

the HIGH of Flying

Club members can't get enough of piloting radio-controlled model planes and helicopters

Model planes, from Page 1

"I never get tired of flying," said Stites, a retired Loch Raven High School band director, who lives in Baldwin. "I'm out here flying as often as I can. I even have a plane on skis so I can fly in the snow."

But for those not as hardy as Stites, the club offers indoor flying. It meets at Carroll Manor Recreation Council's gym in Jacksonville each Wednesday afternoon to fly planes and helicopters.

The indoor battery-run helicopters and planes are so light — some weigh less than an ounce — that the gym's air conditioning is turned off to prevent downdrafts that could send a plane crashing to the floor.

Jerry Stevens, 81, of Forest Hill, recently maneuvered his single-blade helicopter around the gym, keeping along the same flight path as six other planes and two helicopters.

He joined the club in 1981 and now owns six planes and three helicopters. He flies at Parkton several times a week and in the gym weekly.

Career springboard

The club, which is an associate member of Seventh District Recreation Council, has about 125 members. Most are men, but there are a few women members, though they aren't currently flying.

The members have varied backgrounds — doctors, engineers, dentists, store owners and businessmen — but they are united by their passion for planes.

"I owe my career to this club," said Ron Stahl, 53, of Reisterstown, a club member for 35 years, referring to his job at AAI, the Hunt Valley based corporation that manufactures high technology equipment for the government. "When AAI started making unmanned airplanes, they approached the club for some advice and several of us were eventually hired,

including me. I'd say 10 percent of the club is retired from or still works for AAI."

Like Stites, Stahl comes out to the field every chance he gets. He recently flew an electric jet at about 90 mph. He built the 6-pound jet with a 42-inch wingspan from a kit and had no trouble landing it on the 300-foot paved runway the members built.

But Stahl has had his share of accidents, including one day when two of his planes crashed — a problem that was later traced back to faulty equipment.

"If you fly and you say you haven't crashed, you're lying," he said. "But that's partly the fun — repairing or rebuilding a plane."

Stahl and Stites are two of about a dozen members who are instructors. They invite anyone age 9 or older to come out to the field for a test flight. The novice will fly one of three training planes the club owns, using a buddy box that allows the instructor to take over at any time.

After three successful take-offs and landings on their own, as well as some maneuvers in the air, students get a pair of wings and are invited to join the club.

William Warren, 12, of Baltimore is the club's newest member. The seventh-grader at Park School was interested in buying a gas-powered plane, but first needed to find a field where it is legal to fly it. And he needed some help with his flying skills.

He found the Radio Control Modelers of Baltimore on the Internet and practiced on club-owned planes before buying his own.

"I went out there three or four times before I passed the test," he said. "The club

members were very helpful to me. The first time I flew on my own, I was a little nervous, but it's fun. It's an expensive hobby though."

Annual fees for the Radio Control Modelers of Baltimore are \$50 for adults and \$25 for kids under 18. Each member must also belong to the national Academy of Model Aeronautics, which provides insurance. Those dues are \$58 a year for those 19 and over.

And, of course, there is the cost of a plane and radio controller. A basic ready-to-fly kit with a foam plane and radio controller can be bought for about \$150.

"This is a great father-son sport," said Stites, whose son, Brian, spent many hours flying with his father and now flies corporate jets for a living.

The club has even attracted attention from Johns Hopkins University. Hopkins professor Cila Herman found the club's website when she was teaching a class on mechanical engineering in aviation.

She asked several members to help teach the class last year, Stites said. The men supervised students while they built model planes in class, then they all went to Kingfield to fly their creations.

Crashing is fun

The flying club got its start in the 1950s when boys and men gathered behind Peerce's Plantation on Dulaney Valley Road to fly gas-powered planes.

From there they moved to a field of

See Model planes, Page 2

