Picking The Runway, And Airport

The surface you land on in a gear emergency is at least as important as the airplane's condition. It needs to be long and wide enough to accommodate your airplane under normal circumstances. It would be nice if it also was equipped with a crash truck or two, just in case. All of which argues in favor of a towered airport with scheduled service. Yes, you might tie up some airliners for an hour or so, but that beats rolling up the airplane into a ball, with you in it.

PAVEMENT, PLEASE

Many pilots believe a belly landing on grass or open land is preferable to a runway because it's softer and more forgiving than a concrete slab or thick asphalt. We disagree, and will take the pavement every time.

Why? Mainly because it's smooth and relatively obstruction-free. Soft terrain is just that—soft—and landing on it can mean higher deceleration rates. While it may appear flat from pattern altitude, up close and personal there are rocks and clumps of grass, plus drainage ditches and pipes, all of which can ruin your day as parts of the airplane—a deformed belly, for example, or even a landing gear leg—dig in. The result can be a too-sudden stop, among other outcomes.

Pavement is uniform in its hardness, offering the best opportunity for the kind of gradual deceleration and minimal airframe damage we want and need.

NO FOAM

There was a time when airports would send out a truck or three to apply fire-retardant foam to a runway before a planned emergency landing. Those days are behind us.

In a 2002 "cert alert," the FAA's Airport Safety and Operations Division stated, "The FAA does not recommend the foaming of runways for emergency landings and warns against the practice" without using a so-called "protein" foam: "It is recommended that [airport rescue and fire-fighting] personnel decline to foam a runway when requested by a pilot because they do not have the specialized equipment and protein foam."