

IN PERSON

Executing controlled risks

Rory Moore tackles nonprofit telecom as he does performing stunts on plane

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Rory Moore's friends say he does business the way he performs daring feats in his plane: with fearlessness, confidence and precision.

Never recklessly.

Moore, a former Arizona Unlimited Aerobatic champion who once placed seventh in national championships, is an icon in the elite world of competitive aerobatic flying with a repertoire of audacious tricks that leave other pilots white-knuckled.

“He would scare the fire out of people, including me,” said Chip Beck, a former business partner and student of Moore, who credits Moore with coaching him to three Arizona Unlimited Aerobatic championships. “But the proof is in the pudding. He was good enough to pull it off every time.”

Moore is bringing the same gusto he has at the controls of a Pitts S1T aircraft to his role as interim chief executive at CommNexus San Diego, the area's nonprofit telecommunications trade group. Founded in 1998 as the San Diego Telecom Council, CommNexus hosts events where employees of member companies network and catch up on the latest industry trends.

“As I've watched Rory Moore in business, he's fearless,” said Beck, who lives in Scottsdale, Ariz.

“He's not afraid to do something that most people would be afraid to try. The average person will not take on a high-risk, low-odds-of-success proposition, but that's the sort of thing Rory would take on without batting an eye. And he'd pull it off, where other people would fail.”



HOWARD LIPIN / Union-Tribune
Rory Moore, interim CEO at CommNexus, flies aerobatic planes like this Pitts Special S2-B at Montgomery Field.

How a competitive aerobatic pilot in Phoenix navigated his way into San Diego's telecommunications industry is a story full of, well, twists and turns, ups and downs.

Moore, who will turn 59 in two weeks, was born in Fresno, a third-generation Californian and the oldest of four children. But he grew up on a farm in Arizona, where his family moved when he was a toddler.

After two years of active duty in the Air Force and a bachelor's degree in business from the University of Michigan, Moore got his feet wet in Phoenix business in a management training program at Farmers Insurance, a company founded by his grandfather in 1928.

He left in 1976 to start the first of seven companies: a risk management firm. After mornings at his desk, Moore would take his lunch hours to practice stunts such as flying upside down at 220 mph, 10 feet off the ground over a runway, or performing outside loops that bottom out 10 feet off the ground.

Moore also is known for flying his plane so close in formation that airplane designer and friend Dan Rihn calls it “unnervingly close.”

“The wings would be a couple feet apart, closer than what the Blue Angels fly,” said Rihn, who has flown in formation with Moore from Los Angeles to San Francisco. “I never felt unsafe, per se, just nervous about it.”

Fellow aerobatic pilots think Moore might have honed his extraordinary ability to twist, turn and fly upside without losing his bearings when he was a competitive diver in college in the late 1960s.

“He did the same types of gyrations and what-not and still had the sense of situational awareness, where he knew where he was at all times,” Rihn said.

Moore has had three close calls. Once, his engine failed and he had to land on a freeway full of vehicles north of Phoenix. (He landed without scratching his plane or a car). Another time, the oil line ruptured in a plane that Rihn designed for him, requiring Moore to make an emergency landing on a one-lane country road. And the third time, right after takeoff, a clog in a fuel line necessitated a landing in a wheat field.

In all three cases, no one was injured.

Moore retired from competition a little more than 10 years ago, but he still flies regularly.

“You know, the only times I've ever been in an airplane with Rory, we've been upside down most of the time,” said San Diego entrepreneur Marco Thompson, who has known Moore for more than a decade. “I try to forget those flights. Last time, I was in an airplane with him, we flew upside down from Del Mar to El Cajon. He's crazy like that.”

While Moore's aerobatic stunts might lead some to call him a daredevil, his friends take umbrage at the use of the word.

"I wouldn't call him a daredevil," Thompson said. "He's a very careful and measured guy."

Beck, who co-founded a company with Moore that maintained aerobatic planes at the Phoenix Deer Valley Airport, said his friend runs his businesses like he flies his planes: "Not in a careless manner, but with the self-confidence that he can succeed," Beck said.

Their maintenance company shut down when it lost its lease. Then, in 1989, W.R. Berkley, a large insurance holding company, bought Moore's risk-management business.

Moore landed in San Diego because of an old friend from high school, Ron Reedy. The two, along with Reedy's colleague Mark Burgener, founded Peregrine Semiconductor, a designer, manufacturer and marketer of integrated circuits for the wireless, satellite and broadband cable markets. Moore helped fund the company and was its vice president until he left in 1996 because, as he puts it, "my co-founder and I were both trying to fly the airplane, so I left to fly my own plane."

Moore went on to start other companies. Some were successes, such as Silicon Wave, a San Diego-based supplier of integrated circuits for wireless personal area networks, which was acquired in 2004. Some were failures, such e-Fire.com, an online auction site for used fire and security equipment.

He began volunteering at CommNexus, then called the San Diego Telecom Council, by forming the military special interest group with retired U.S. Navy Vice Admiral Walter Davis. Thompson, former president of the San Diego Telecom Council, called the military special interest group "the best-attended and the longest-running" of all the organization's special interest groups.

One of the more memorable meetings organized by Moore and Davis, a session on how to do business with the government, took place immediately after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Thompson said the council was hoping for a turnout of 100 or so at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot. More than 400 showed up, causing a backup onto Interstate 5 as each vehicle checked in at the gate.

"There was a one-mile line of cars backed up on I-5," Thompson said. "That's the kind of influence that Rory and Walt had within the community."

Moore became a board member of the Telecom Council in 2004. When the chief executive left this summer to take a job in the private sector, board member Kevin Cahill, an attorney, recommended Moore for the interim CEO position at the newly named CommNexus San Diego.

“I knew his skills,” Cahill said. “He's a wonderful person and a great serial entrepreneur. He's very much a person who perseveres and who has great stamina. You have to have that if you're going to set up entrepreneurial companies.”

CommNexus counts almost 500 companies as members, ranging from big local telecommunications players, such as Qualcomm and Kyocera Wireless, to companies that offer telecom-related services, such as law firms.

Moore's business at hand is to sign up companies that aren't based here but which have a local presence and to reinvigorate companies that are already members.

“He's done a wonderful job for us revitalizing the organization,” Cahill said. “In particular, on the money-raising side, he has been bringing back a bunch of sponsors who had dwindled over the last six or eight months, and he has really put a new spark into Comm-Nexus.”

Moore combined his love of flying with a fundraiser for the Injured Marine Semper Fi Fund when CommNexus, along with Luce Forward and Bank of America, set up a tent at the Miramar Air Show last month. They raised \$21,000 for the fund, which provides financial grants to wounded Marines, sailors and their families.

Moore said he has so many ideas for CommNexus that he would like to be considered for the \$130,000-a-year position of permanent CEO. The board expects to decide between Moore and other candidates by the end of this year.

In the meantime, Moore is considering competing again as an aerobatic pilot.

“It's safer than driving on Interstate 5,” he said.

Thompson said Moore's preparation – for flying and business – make the difference.

“It's just like anything else in the world,” Thompson said. “If you prepare and plan and understand your airplane and the safety margins, it's just as safe as stepping off a curb. But you have to have a certain confidence, capability and knowledge in order to be successful as a pilot or in order to be successful as a leader of an organization. There's a common skills set you have to deploy.”

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