

STAY IN CONTROL



WHEN TURNING BASE LEG

Loss of control in the circuit

I'll just go and do a few circuits to keep current, that won't need much planning or thinking about — or will it?

If circuits are 'easy' and 'don't really need much preparation', you might be surprised by the number of incidents and accidents that occur there due to loss of control.

In the five years from 2018 to 2023 'loss of control in flight' accidents and serious incidents accounted for 10% of all General Aviation (GA) accidents and serious incidents, 40% of all fatal and 18% of all serious injury accidents — and the majority of these occurred during take-off.

Loss of control at low level, particularly in the circuit, is not a good place to be. It invariably ends up in a stall and or spin which might, perhaps, be easily recoverable at 5,000ft but not so at 500ft. The cause is often a high angle of attack resulting in reducing airspeed leading to a loss of lift and, ultimately, a stall.

So why does it happen?

Flying a circuit involves differing handling skills through the various phases of flight in a matter of just a few minutes: climbing, turning, levelling off, descending, changing power/propeller settings, using the flaps, trim and carburettor heat among other things — and not forgetting lookout.

It's a high workload, especially when you include all the radio calls, with the

particularly critical stages being take-off, climb-out, turning onto final, and the final approach itself.

How good are your handling skills really — and how current (rusty) are you?

Are you sufficiently aware of the correct attitudes for the phases of the flight: for example, a safe angle of attack for that particular climb speed? The same is true for setting up the approach, lowering the flaps and maintaining the correct speed for a stable approach that only needs minor adjustments. Is the aircraft in balance, is the trim adjusted correctly?

Turning from base to final is a very common place for poor speed control and — this might surprise you — some pilots tend to lower the nose in a left turn and raise it in a right turn due to offset cockpit seating

(unless you are in a single-seater or tandem cockpit where of course the picture is the same both ways)

Where are you looking when you do a turn; are you looking ahead or into the turn, or looking both ways rapidly? A good turn is a case of knowing 'the correct picture' and adjusting your attitude as required going into and coming out of the turn as well as during it.

After take-off is another area where poor attitude control can lead to poor speed management at a critical time. So, is the trim set correctly (particularly after a touch & go), are the flaps in the correct position, is an early noise abatement turn required? Any or all of these issues can lead to a high angle of attack when you really don't want to go there...

Other factors can interfere with handling skills too: distractions due to RT calls, passengers talking, looking out for other aircraft, disorientation at an unfamiliar airfield, or even at your home base (multiple runways, or perhaps a change of circuit).

Weather can also play a big part — turbulence, crosswinds and windshear, for example. Do you check the wind forecast for 1000ft as well as the surface? A weather check isn't always thought about 'just for a circuit', but it's certainly worth thinking about in pre-flight planning as the variations in wind speed/direction and visibility can be quite marked.

Then, perhaps more importantly, there's complacency. Rather than think 'I'll just pop out and do a few circuits, done it plenty of times...', perhaps it's wiser to think 'I'll do a Threat and Error check first to think through any potential issues and plan the different phases of the flight properly, even though 'it's only a circuit'.

It's far better to have a safe and enjoyable time rather than adding to the incident/accident statistics'.

