

Non-Towered Airports

Is there an Active Runway at non-towered airports with multiple runways?

By Tom Rogers CFI-II-MEI, NAFI Master CFI



This is an interesting question. For most of my 50 years in the air I would say no, and I have even seen FAA inspector comments to the negative in past year or so, but things they are a changing. I believe and operate as if there is. Let me explain why. In recent changes to FAA guidance and best practices, clearly the FAA is moving toward pilots recognizing and complying with an “Active” runway operation at non-towered airports. I will not say that all ambiguity has been removed, to be sure the FAA guidance is still vague.

For you legal eagles out there, best practices are a general term intended to describe all the guidance contained in non-regulatory FAA publications. The Aeronautical Information Manual (AIM), Advisory Circulars in this case AC90-66B Non-Towered Airport Operations, Pilots Handbook of Aeronautical Knowledge (PHAK, FAA-H-8083-25B), and the Airplane Flying Handbook (AFHB FAA-H-8083-3C) are ones which deal with the subject today of non-towered airport operations. Before you make a case that the guidance is not in a regulation so you don’t have to follow the recommendations, ask yourself would you pass a private, commercial or ATP check ride not following best practices? The answer is of course no, you would not. So please don’t make a case that you don’t have to follow the best practices in day to day flying.

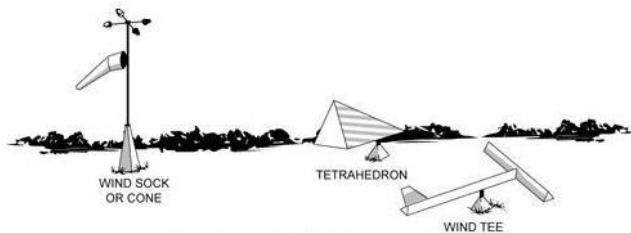
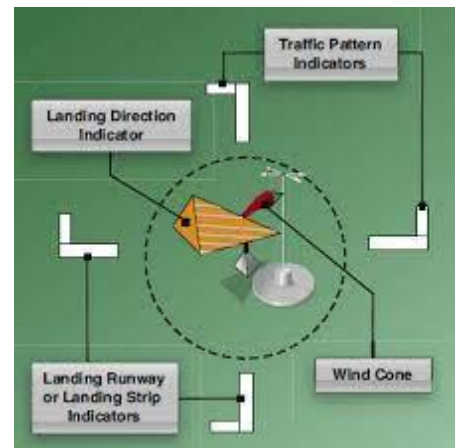


Figure 6-11.—Wind direction indicators.

Guidance was rewritten and updated in 2017 and again in 2019 in all the best practice publications. I came upon the significance of the changes when I noticed this new depiction and began to research the subject further.

The first depiction Figure 6-11 was found in the AIM dated 2011. It describes all the indicators the way they were when I first began flying 50 years ago. Now take a close look at the new AIM depiction dated 2019. The tetrahedron is now “Landing Direction Indicator”. This isn’t exactly a smoking gun to prove my premise, but it led me to asking, why the change? I sought guidance with a few of my old friends in the FAA and they began to describe a slow deliberate change occurring within the FAA regarding non-towered airports.



In previous articles I mention that in this process they deliberately scrubbed the word “Uncontrolled” from the books in favor of the term non-

towered. This was a deliberate change to remove the paradigm that non-towered airports have no rules. I continued my research by reviewing the changes to the AIM that were published in 2017.

AIM-4-3-4. Visual Indicators at Airports Without an Operating Control Tower

3. The landing direction indicator. A tetrahedron is installed when conditions at the airport warrant its use. It may be used to indicate the direction of landings and takeoffs.

The AIM changed the description of the tetrahedron from a simple wind indicator to a device directing the landing and takeoff direction. This sounded a lot like active runway. I continued to the non-towered airport bible AC90-66B to see what had changed there.

Chapter 11 RECOMMENDED STANDARD TRAFFIC PATTERN.

The following information is intended to supplement the AIM, paragraph 4-3-3, Traffic Patterns, and the PHAK, Chapter 14.

11.6 Runway Preference. Landing and takeoff should be accomplished on the operating runway most nearly aligned into the wind. However, if a secondary runway is used (e.g., for length limitations), pilots using the secondary runway should avoid the flow of traffic to the runway most nearly aligned into the wind.

AIM 4-3-3 and PHAK chapter 14 regard the standard traffic pattern. Let's look at the AFHB.

AFHB Chapter 7

When entering the traffic pattern at an airport without an operating control tower, inbound pilots are expected to observe other aircraft already in the pattern and to conform to the traffic pattern in use.

The guidance does not use the term active runway, they use the term operating runway. Further they describe a situation where even at airports with multiple runways, traffic should only use one runway at a time. That runway should be the runway most aligned into the wind. If for a safety related reason, you need to operate on a different runway not aligned with the wind, you must remain clear of the pattern for the runway aligned to the wind. Regardless of whether you are beginning to agree with me that there is an active runway at non-towered airports, the guidance is clear, there is only one pattern authorized at a time.

This guidance is anticipated to cause arguments as pilots attempt to use the runway aligned with the wind and others, operating in a mindset of uncontrolled operations, decide they want to use another runway for what ever reason. Let's go back to 90-66B and read on.

