

Circling For Keeps

Aspen, Colo.'s Pitkin County/Sardis Field has three published approaches, reproduced at right. Despite all of them incorporating final approach courses aligned relatively closely to the runway, none of them include straight-in minimums. Each includes circling minimums greater than 2000 feet agl, and none are authorized at night.

Perhaps the poster-child accident for those who would urge caution when executing the circling maneuver, circling at night or even flying into Aspen in other than clear-and-a-million VFR is the March 29, 2001, fatal crash involving a chartered Gulfstream III. The NTSB's probable cause finding included "the flight crew's operation of the airplane below the minimum descent altitude without an appropriate visual reference for the runway" and the FAA's "unclear wording" of a Notam on nighttime restrictions for the VOR/DME-C procedure the crew was executing, along with "the FAA's failure to communicate" the Notam's restriction to the tower.

