THE \$30,000 QUESTION

If you had the cash today, what airplane would you buy?

hirty thousand dollars. What'll that get you these days? Any more, it's not the top of the line in automobiles . . . something in the neighborhood of a mid-line luxury sedan, perhaps, or a fully loaded minivan. For that sum maybe you'd prefer a brace of Harley-Davidsons, 10 vacations in Hawaii, 400 pairs of running shoes, 4,285 screenings of *Pulp Fiction*, or TV dinners for the rest of your natural life. Then again, maybe not. You could, alternatively, have an airplane. For those of us not rolling in six-figure salaries, a personal airplane can still be an attainable goal. So we asked each of our staff writers a simple question: Given \$30,000, which airplane would you buy? It's interesting to note that none of the editors indulged in economic suicide by selecting an airplane that's cheap to buy but not inexpensive to keep. First-time buyers might be tempted by the low buy-in of a maintenance hog, but such a purchase ultimately leads to greater overall expense. In these choices you'll see models that represent the vast middle ground, conveyances that a mere working-class Joe could hope to buy *and* maintain. Here, then, are our selections. —*The Editors*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE FIZER

JURASSIC MODNEY

Be bold-go old

BY MARC E. COOK

ON such a limited budget, there are really only two ways to go—with a late-model, lowend airplane, or something more sophisticated but substantially older. Keeping all the caveats on age in mind, I'll opt for more rather than new. In this case, it'll be a Mooney M20.

With 30 grand to spend, I'm pretty much limited to the earliest of the M20 series. According to the Aircraft Bluebook-Price Digest, \$30,000 will, at the retail level, buy me a Mooney as young as a 1964 M20C. (Considering these are retail figures, a savvy negotiator might be able to latch onto something a couple of years newer for the same money.) The list of under-\$30,000 M20s extends back in time, of course, but there's a practical cutoff of 1961 for the M20B. Earlier Mooneys had wood wings, and the most elderly have wood tails as well. Any form of organic composite is considered undesirable in today's Mooney market, as witnessed by the whopping \$7,750 disparity in value between a 1960 M20A and an allmetal 1961 M20B.

Sure, a 1964 airplane is plenty old, but the Mooney has in its favor a brand of ruggedness not built into every general aviation airplane. Assuming there's been no major damage history and the steel-tube structure within the cabin hasn't rusted, the Mooney airframe has the potential to survive the ravages of time quite well. What's more, given the market position of the Mooney, it's unlikely to ever have been a complex trainer certainly a boon for the model. All of the M20Cs are fitted with what is arguably the best aircraft engine made, the Lycoming O-360. In parallel-valve, carbureted form, the M20C's 180-horsepower engine is both simple and long-lived. Camshaft wear from low utilization and cylinder cracking from excess heat created by the closely cowled installation are items to check on the prebuy inspection. But for the most part, the M20 and the four-cylinder Lycoming have endured a long and





healthy relationship.

Inside the early Mooney there is, I'll admit, a curious mix of delightful and dreadful. Mooneys of this vintage, if in original condition, will have instrument panels cut before standardization took hold and color schemes that make Brady Bunch attire seem absolutely futuristic. On the positive side, the landing gear on these first M20s moved with one man-power, thanks to a long lever hinged on the floor between the pilots. Again, simplicity has served the Mooney well, as the gear system-though not trouble-free, by any means-has proven more durable than electric or hydraulic types.

If the gear isn't at the top of the maintenance list, it's likely that in a 1964 airplane, the avionics will be. Frankly, any Mooney of

this vintage is probably going to have vacuum tubes in the radios and will therefore be ill-suited to serious instrument flying.

Avionics upgrades, as well as a new coat of paint and something more recent in interior furnishings, can come in time, of course. And here the Mooney enjoys the benefits of subtle refinements over the years. Modifications for the circa-1964 airplane are plentiful. With the proper application of time and money you could easily turn a C model into the mirror image of a 201. But what's important for a start is to find a good, solid airframe with an engine of sound repair and known history.

There's one somewhat less obvious advantage to the \$30,000 limit. It gives me justification for the age Mooney that I find most aesthetically pleasing. The twin side windows, with graceful curves, satisfy me much more than the squared-off look of the later Mooneys. It's the same mental quirk that makes me prefer the original straight-tail Cessnas over the later swept-tail, rearwindow variants. After all, as much as we try to limit its influence, emotion always weighs heavily in the purchase of an airplane. So we might as well give in to it—at least a little.



