Make mine a TAILDRAGGER

Tecnam is betting older pilots will want a retro tailwheel airplane

BY ALTON K. MARSH
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS ROSE

ANY TIME I SEE A TAILWHEEL AIRCRAFT with its main landing gear spread wide apart, I breathe a sigh of relief—for such aircraft usually are the best behaved of the "conventional gear" fleet. Such was the case as I applied takeoff power to the Tecnam P92 Tail Dragger (it is part of the name, in case you had any doubt) at Avon Park, Florida.

With stiff springs centering the tailwheel, the aircraft gave no hint of wanting to stray from the straight and narrow path during takeoff. Once in formation, the Lycoming engine had more than enough power to keep up with Phil Jimenez of PJ Aircraft in his newly reengined Cessna 172—and provided the same solid ride. The 1,320-pound (by regulation) Light Sport aircraft (LSA) took the occasional turbulence above Lake Istokpoga near Sebring, Florida, as well as the slightly heavier Cessna 40 feet ahead. (Recently captured in the lake was a very large alligator, we were told, so we stayed near the shore.) If there was an award for best-behaved tailwheel airplane, this one would win.

FUN CHOICE. Statistics show that older pilots worldwide are buying aircraft with a tailwheel as their recreational, fun vehicle of choice, according to Tecnam North America CEO Phil Solomon. That's why Tecnam's latest version of the P92 LSA sports a tailwheel. The P92 airframe has been around since 1992, as the model number indicates, but the tailwheel model didn't exist until 2012. (The "P" stands for Partenavia, a company that no longer exists. The company is now Costruzioni Aeronautiche Tecnam.)

THE TAILHOOK for towing gliders (left) was intended for use in Europe only and will be removed when this demonstrator is sold in the United States. The tailwheel is held at center by stiff springs and requires force on the rudder pedals to effect steering. Chromed control sticks (above) are a part of the "retro" look. The panel comes bare bones but ready to fly—although glass-cockpit options are available. A small cargo compartment holds oil and headsets (right).

There are only four P92s Tail Draggers in the United States, two of them with customers and two ready for sale at Solomon's headquarters in Ashland, Virginia. A model sent to the United States with Lycoming's new 115-horsepower LSA engine, the YO-233, was used as the demonstrator for this test report, although the Tail Dragger also is available with a 100-horsepower, 2,000-hour time-between-overhaul Rotax engine.

Using the Rotax engine saves 50 pounds compared to the Lycoming, and allows the installation of a $4,300 cargo pod option beneath the cabin that can carry camping gear. The high, spring-steel gear keeps the propeller out of the weeds and gravel. Large tundra tires are an option, although smaller tires allow the claimed 118 knots true airspeed cruising speed. (Corporate pilot Ron White, who flew the P92 Tail Dragger to the U.S. Sport Aviation Expo in

Sebring in January, said he saw 115 knots indicated airspeed at 2,000 feet msl and 60 degrees F during his trip from Virginia.) It's meant to be a bare-bones, just-the-basics aircraft with minimal instruments. "You can't talk to the president and you can't call NASA," said Tecnam President Tommy Grimes. Glass cockpits from Garmin, Dynon, or Advanced Flight are available as options, although a Dynon D120 engine monitor is standard. Basic instruments include an airspeed indicator, vertical speed indicator, compass, altimeter, and slip indicator. The aircraft I flew also had an optional Icom ICA-210 radio and intercom, and the red and cream paint job plus retro door handles. A quilted interior cabin ceiling adds another retro touch.

The Rotax-powered model starts at $119,900. Add $19,000 for the Lycoming engine option. Throw in a good moving-map GPS, extra radio, and transponder, and the price goes up another $8,000 or $9,000. Shipping from Italy is already included in the prices.

Obviously, a glass cockpit such as the Garmin G3X would cost still more. After full fuel is loaded, you'll carry about 320 pounds with the Lycoming model, or 390 pounds with the Rotax-powered model. Since White and I would have put the aircraft above its gross weight of 1,320 pounds, we flew with partial fuel. The Lycoming engine can run on mogas or avgas, while the Rotax can burn those fuels or premium unleaded with ethanol. The fuel burn of the Rotax engine is about 4.5 gallons per hour, while the Lycoming burns six gallons per hour. A single- or dual-axis autopilot is also an option.

