



# My Other Plane is a Kitfox

by MATT McDANIEL



*Alex takes a self-portrait using a drone after landing RedFox at a remote site in northern California.*

**T**he Sacramento River delta, northeast of the San Francisco Bay Area, is flat and sprawling. It meanders between California's capital city of Sacramento and the Suisun Bay. Exit the Class D airspace of Concord's Buchanan Field (CCR) to the northeast and you're there. Thus, this expanse of low-country, situated under hordes of air traffic transitioning to/from NorCal's busiest airports, beckons the little red Kitfox to leave its CCR hangar and come out and play.



▶ *The author (left) and Di Sessa after landing at the private grass runway known as Steamboat.*



*Di Sessa (left, at age 16) and his instructor with the Brazilian-manufactured Inhapecal glider, after Alex's first solo in 1991.*



## Laser Focus

Alex Di Sessa is the founder and CEO of Azena Medical, a company which designs and manufactures laser equipment for the oral health care and medical industries. There is no doubt his success in that field is a combination of good timing, calculated risk taking and old-fashioned hard work. Drawing the attention of much bigger players in the field, the first iteration of his company was sold and the deal included a five-year, noncompete clause. That career intermission was the perfect opportunity to rekindle his aviation passion.

Di Sessa learned to fly in gliders as a teenager, soloing at age 16 and logging nearly 400 hours soaring the air currents above his native Brazil. Then, in 1998, he moved to the United States to complete his education. Due to time, money, the demands of his studies and mastering a second language, he didn't log a single hour as PIC for over seven years. As his professional hiatus began in 2005, he decided that needed to change. He sought out and found a flight school that offered primary training in a Cirrus SR20 and began his first lessons in powered aircraft. By the end of 2006, he had his U.S. Private Pilot License. An instrument rating was added in late 2010, again training exclusively in a Cirrus.

## Personal Data

**Name:** Alex Di Sessa

**Age:** 43

**Born:** Sao Paulo, Brazil

**Living:** Walnut Creek, California and Palm Beach Gardens, Florida

**Status:** Married to Mari Di Sessa; one son – Nick, age 13

### Education:

BA in Computer Science at FASP University – Sao Paulo, Brazil, 1998

English as Second Language – UC Berkeley, 1998-2000

Computer Science – UC Berkeley Extension, 2001-2002

Cisco Systems / Microsoft Certification: 2001-2002

**Occupation:** Founder and CEO of Azena Medical A company that designs and manufactures laser equipment for the oral health care and medical industries.

**Hobbies:** Aviation, RC Planes, Karting, Soccer, Tennis

## Aviation Data

**Earliest Aviation Memory:** My dad has always been a pilot, so my earliest aviation memory is of me sitting on my mom's lap as we flew in an old Cessna when I was 4 or 5 years old.

**First Flight:** I started flying gliders at age 15, during the summer of 1990, at small rural airport among the countryside of Sao Paulo called Tatui Aeroclub.

**Aviation Mentors:** I've had many great aviation mentors. My original glider instructor, Fernando Cunha de Abreu,

Di Sessa is not a newbie to the COPA community; he's been a prolific poster on the forums and on YouTube for a dozen years. He purchased a 2005 SR22TN in 2012. The major makeover the airplane then received was featured in this magazine. While he has remained a vocal advocate of Cirrus, he decided in 2016 to sell his beloved SR22 to explore other facets of aviation. The focus on expanding his horizons has been like that of the medical lasers that have helped to finance it – laser-sharp.

## RedFox

The Kitfox is a kit-built, two-seat design first introduced in 1984. The versatile and sporty little machine has proven consistently popular with builders and pilots ever since. Kitfox aircraft can be found in all manner of configurations. Tailwheel versions are most popular, but tricycle-gear, seaplane, amphibious, and ski versions are well represented too. Engine options are numerous, with various Rotax designs being most common. To remain

taught me to fly the same way we should talk to people: Respectfully, while remaining secure and humble. He taught me not only how to fly, but how to enjoy flying.

**First solo:** My first solo was in a Brazilian glider called an Inhapecal. It was not a super performer and we didn't have any hills to ride waves on. I soloed shortly after my 16th birthday in 1991 in PP-FAH (Brazilian registration number).

**Initial Training:** All of my primary training was done in gliders. Between 1991-97, I logged 380 hours soaring. My first powered aircraft experience was in the United States in 2006.

**Private & Instrument Training:** Sterling Aviation in Concord, California (CCR), using an SR20

Private Pilot training and certificate: 2006

Instrument training and rating: 2008-2010

**Aircraft Owned:** 2005 Cirrus SR22TN (upgraded with Avidyne R9 avionics, new paint and interior, etc.), 2012-2016 Kitfox Model V, 2017-present and foreseeable future

**Proudest accomplishments in aviation:** Sharing my love of flight with others, especially when I flew to Oshkosh with my dad and brother, when I flew to Alaska with my dad and son, and every time I get to give Young Eagles rides. Those are moments that make me feel accomplished as a pilot and an individual.