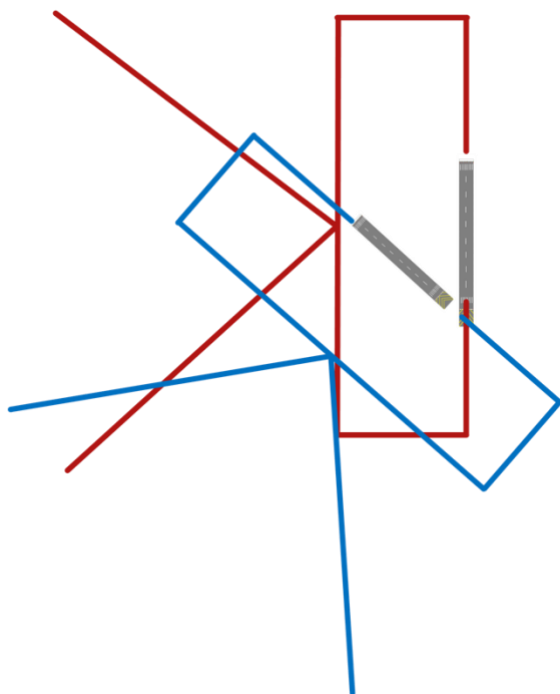
10.7 Disagreements. Do not correct other pilots on frequency (unless it is safety critical), particularly if you are aware you are correcting a student pilot. If you disagree with what another pilot is doing, operate your aircraft safely, communicate as necessary, clarify their intentions and, if you feel you must discuss operations with another pilot, wait until you are on the ground to have that discussion. Keep in mind that while you are communicating, you may block

transmissions from other aircraft that may be departing or landing in the opposite direction to your aircraft due to IFR operations, noise abatement, obstacle avoidance, or runway length requirements. An aircraft might be using a runway different from the one favoring the prevailing winds. In this case, one option is to simply point out the current winds to the other pilots and indicate which runway you plan on using because of the current meteorological conditions.

You may not be convinced that indeed there is an active runway at non-towered airports yet but changes are still being made to the FAA publications. Over the next few years, it will become clearer that the FAA is gently encouraging pilots to fly non-towered operations with more care and using more standard operations. As I have indicated in previous articles the reason behind these changes is safety.

The last full years safety statistics published was 2021. The rate of general aviation accidents remains steady for the last 20 years at approximately 5.5 accidents per 100,00 hours flown. In real terms there are on average 30 accidents each month year after year. Within these numbers the two largest categories are loss of control and mid-air collisions. Looking at just mid-air collisions in the past 20 years, general aviation has between 20 and 30 a year. Digging deeper, all of these occur in class G and E airspace below 1000 feet and most occur in the proximity of non-towered airports. A full 68% occur on short final at non-towered airports. It is a vital safety goal to encourage pilots to use more standard procedures and be more predictable in the pattern at non-towered airports.

In past articles I have described in detail how to fly near non-towered airports with one runway option let me talk about some of the trouble spots at airports with multiple runways.



Here is a typical runway layout with a North-South runway and a NW-SE runway. It resembles an airport I fly out of often. For many reasons pilots prefer to use the N-S runway. Among the reasons are that the flight schools are located to the East of the N-S runway making it closer for taxi. Other reasons are that the ILS is located on the longer N-S runway. Problems occur when the wind is out of the West or Northwest. Rightly so, many tailwheel and light sport aircraft want and need to operate on the NW runway aligned to the wind. Others do not want to taxi further and choose to use the north runway with a crosswind.

Often, I witness this occurring at the same time with multiple aircraft in the pattern for both runways at the same time. Downwind legs cross, aircraft departing the NW runway go head-to-head with 45 entries to the north runway and aircraft converge on short final. I have been on

downwind with another aircraft landing on the NW runway with two other aircraft on downwind for the North runway and yet another aircraft decided it was a good idea to enter directly onto downwind for the South runway and fly multiple patterns opposite all traffic. It is pandemonium on warm, clear, summer days. This is exactly the scenario that the relatively new guidance from the FAA is trying to address. All these pilots if individually asked, would say they are a safe pilot and take safety seriously because that is known to be the correct answer. Yet while in the air they believe the old uncontrolled airport meant they could do whatever they want. Thoughts need to change, actions need to be standardized, and Safety needs to be the primary motivation while flying.

My recommendation is that CFIs develop briefings for their clients undergoing the flight review on this and that flight schools develop standardization positions. Both in the airlines and Military there are required positions usually called standardization and evaluation or StanEval. General aviation usually incorporated the duties of StanEval in the Chief Pilot or chief Flight Instructor. I believe another senior CFI needs to hold this title and responsibility as it is a critical duty which cannot be done properly by a busy Chief Pilot. The idea is that the StanEval CFI then keeps abreast of changes to rules, best practices, and local area operations, then shares this with other CFIs and pilots. Monthly briefings and flyers can address the “approved” way to operate the school’s aircraft. Keep in mind that 62% of mid-air collisions involve a dual flight.

Standardization is how the airlines and military operate with very small accident rates. Fly safe, no, really fly with safe intent.

Over and out.