’s just about me. I don’t want to hear anything else but my own thoughts for a couple of hours in order to flush away all the stuff I’ve been doing that day; I need to flick that switch.”

Having flown so many, Mike normally doesn’t get nervous before an air show. At Oshkosh however, it’s not just your regular public of aviation enthusiasts, but also fellow pilots that are watching intently. Things that might not be noticed by the visitors get picked up immediately by



Mike talks to Nicolas Ivanoff, another Red Bull pilot who he mentored at last year’s Oshkosh.



GOULIAN

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other aerobatic performers. Being a 'bit off' is something you just can't afford here. The extra pressure is so big all first time performers get given a mentor – Mike mentored fellow RBAR pilot Nicolas Ivanoff for his first Oshkosh appearance in 2013. The French pilot came all the way to Nebraska just to train with Mike and, now being in his second year, he still swings by the Goulian trailer for a chat. A veteran and mentor, even Mike admits that flying your routine at Oshkosh is something different: "Here, I always get a little nervous, especially before the first show of the event. The people at Oshkosh know what they're looking at so you want to do a good job."

It seems like he has in the past: ever since he first appeared at AirVenture in 1995 Mike Goulian is one of Oshkosh's most wanted men. This year he even has to leave the obligatory pilot briefing early due to other commitments at the IFR Proficiency Centre. Mike is at the Charlie Hillard Building for the time hack, the roll call and a tiny bit of the weather info, but after hearing that the winds will start moving to the west later in the afternoon, he leaves it up to his relocation pilot Chris Porter to get the rest. "I feel like a jackass not attending the full brief prima donna style," he admits before going in. And as expected, explaining his absence to the organisers prior to the briefing causes jests and jokes about "the guy who's so full of himself he has his own face painted in XL size on his trailer..." The comments are all made in good fun though, and sneaking out of the door in the middle of the

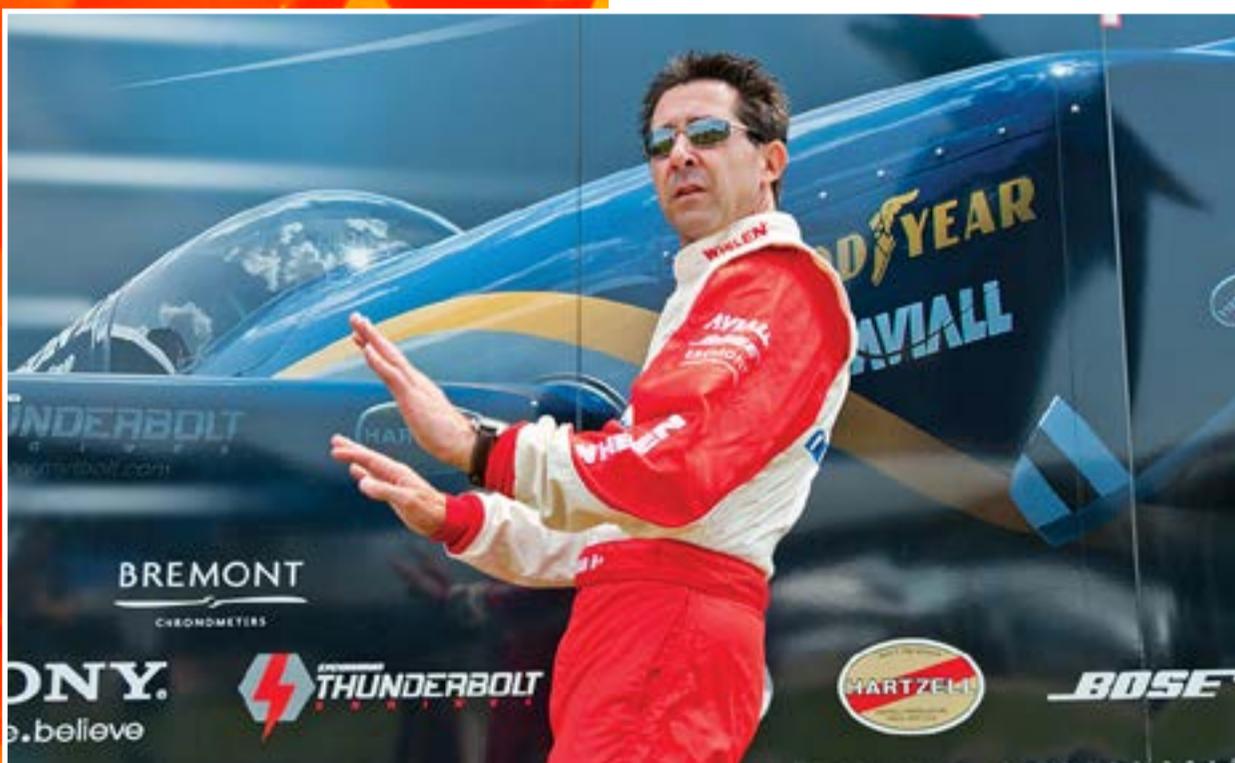
Practising the routine before a flight is essential for Mike to get into the zone.

briefing "is like being a naughty school kid" according to Mike.