The Cessna 172M: Ordinary yet extraordinary

never liked jumping on the bandwagon, but in choosing the Cessna 172 Skyhawk for "Wish List," I knew I had solid statistics to back up my choice. For example, 36,000 172s were produced in 30 years—more than any other airplane. I, like many others, learned to fly in a Skyhawk and honestly feel the more time I spend in one, the more I realize what a great little airplane it is. Put it into a spin, it pulls itself out. Use it as a trainer, IFR cruiser, or utility hauler; put floats or skis on it; whatever, it's a 172, the world's most popular airplane.

Skyhawks are easy to fly and maintain; insurance is inexpensive; and reasonably priced parts are readily available. For a 100-hour year, the Skyhawk will cost approximately \$45 to \$50 an hour to fly.

The 1973 through 1976 172M Skyhawks are considered excellent used aircraft for a number of reasons. The 1973 M-model's wing was the first to incorporate the cuffed leading edge. The cuff lowers the stall speed and reportedly improves climb performance. Coupled with the maximum 40-degree flap setting, the cuffed-wing

BY PETER A. BEDELL

Skyhawk will stall at indicated airspeeds of about 40 knots or less, allowing extremely short landing distances.

Lycoming's venerable O-320 powers the M-model, replacing the smoother but more troublesome sixcylinder Continental O-300 used in pre-1968 models. The O-320 produces 150 horsepower and pulls the Skyhawk along at about 110 knots at 9,000 feet. Expect a fuel burn of eight gallons an hour on almost any grade of fuel, even autogas, with STC approval. I avoided picking the 1977 to 1981 172N Skyhawks because of their infamous O-320-H2AD engines that were plagued with ADs. Overhauls on the O-320 generally run \$9,000 to \$10,000, including installation.

Available modifications are another reason the 172 makes a good buy. Bigger engines, long-range fuel tanks, STOL kits—you name it, it's probably out there. A good example of what can be done to a Skyhawk is AOPA's 1994 Better Than New 172 sweepstakes airplane that was given away in January. From a plain 1978 N-model, the airplane was transformed into a luxurious, long-range, 130-knot airplane that is just as comfortable hopping in and out of a farm strip as it is slogging through IFR weather at major airports (see "Better Than New 172: Test Flight," January *Pilot*).

Although they may not look it, Skyhawks are pretty tough. Often used as a trainer, the Skyhawk can withstand years of student abuse and come out unscathed. A few years back, while practicing touch and goes at night, I struck a deer with a 172 during the landing rollout. The right main landing gear took the full force of the blow and suffered only a dent in the fairing that covers the tubular-steel gear, and a cracked plastic cuff.

According to Howard Van Bortel of Van Bortel Aircraft Sales, \$30,000 can get a 3,000- to 4,000-hour Skyhawk in good condition with a lowto mid-time engine and nice paint and interior. The transition from almost every common trainer, especially the 150/152, will be an easy one. The airplane isn't beautiful, nor is it a speedster, but exceptional value sets it apart. As one owner puts it, "the 172 isn't the best, but it does the most."



Ageless Warrior fills a tall order

BY THOMAS A. HORNE

SO I've got \$30,000 to spend, eh? Well, let's see, I wouldn't want anything too terribly old. That would mean possible corrosion problems and a maintenance history with a higher-than-average chance of skeletons in the closet. It would have to be a multi-role airplane, too—able to serve equally well as a local cruiser or cross-country vehicle. Four seats would be nice. So would a more modern look. So would a nearbulletproof engine. The last three attributes would stand me in good stead in case, heaven forfend, I ever felt the wolf's breath and had to put it on an FBO's leaseback line.

That's a tall order, but I found a match. It's the 1974 to 1977 Piper Warrior. These are upgraded versions of the old Cherokee 140 series—the first



Warriors, in fact-and, as such, have some significant improvements. First, there's the newer, double-tapered wing. This permits a 2,325-pound gross weight, some 175 pounds more than the old 140s with the "Hersheybar" wing planform. The '74 to '77 Warrior's sturdy 150-horsepower Lycoming O-320 engine has a reputation as one of the most reliable general aviation powerplants ever produced. Just remember to lean judiciously, since the engine was designed in the days when 80 octane was more plentiful; today's 100LL can cause spark plug fouling. With full (48 gallons) fuel, my Warrior will carry about 730 pounds of people and bags; fly at 115 KTAS for around four hours, 45 minutes; and cover some 551 nautical miles in one fell swoop.

