

Bruce Jenner: Winning and Aviation Are in His Blood

*An Interview with NATA President James K. Coyne
and Vice President Eric R. Byer*

When James Coyne and Eric Byer asked Olympic Hall of Famer and multifaceted businessman Bruce Jenner to talk to NATA members about aviation in the Aviation Business Journal, he enthusiastically accepted. The interview took place before his riveting presentation at NATA's Air Charter Summit dinner on June 8. Following are some excerpts about Jenner's history with aviation, passion for flying, and views on the industry.

ABJ: How did you get your start in aviation?

Jenner: When I was a little kid I would go to the airport, sit at the end of the runway, and watch airplanes land and take off, and thought wouldn't that be the coolest thing in the world to learn how to fly, never thinking I would ever really have the opportunity. But then after the games in 1976, all of a sudden I had at least a job and some resources, and I went to Santa Monica Airport to Cannell Aviation and got my ticket, and that kind of started it.

I bought my first airplane in 1978, a Bonanza A36, went back to the factory, met Mrs. Beech, and picked it up. Getting your first airplane is one of the greatest days of your life. I had only about 500 hours at that time when I bought it. I got my instrument rating in it and kept it about three years, and then I bought a 1982 pressurized Barron. Now that one could get me around all over the place. I went everywhere and put a lot of hours on that thing. I went coast to coast, Florida, Mexico; I went everywhere and then sold it.

While I had the Barron, I also bought a Pitts, did a lot of aerobatics, and put about 320 hours on that little Pitts. A guy came up at the airport and said he wanted to buy my Pitts. I had a business relationship with a guy in the South that had a couple of airplanes. Right after I sold it, not really knowing what I was going to do, he had this MU-2 that he wanted to get rid of. He had just spent a year getting it totally redone, and so he said, "I'll make you a deal you can't refuse," and I bought the MU-2.



I bought it through a guy named Rick Crout. He was good friends with my business partner, and he had a small business in Columbia, S.C., and mostly dealt in small planes. I liked dealing with him and liked him as a person. I talked with him, and I said, "Do you want to expand your business? Let's kind of take it to the next level and get into the bigger stuff and see what we can do." That was 22 years ago, and we started Bruce Jenner Aviation, and we've been doing it ever since. That's kind of how it got started because I had an interest in aviation and I also wanted to look at the business side of it.

ABJ: How many total flight hours do you have?

Jenner: I've kind of lost count, but well over 5,000 hours.

ABJ: And you're still active, still fly when you can?

Jenner: Yes, mostly with my son, Brandon. He got his pilot's license, and he's always renting stuff. We'll rent a little Super Decathlon and go throw it

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around the sky. He's a good aerobatic pilot. He's also a helicopter pilot, so we'll fly helicopters once in a while. Now I'm into RC helicopters, and that's a whole other world. If you think flying an airplane or a real helicopter is difficult, try RC helicopters—it is by far the most difficult thing. I tell people it's kind of like trying to learn how to play the piano and sing at the same time.

ABJ: Some indicators show that the economy may be getting a little bit better. Are you seeing that on your end, or do you think it's just as bad as it was last year?

Jenner: Through the 22 years that we've been doing it, I've seen all of the ups and downs and the good times and the bad times. The aviation business, our brokerage business, is directly related to what the economy is doing. If the economy is good, business is good. If the economy goes down, business is not good, buyers are hard to find, inventory goes up, and there are planes that you can't move. Obviously for the last few years, the economy has been down and business has been down. Last year we didn't do badly, but everything went out of the United States to Europe—we had one to China, one in the Philippines, a couple in Europe, but nothing was happening in the U.S. The dollar was weak, and people were buying international.

ABJ: You recently appeared on the Sean Hannity Show and had a really good interview about the fact that the President of the United States flies Air Force One more than any president in

history, and he is doing multiple press conferences and bashing the CEOs of the big three automakers for flying in private jets into Dulles. What are your thoughts?

Jenner: Put it this way: I can honestly say I'm not a fan of this administration. The hypocrisy is unbelievable. Here we have probably one of the most ambitious Presidents in history with his agenda, but he tries to demonize anybody else who tries to make something of themselves in the business world. And it is just ridiculous how he can look at business aviation as a perk for CEOs, when it's a business tool. You brought up General Motors. General Motors is an international company; major executives have to move around the world. I can't even imagine trying to do that on a commercial airline. An efficient use of time is so extremely important that big companies can't do that. For companies who have multiple locations throughout the United States that are not near airports, it is an enormous waste of time trying to fly commercially. I have done some promotions using private aircraft where I'll hit four cities in one day, and it's so simple. You can do more business.