MODEL CHOICE. The Tecnam company itself inspires confidence, if for no other reason than the large number of models it offers. There is a turbocharged P2008

SPEC SHEET
Tecnam P92 Tail Dragger

BASE PRICE: $138,900 ($119,900 W/ROTAX ENGINE)
PRICE AS TESTED: $152,231

SPECIFICATIONS

Powerplant | **115 hp Lycoming YO-233 B2A**
Recommended TBO | **2,400 hr**
Propeller | **ground adjustable Sensenich 2EK/C72AE4**
Length | **21 ft**
Height | **8 ft 3 in**
Wingspan | **28 ft 6 in**
Seats | **2**
Cabin width | **3 ft 9 in**
Empty weight | **850 lb**
Empty weight, as tested | **874 lb**
Max gross weight | **1,320 lb**
Useful load | **470 lb**
Useful load, as tested | **446 lb**
Payload w/full fuel | **333 lb**
Payload w/full fuel, as tested | **309 lb**
Max takeoff weight | **1,320 lb**
Fuel capacity, std | **23.8 gal (22.9 gal usable) 142.8 lb (137.4 lb usable)**
Baggage capacity | **44 lb**

PERFORMANCE

Takeoff distance, ground roll | **295 ft**
Takeoff distance over 50-ft obstacle | **820 ft**
Max demonstrated crosswind component | **15 kt**
Rate of climb, sea level | **1,200 fpm**
Max level speed, sea level | **120 kt**
Cruise speed/endurance w/45-min rsv, std fuel (fuel consumption) 4,000 ft @ 75% power, best economy| **118 kt/3.1 hr (36 pph/6 gph)**
Landing distance over 50-ft obstacle | **820 ft**
Landing distance, ground roll | **426 ft**
Service ceiling | **13,100 ft**

LIMITING AND RECOMMENDED AIRSPEEDS

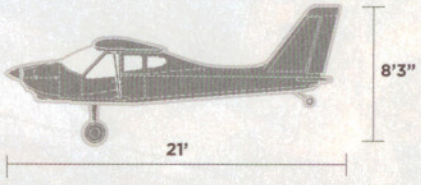
V_X (best angle of climb) | **60 KIAS**
V_Y (best rate of climb) | **68 KIAS**
V_A (design maneuvering) | **93 KIAS**
V_R (rotation speed) | **50 KIAS**
V_{FE} (max flap extended) | **68 KIAS**
V_{NO} (max structural cruising) | **106 KIAS**
V_{NE} (never exceed) | **34 KIAS**
V_{S1} (stall, clean) | **48 KIAS**
V_{SO} (stall, in landing configuration) | **43 KIAS**

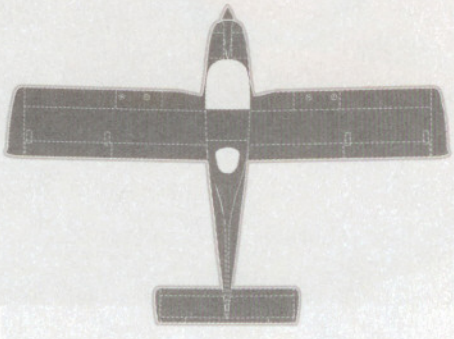
For more information, contact Tecnam North America, 11152 Air Park, Ashland, Virginia 23005; telephone 804-798-6500; fax 804-798-654; email info@tecnam.net.

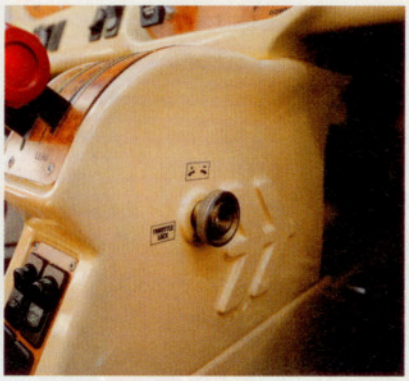
All specifications are based on manufacturer's calculations. All performance figures are based on standard day, standard atmosphere, sea level, gross weight conditions unless otherwise noted.