"Mike's always joking around," Emily Mankins, his sponsorship coordinator, comments on the pilot's behaviour. And indeed, it seems that bantering is the way he relaxes. Look a bit closer though, notice how, with Karin, he swings Emily between their arms when they're walking over the grounds, and it's crystal clear that family plays a way bigger part in dealing with the pressure. Karin explains: "I think you wouldn't be able to do this if you didn't have a supportive family behind you, it'd be pretty lonely very soon." Mike agrees: "The longer you're on the road, the less fun it becomes. I feel better when my family is with

me because knowing that they're around just relaxes you."

But no matter how important Karin and Emily are to him, they can't be in Mike's mind when he takes off in his Extra 330SC, pulling around 10g when tumbling and rotating in the air. "I don't think about my daughter or my wife before flying. Not at all. There is risk involved in what I do,



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and thinking about my family would mean thinking about those risks, which would make me apprehensive. You can't be apprehensive when performing at all: caution is bad. You need to have 100% faith, in yourself, in the plane, in everything. Karin is a professional athlete's wife. She knows when to be around and she knows when to leave." So directly before his flight Mike is alone for the second time of the day,



walking around on the grass close to his airplane. He's in the zone: rehearsing his moves and walking through his routine, completely oblivious of the people watching him. "I have to get my mind ready to go: when I fly it's almost in a subconscious state - you practice technically, but you perform emotionally." Earphones in, he's listening to "crazy rock music," just to hear nothing else. "He does that an hour before the show, it's his ritual," says Karin, for whom this is a day of waiting, hurrying up, and more waiting.

Mike performs his routine. No mistakes and total concentration is what it takes at Oshkosh.

More than just 'the wife of an air show pilot', Karin also deals with the logistics, paperwork, organisers and keeps sponsors

and partners happy in her role as marketing and sponsorship director. "In the winter, when Emily and I are stuck back at home and Michael's on the road a lot it's a bit hard, but luckily Michael is very communicative. He calls, we Skype and he comes home whenever he can." Unsurprisingly, Karin is a pilot as well. She obtained her PPL when she was pregnant with Emily but doesn't fly aerobatics: "Straight and level is enough fun for me." She doesn't feel nervous while watching her husband perform hammerheads and flips though: "When I'm here to see the show I don't fret so much. It's when I'm not around that I worry more, because I don't know what's going on. His mother Rita is the opposite: she can't watch him perform. If she was here now, she'd hide behind a building." Another reason why Karin isn't that concerned is the fact that Michael flies a bit higher than most air show pilots. "Some of the other guys scare me," she admits. "They fly so close to the ground and there's no reason for that. I feel different when Michael's flying an air race: there you're closer to the water and you have the risk of pylon cuts, it's just more dangerous."

FLYING TIME

As Michael's performance is announced, 'Just 15 seconds until one of the most accomplished aerobatic pilots in the whole world!', his wife and daughter walk all the way up to the flight line, as close as they can get, to do what thousands of other fans do: watch Mike Goulian fly his

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air show. Mother and daughter hold hands when he takes off and for the 12 minutes his show takes, Karin follows his every move with her eyes. Emily dances around to the music, making flying movements with her arms and mimicking her father's loops and rolls in the air. Directly afterwards there is no chance for the both of them to congratulate Mike on his amazing performance. Getting out of his aircraft, his face is red, and he's exhausted, hot and sweaty from intense concentration in the bubble canopy under the burning sun – not surprising, as his body has just taken a pounding in one of the most intense environments known to men. A drink of water, a wave at the crowds and immediately Mike gets driven off in a Mustang and shown to the applauding fans.

For Mike the show is over, but performing isn't. The pressure is still on as together with his crew chief Matt Chapman and relocation pilot Chris Porter he debriefs in his trailer with a video of the routine. Every action gets reviewed critically: comments range from "Here I just overcompensated for the headwind" to "This could be a little bit further to the left." Overall though the performance is considered "a good solid ride: everything but the second last flip was good." "I'd give it a seven out of 10," Mike says with a big smile, before planning his next moves: a quick shower at his hotel and then back to the show grounds to host a party for his sponsor Goodyear. Sleep? "Maybe at 10.30pm if I'm lucky. There'll be plenty of time to sleep after the show."

To a non air show pilot, just 12 minutes of flying might seem like

little time in the air, especially for a whole day of working hard. "Flying is what got me here. It's my dream, but at a certain point it becomes very little of what I do," Mike agrees. "That's OK though: I just want to share my passion for flying and get another generation of pilots interested. The best memories aren't of the flying anyway, they're of the people. When you've done over 5000 hours of aerobatic flying and over 2000 hammerheads it gets kind of hard to keep them apart, let alone pick the best one. Yes, certain flights will stay with me, but if someone comes up to me and says 'you've inspired me to become a pilot', those are the things I remember." He does

exactly that as two boys come up to their hero, complementing him on the "totally amazing show" and asking him to sign their caps. And just as he steps in his trailer and lays down on the leather couch his mother calls, asking how it went. There's no rest for the wicked – but also not for air show performers at Oshkosh it seems...

A true showman, Mike seems to always have time for his fans, even at Oshkosh.