**All-time favorite flight:** This might sound cliché, but when I fly the KitFox, then put her back in the hangar, I always think to myself, "I can't possibly top that flight." Somehow, I feel the same way on each subsequent flight.

**Flight Time:** 2,700 hours (2,000 in Cirrus, the rest split almost evenly between gliders and the Kitfox).





*The most popular cowl option for the Kitfox is the round bump cowl, which mimics the classic radial-engine look. In contrast, Di Sessa chose to give the spinner a modern composite look using the hydro-dip graphics application process.*

relevant over three-plus decades, the design has continuously matured. Currently, the Model 7 Super Sport remains available worldwide, while the Model IV (considered the “classic” version of the Kitfox) is still sold within the European market.

While Alex didn’t have any burning desire to build an aircraft himself, he did yearn to do the sort of flying Kitfoxes excel at. He wanted to explore low and slow flying, STOL and off-airport operations, and the out-of-the-ordinary stuff that is far from the mission Cirrus aircraft were designed for. The Kitfox fit the bill nicely and his search was on. Eventually, he found a beautifully crafted Kitfox for sale – a Model V airframe, with Model 7 firewall-forward updates. Built with close attention to every detail, the builder so impressed the owners of Kitfox Aircraft that they hired him to come work for them! A deal was struck for Alex to purchase the plane and the original builder to update it to Alex’s specifications. What Alex had in mind was to blend what he loved about his Cirrus into the Kitfox and create a unique attention-grabbing example, with comfort, capability and excellent dispatch reliability.

The result is now known as RedFox, a take on the aircraft type, the builder’s original red paint scheme, which Alex kept, and Alex’s flair for multimedia –

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RedFox has its own YouTube channel (see QR code at the end of this article). RedFox differs from its original configuration in subtle, but significant ways. Alex designed a new interior reminiscent of his SR22TN’s luxury-inspired leather with raised stitching. An all-new, all-glass instrument panel layout was created. Anchored by a Garmin G3X Touch Flight Deck, it also includes a flush-mounted iPad®, a carbon-fiber motif, an efficient layout of switches, and provisions for future expansions to IFR capability. Outside, the standard main wheels/tires were replaced with 26-inch tundra tires for the rough terrain operations Di Sessa envisioned. The spinner was given a carbon-fiber look (though it’s still aluminum, in reality) and custom graphics were added. The Rotax engine was examined, as well.

### Tastes Like Chicken

It seems no matter how hard aircraft designers have tried over the years, it’s impossible to escape predictable comparisons. Within the two-seat,

taildragger, light aircraft category, the inevitable comparison is to the Piper Cub. To say that an aircraft, “flies like a Cub” seems somewhat unimaginative. Like saying that some grand culinary concoction, “tastes like chicken.” Yet, the truth is that such comparisons are often both accurate and complementary. After all, most anyone can identify the taste of chicken and few truly detest it. The same concept applies to light taildragger pilots; most have sampled a Cub’s flight characteristics at some point and, from that day forward, it became the stick by which all other similar-category aircraft are measured. The Kitfox conforms to the old aviation adage that if it flies like a Cub, pilots will enjoy it!

### Escaping the Pavement Purgatory

After picking our way under and around the Bay area’s Class Bravo, Charlie and Delta airspaces, Di Sessa and I found ourselves over the river delta and ready for some air work. Slow flight, steep

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RedFox at rest in the parking area of Steamboat Airport.

turns and stalls were, well, very Cub-like. However, the Kitfox outperforms most any Cub in roll responsiveness. Unlike a Cub, the Kitfox has flaperons (combination full-span ailerons/flaps). At full extension, the flaperons lower stall speed dramatically without sacrificing roll control. Thus, the pilot can easily maintain wings-level or turn to headings while in a full-stall, falling-leaf maneuver.

Paved runway manners are typical and again, very Cubesque, but, no pilot who chooses to own or fly this type of airplane seeks out paved runways. Non-paved runways or off-airport landing areas are what they desire. Di Sessa is no exception and we were soon heading direct to one of his favorite grass runways, known as *Steamboat*. Upon arrival, he performed his preferred grass/rough field technique of a wheel landing (main wheels first), then adding slight forward stick to keep the tail flying longer. This method is meant to keep the tailwheel off the rough surface as long as possible to protect it from damage. While a three-point landing is generally the preferred method for light taildraggers in moderate-to-light winds, such landings can put higher stresses on the tailwheel assembly, especially when the landing surface is truly unimproved. Tailwheel damage while in the backcountry



The tail of RedFox sports new graphics, including the QR Code for its YouTube channel.