The Warrior also has a roomier cabin than its biggest competitor, the Cessna 172; more baggage capacity; and a simple, manual flap system.

Sure, rates of climb are on the weak side, at or below 400 to 500 fpm when the thermometer hits more than 26 degrees Celsius, and cruise speeds don't exactly set the skies afire. However, annuals usually run well below \$1,000, the airplane's handling characteristics are great, and it can deal with crosswinds with relative ease.

According to the Aircraft Bluebook–Price Digest, the average retail price of a 1974 Warrior is \$28,000. For



the 1977 model, expect to spend around \$29,500. With enough jawboning over a high-time model, you could even get the price a few thou lower, then convert the savings into a new paint job and some new avionics. This brings up another advantage of the '74 to '77 Warrior: Since the airframe design hasn't changed much in the intervening years, cosmetic makeovers can make my vintage Warrior look like a new model.



Who needs straight and level?

aving searched the classifieds for a used corporate jet costing \$30,000 or less, and having failed, I settled on a 1977 Bellanca Citabria 7ECA for \$21,000. The other editors seem inclined towards a point-A-topoint-B machine—a flying easy chair with lots of dials and switches. I'd rather have a little fun along the way, a simple aircraft that will loop or roll to break the routine of straight and level flight. (Don't tell anyone, but I got into flying just to have fun, not to close a big deal in the next town.)

First choice would be a Decathlon with a 180-horsepower engine, because it has enough power to do all the basic maneuvers found in any beginning aerobatics course. It also happens to be the one with which I am most familiar. But most of them cost more than \$30,000 used.

A good compromise might be a 150horsepower Decathlon, available used for less than \$30,000 for model years 1980 and older. But this is to be strictly a fun machine; since it has low utility (none wanted), it should have the lowest operating cost possible. That brings

BY ALTON K. MARSH

up the 1977 Citabria with an economical 115-horsepower engine.

So why not buy a Cessna 152 Aerobat with the same engine? Most 1982 and earlier models cost just under \$30,000, after all. It has a nosewheel, something to be preferred in a crosswind. But the Cessna 152 doesn't look like an aerobatic airplane—and appearances are important, at least to me. Secondly, performing aerobatics in an Aerobat usually means a wrestling match with the controls (I much prefer a stick for quick movements). The Aerobat is not as comfortable as a Citabria, nor is the visibility as good.

The Citabria I found here at Frederick, Maryland, has 2,230 hours on the airframe and 520 hours since the last engine overhaul. For avionics it has only a nav/com and transponder with altitude encoder, but that's all I need. I wasn't planning to use it for inverted ILS approaches, after all. There is no inverted fuel or oil system, and only a three-point harness.

With the \$9,000 I will have left over from the imaginary funds the editor intends never to supply, there will be enough to install a five-point harnesseven a GPS receiver. While the good news is that this is an aerobatic airplane, that is also the bad news. A good pre-purchase inspection should include a thorough look at the structure to assure the airframe is not damaged. Typical damage to this airplane which occurs during aerobatic maneuvers includes cracked side windows. Aerobatics are prohibited, by the way, if stronger front wing struts called for in a 1977 AD are not installed. Cracked wing ribs are a common problem on early Citabria models. A careful inspection of the fabric is also required.

If competitive aerobatics were my goal, I would skip the Citabria: It just doesn't have enough power.

This is a slow cross-country aircraft, with cruising speeds of 95 to 100 knots. The Citabria was intended for people who enjoy tailwheel flying not to mention terrific visibility—and occasional positive-G aerobatic maneuvers. (Sorry, it is not able to handle negative G maneuvers.) Pilots who fly in pinstripe suits and street shoes need not apply. □



This 1970s sportster gets you there in short order

BY THOMAS B. HAINES

early 20 years ago, the pages of aviation magazines were saturated with advertisements and articles about the AA5 series of perky aircraft models from Grumman. As a teenager, I was mesmerized by the sporty Cheetah and the speedster Tiger. One of the publications was offering a Cheetah as a sweepstakes prize, and I was sure I was going to win it—so sure that I carefully planned numerous flights in my new runabout. In fact, I spent hours detailing the flights in a way that only a student pilot—which I was at the time—



would; ah, the optimism of youth.

Today, that series and vintage of airplanes represents a terrific value on the used market. For about \$30,000 or less, depending on year and model, I can sport around at speeds greater than most similarly powered and sized aircraft, lift a reasonable load, and (thanks to simple construction methods and systems) do it with minimal concern about maintenance costs.