NEATNESS

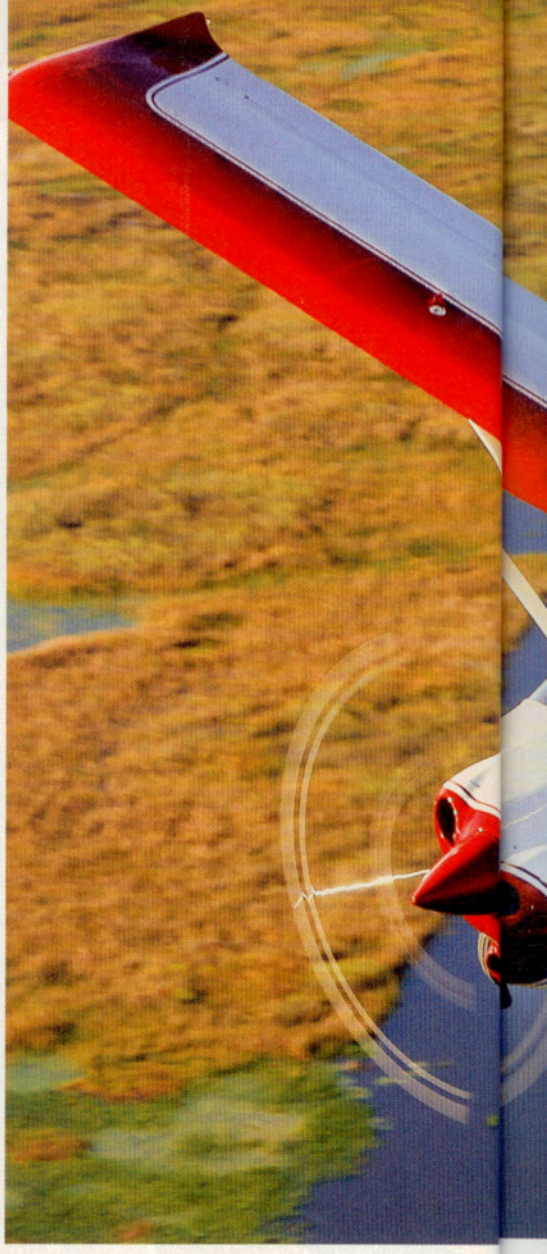
Italian engineering is synonymous with attention to detail. The fuel vent lines come out of the wing tanks as a small loop, and return to the interior where they run to the wing tip. Wouldn't want those blue fuel streaks on the underside of the wing typically seen on American-built aircraft, would we?







A QUILTED HEADLINER for the cabin ceiling (left). Seats are comfortable and the cabin is roomy thanks to bowing the doors outward. A friction lock for the engine controls (below). The P92 Tail Dragger flies above the alligator-infested Lake Istokpoga near Sebring, Florida (right).



(the model was designed in 2008) coming out, and the Echo Classic Light for $75,000 featuring an 80-horsepower Rotax engine was just announced. It was still on the ship headed to the United States as this was written. The P92 family includes the Echo Classic Light, the Echo Classic, the Echo Super, the Eaglet—and, of course, the Tail Dragger. Tecnam will display the P92 as a floatplane at EAA AirVenture and build its own floats.

The mostly aluminum P92 uses composite material in the cabin (although the cabin has a steel roll cage), on the engine cowling, fairings, doors, and wing tips. The ailerons are fabric-covered. The P2008 is a complete departure, with a carbon-fiber fuselage and metal wings. Tecnam received FAA certification for the twin-engine P2006T in 2010.

The demonstrator I flew had a tow hook for gliders that had been used in Europe, but the 10-pound hook will be removed when the aircraft is sold in the United States. "The equipment we expect people to want is going to be fairly minimal," Solomon said. "We're not really expecting people to want to cross the country to California. We see it more as a fun type aircraft; you know, rough fields, people meeting up with their pals to have something to eat."

Another reason for confidence in the Naples, Italy-based company is the founder, Luigi Pascale, who started the business

with his brother in 1949 while an assistant at the Naples University Aeronautical Construction Institute. At age 88 he is still there to test-fly every airplane—Tecnam makes slightly more than one a day—and assure it has the control harmony he demands. Tecnam still builds tailplanes for the ATR 42/72 airliner, and has built panels for Douglas and Boeing in the past, proof that Pascale must be doing something right. **AOPA**

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