### Data Chart – Kitfox Series V, “RedFox”

Engine	Rotax 912ULS, 100HP
Propeller	NSI Cap 140, 3-Blade Composite, Adjustable Pitch
Seats	Two (side-by-side)
Wingspan	30 feet 8 inches
Length	19 feet 9 inches
Height	8 feet 2 inches (top of tail level attitude)
Wing Area	128 sq. ft.
Max Gross Weight	1,550 lbs.
Useful Load	700 lbs.
Wing Loading (1g)	12.11 lbs. / sq. ft. @MGW
Power Loading (@MGW)	15.5 lb./hp. @MGW
Baggage Capacity	150 lbs.
Fuel Capacity (usable)	26.0 gal.
Wheels/Tires/Brakes	8-inch wheels & 26-inch Tires Groove Brakes
Landing Gear	Conventional
Cockpit Flight Controls	Dual sticks with PTT
Stall in Landing Config (Vso)	40 MPH @MGW
Stall – Clean (Vs)	45 MPH
Best Angle of Climb (Vx)	55 MPH
Best Rate of Climb (Vy)	60 MPH
Economy Cruise	95 MPH @4.0 GPH
Max Cruise	125 MPH
Max Normal Operating Speed (Vno)	135 MPH
Never Exceed (Vne)	150 MPH
Flaps Extended (Vfe)	80 MPH
Final Approach (Vref) – Full Flaps	45-55 (depending on weight)
Takeoff Distance (@MGW)	320 ft.
Landing Distance (@MGW)	300-450 ft.

All data based on best available information. All Speeds in MPH, IAS.



*The thoroughly modern instrument panel of N171KK was designed for future expansion to IFR capabilities. However, now that Di Sessa has been flying the plane for several hundred hours and has never had a need or desire to fly in IMC with it, he doubts he'll bother adding IFR capabilities any time soon.*

can be a show-stopper and leave a pilot stranded miles from civilization. *Steamboat's* grass strip is on an operating farm and pear orchard and is open (with prior permission) to pilots flying in to partake of the on-site, country-style restaurant of the same name. Seaplane pilots can land in the Sacramento River and dock across the street! On the walk to/from the runway or dock, you are likely to be personally greeted by the owner and welcomed to his little slice of heaven. After lunch, Alex and I headed for one of his favorite off-airport landing sites; a stretch of privately-

owned, river-levy separating the deep-water channel of the Sacramento River from the natural river delta. Atop the levy is an "access road" that, in reality, is just a tiny strip of gravel, about 4-to-6 feet wide. Cattle graze in the high grasses on both sides. After a low pass to assess the conditions, we landed, shut down, and enjoyed the solitude for a few moments. In such locations, one truly appreciates the car-like, push-button, quick-starting performance of the Rotax engine.

Other areas that Alex and his new crop of back-country flying buddies enjoy exploring include gravel bars along several area rivers and tributaries. Also accessible to the STOL capabilities of RedFox are many mountaintops and grassy flats within Bureau of Land Management (BLM)





*RedFox parked on a privately-owned portion of the Sacramento River levy. Miles from anywhere, yet minutes flying time from dense population centers.*

lands, beaches and other isolated areas. In all cases, Di Sessa is careful to investigate the legalities of landing in such areas in advance. Privately-owned lands make this a bit easier if the owner is known and permission can be secured. Being able to consistently takeoff or land in under 500 feet makes the possibilities seemingly endless.

## Cirrus Ownership, Part Dois

While cruising along, I asked Alex the meaning of the sole switch on the panel which I could not identify. He informed me it was the on/off switch for the smoke system. As a nod to his native tongue of Portuguese, he had it labeled, “Fumaca Ja!” (Smoke On).

While it is obvious that Alex is having a great time with RedFox, his Cirrus flying days have not ended. He recently moved his family and primary residence to Florida, while his business and RedFox remain in

California. In both places, he still rents Cirrus aircraft and flies with fellow COPA members. However, he plans to resume Cirrus ownership himself in the near future. When that happens, he'll likely base the Cirrus in Florida to enjoy flying and touring in the southeast and the Caribbean. He'll likely also utilize his next Cirrus for the occasional transcontinental flight to/from NorCal. An additional Kitfox, based in Florida, is not outside the realm of possibility either. Whether it be in RedFox or a future Cirrus, Alex remains passionate about aviation and sharing that passion with his young son and their online viewers worldwide. Check out their many entertaining, educational, and visually vibrant videos on YouTube! ☺



Scan this QR code with your smartphone for a direct link to the RedFox YouTube channel.

*Matthew McDaniel is a Master & Gold Seal CFI, ATP, MEI, AGI, & IGI and Platinum CSIP. In 29 years of flying, he has logged over 17,500 hours total, over 5,500 hours of instruction-given, and over 5,000 hours in all models of the Cirrus. As owner of Progressive Aviation Services, LLC (www.progaviation.com), he has specialized in Technically Advanced Aircraft and Glass Cockpit instruction since 2001. Currently, he is also an Airbus A-320-series captain for an international airline, holds eight turbine aircraft type ratings, and has flown 90 aircraft types. Matt is one of less than 15 instructors in the world to have earned the Master CFI designation for eight consecutive two-year terms. He can be reached at matt@progaviation.com or (414) 339-4990.*

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