For business transportation, I'm fortunate to have a speedy, pull-up-the-gear, punch-onthe-autopilot, dodge-the-lightning-strikes steed in waiting.

As a result, I'm free then to spend my 30,000 *Pilot* dollars on a machine that suits my purely personal transportation needs. The 150-horsepower, Lycoming O-320-powered 1975 AA5 Traveler does that to a T.

According to the *Aircraft Bluebook–Price Digest*, I can find such a ride for about \$24,000, leaving me a balance of \$6,000 to fill the panel with a VFR GPS receiver and maybe a

single-axis autopilot. A little more cash will get me a newer AA5A Cheetah, but the panel improvements would then have to wait until the bank account recovered. The 180-hp Tiger is over the budget by \$7,000 or more.

Like others in the series, the Traveler's handling is crisp and quick—great fun when tooling around the neighborhood, but a little tiring when jour-

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neying cross country—thus the desire for the simple autopilot. With a 125-knot cruise speed, the Traveler makes fast work of my usual trips of less than 300 nm to visit friends and family in the region. Four seats mean room for the whole family, at least until my two daughters an infant and a toddler—get too big for the narrow back seats.

With its sliding canopy, castering nose wheel, and bondedmetal and aluminum honeycomb construction, the AA5 series seems to thumb its nose at convention, but in a friendly sort of way. After dealing with Spam cans all week, it's just the sort of airplane I could enjoy on the weekends.



A Cessna that looks like it's going places

BY MICHAEL P. COLLINS

General aviation has seen its share of aircraft that fared poorly in the marketplace, and I sometimes feel compelled to place my bet on the underdog. But if I had \$30,000 to

wager on an airplane today, I'd bet the last dollar on a fixed-gear 1970 Cessna 177B Cardinal.

The rakish, stylized Cardinal—think of it as the sport model of Cessna's

venerable Skyhawk—is one of those love/hate airplanes. Some pilots who have flown the original 177, which debuted amid much fanfare in 1968, bemoan the first year's model as



underpowered and quirky to fly. On the other hand, many with time in the 177B believe the airplane was introduced before its time. Pitch my tent in that camp.

Just look at a Cardinal on the ramp. It's about the only aircraft of its day and price range that looks like it's going somewhere when it's standing still. The windshield sweeps back from the low, wide fuselage at a racy 45degree angle. Cantilevered wings, à la the Cessna 210 Centurion, mean no struts to impede cockpit access—or



obstruct the view from the side windows. Beneath the swept tail, a stabilator replaces Cessna's traditional hori-



zontal stabilizers and elevator.

Climb in through one of the huge, four-foot-wide doors, settle into the seat, and enjoy the familiar Cessna feel. The cabin is a little wider than that of a Skyhawk, but it feels a lot wider: The leading edge of the wing is behind the pilot, making the cockpit feel roomier and giving the Cardinal exceptional visibility for a high-wing design.

Once the airplane's light control forces are mastered, transitioning into the Cardinal should be a snap for the legions of pilots who learned to fly in Cessna 150s, 152s, and 172s. At 7,500 feet and 75-percent power, the 177B's 180-horsepower Lycoming O-360 (only the 1968 177s shared the Skyhawk's 150-hp Lycoming O-320) will pull the Cardinal along at 123 knots. At an average retail price of \$30,000 in the current Aircraft Bluebook-Price Digest, the fixed-gear 1970 Cardinal 177B also includes a two-blade, constant-speed McCauley propeller; the retractable 177RG entered production in 1971 but, at \$34,500, is out of my budget.

Of the 2,700-odd stiff-legged Cardinals produced, only 160 were 1970 177Bs. Newer airplanes will cost more, unless you stumble upon one approaching its 2,000-hour TBO; 1968 177s (fixed-pitch propeller and the 150-hp engine) average \$26,750, while a 1969 177A (still a fixed propeller but with 180 hp) might go for \$28,500.

The four-place Cardinal invites comparison with the Skyhawk. Average retail for a 1970 172K Skyhawk (\$27,500) is slightly lower, as is its cruise speed (115 knots), rate of climb (645 feet per minute compared to 840 fpm for the Cardinal), and useful load (985 pounds versus 1,015 pounds).

An extra \$2,500 for better performance, more responsive flight controls, increased comfort, greater useful load, and—above all—style? Sure, I'll wager on the Cessna Cardinal. It's better than even money.