

Hunt on for best bush pilots

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A plan to put the fun back into aviation has sparked a new national flying competition that will be taking off in Marlborough next month.

The Marlborough Aero Club is hoping the Healthy Bastards' Bush Pilot Champs will bring about 50 pilots to take part in two precision flying competitions at Omaka airfield on February 2.

Club president Craig Anderson said the club was planning to run the competition annually as part of big shift in the way the club operates.

The club was putting its focus on training people to fly in the New Zealand back country and teaching them strip flying, taking off and landing on grass strips and beaches, hoping to give the club a better national profile and draw students from around the country.

A lot of aero clubs were scared of teaching mountain flying and strip flying because it was more dangerous, but the club wanted to make use of the dozen or so farm strips and other grass landing strips within 30 minutes of Omaka airfield. Along with being more scenic, the flying had more challenge and taught more skills, Mr Anderson said.

"The thing with a lot of flying training these days is we try to make it so safe a lot of the fun goes out of it. We put so many rules and regulations in and all of a sudden it's not that fun because you can only fly big airplanes off big, long runways.

"What we're trying to do is to put the fun back into aviation."

The club is so committed to the change it has bought two new Cessna 172 planes from the United States for the purpose.

The flying championships, backed by Bulls-based flying doctor and men's health advocate Dave Baldwin, is also part of raising the club's profile and will involve two competitions. The first will be a short takeoff and landing competition, where the distance pilots use to take off and land will be measured and the shortest distance wins. The second will be a precision landing competition in which pilots try to land as close as possible to a horizontal line on the runway. Both were safe but technical tests of a pilot's skill, which would require a smooth, stable landing approach at the right speed, Mr Anderson said.

Each had a prize of \$500.

The championship has already attracted about two dozen entries and excitement was building, Mr Anderson said.

He hoped it would also provide a good spectacle for the public to watch and perhaps be inspired by.

Entry is free and there will be live music on the day as well.

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