For the first time that I know, we've had an administration that really has demonized business and demonized people who do well, whether it's private aircraft, general aviation, or business aviation, and that is just an absolute shame. As I was saying on Sean Hannity, you have to realize in the big picture, we're trying to build jobs in this country. Look at Air Force One; every part inside that aircraft had to be made by somebody, some place. Somebody has to assemble this plane, and there are literally thousands and thousands of jobs. And then you have maintenance that has to be done on the aircraft and guys that are out there filling it up with fuel, and there is a massive industry around this aircraft. Okay, it's not a CEO taking advantage of a perk; this is a very large business.

ABJ: From your perspective, you've seen campaigns like NATA and AOPA working on GA Serves America and NBAA with No Plane, No Gain. Is there something the GA community is missing in pushing back against



the administration and the naysayers about the use of corporate aircraft and business aviation and GA overall?

Jenner: I think it's extremely important that we do a campaign to bring people together within the industry. The only way you're going to have any power is through organizing. We have a President who has never even balanced the budget of a 7-11 convenience store and he is running a trillion-dollar business, but he's a community organizer and that's what he is trying to do. He is organizing his people to try to stay in business. I think the industry really needs to support the organizations that are out there: NATA, NBAA, AOPA, and all of the organizations. You really have to get behind them and get active. I think that is really important because so many people are affected. I think the aviation community in general has to band together and support the organizations that can lobby. But on the other hand, you've also got to be optimistic for the long term. Aviation is going through a tough time right now, but aviation is here to stay and this administration is not. I feel like from our company's standpoint, we are fortunate. We don't have large overhead within our company. We have sales guys, and some of them work from home. We have an office in Columbia, South Carolina, with my partner and a couple of guys there. So we're very small and very flexible. We're fortunate we can pull back and survive when it's slow, and when things are good we'll probably bring more guys back in and start to generate up. We're not this large, massive organization. I've got good guys who do a really good job.

ABJ: For years, we've worked off the hub-and-spoke airlines, and we're seeing more and more regional aircraft tending to the 121 world where people want to get from point A to point B without a connection. Do you see charter, fractional, and just GA overall becoming more of the predominant mode of transportation than say the commercial aircraft?

Jenner: I would love to see it. They're trying to do the same thing with the new airplanes coming out today that Bill Lear did with the 24, but on half the fuel and ten times the electronics. They're really not going any faster than the old 24, but they're doing it on so much less fuel. More efficient aircraft are coming into the marketplace, and that is extremely important because of fuel prices. I don't see a massive drop in fuel prices in the near future. Back in the old days when it was under one dollar a gallon, that wasn't the expense you had to deal with. Now today you have to seriously look at what your fuel burn is. I'm kind of curious to see where all that is going to settle.

ABJ: Do you see yourself and Bruce Jenner Aviation also going out there and getting a 135 certificate or getting into the FBO business?

Jenner: To be honest with you, we have thought about that, but I look at the aviation business as kind of like the stock market right now. It's volatile. Because of its volatility, I don't want to do anything that we have a lot of capital involved in. Maybe a year from now, we may be talking a different story. For right now, the thing I like about our little company is that we don't have massive overhead. We basically broker aircraft. We put buyers and sellers together, and it makes it very simple.

ABJ: Bruce Jenner's perfect day—do you play golf or do you fly?

Jenner: Perfect day, I would go fly the airplane in the morning, and then I love to wash my own airplane, my MU-2. I used to go in there and scrub it down. I kept it at Clay Lacy's, and the guys would ask, "What the hell are you doing? You can get somebody to do that." And I said, "No, I love cleaning my plane." I put 1,500 hours on my MU-2, and it never gave me a problem—it was a great little aircraft.

ABJ: Any reason you gave it up, or was it just one of those things where you had a good buyer show up?

Jenner: I had a buyer all of a sudden show up, and so I thought, "Well I'll get rid of it," thinking I would get something else, and then fuel prices went nuts and then kind of holding up right now until things settle down.

ABJ: Of course your family is so famous now, and your children are more famous than any people on the planet...

Jenner: On the cover of everything, aren't they?

ABJ: Does that generation have the same appreciation for private aviation as our generation does?

Jenner: Good question. A person's need or curiosity with aviation hasn't changed. Like I was saying, when I was a little kid I'd go to the airport and watch the planes take off and land and think, "Man, wouldn't that be something to fly that airplane?" And I think every young person still has that in them. So I don't think that changes. Now, would it be economically feasible for them to do that? I think that gets a little tougher. So I think that limits a lot of people from getting into it, but I also think young men and women still just have a fascination because there is nothing like it. I don't think that changes. Now the economics of it, we'll see. 