

Practice makes...



Double World Champion and US Team Coach George Moffat explains how to practise to improve your competition performance

GIVEN our 'druthers*, most of us fly during the best three or four hours of really great days, with – in the US – reliable 6kts-plus thermals, 8,000ft bases (5kts-plus and 5,000ft bases in Britain) and lots of good-looking cu, preferably streeting. Fun? You bet! and it makes for great stories at the bar. Practice? No. Not the kind that wins major competitions, anyway.

So how do we practise – meaningfully? Four areas need attention: diagnosis; goal setting; techniques; and psychology.

Diagnosis

Use a diagnostic chart covering all areas of contest flying, similar to the survey opposite, taken from a much longer one used by the US Team. Look realistically at your strengths and weaknesses:

- Try to spot patterns in your flying. Do you never have any 'luck' on weak days, POST days, or ...?
- Consider the locale of the upcoming contest. Flying in flatlands won't help for mountain competitions.

Goal setting

- Be specific: for instance, improve weak weather thermalling.
- Evaluate potential gains. Put high-gain or frequently-encountered problems first.
- Set priorities (usually not more than three at a time).
- Design a practice scenario which can make use of strong, medium and weak weather.
- Evaluate progress monthly.

*American slang for "I'd rather..."

Americans who do most of their flying around Hobbs or Minden can be at a serious disadvantage when it comes to the kind of practice which wins the big ones. How do I know? Of 22 World Championships in which the US has flown, Americans have come first five times. If you add seconds and thirds, nine pilots have finished in the top three 12 times. Not one of these has come from west of the Mississippi. The majority have come from within a couple of hundred miles of New York, with its short seasons of iffy flying weather. How come? Anyone who has flown against Western pilots such as Ray Gimmey, the only person ever to win the US Nationals in all four classes, knows how good the Westerners can be. Why haven't they won in the Worlds, even when they have been held in Hobbs, Australia and Uvalde? Too little flying on the weak and uncertain days that are often the only game in town for Easterners?



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Techniques

- Keep a log of cross-country and contest flights, noting especially your problem areas. You might use a tape recorder. If so, transcribe your recordings.
- Fly maximum-effort cross-countries with pre-selected TPs, preferably against competition.
- Practise weak weather flying short, as-many-times-as-possible, triangles.
- In survival-level weather practise: thermalling, especially getting past others; and very short tasks, putting the airfield in the centre of a triangle with five-mile legs.
- If you are in a predominantly strong area: fly in the morning as soon as it's sustainable; set an arbitrary upper height band limit of 3,000ft-4,000ft (say 1,500ft-2,500ft in Britain) to increase use

of thermals; or take off at 17:00hrs and fly a task as late as possible – excellent weak weather practice.

- At the end of the day do at least a 30km final glide to finish exactly 1,000ft above the airfield. Practise getting back up. Stop at 2,000ft, pull brakes and drop back to 1,000ft and find another thermal. Great for low-save confidence.
- Push the envelope. If you don't land out at least once or twice a season, you aren't trying hard enough.
- If possible, get some dual with a better pilot, but it must be in a Grob or better, preferably a Nimbus 3D or ASH 25.
- Transitions are where the money is: how long does it take you to get centred in a thermal? How decisive are you about leaving it? Count up the number of transitions in a 300km flight. What if you gained 15 seconds on each one?

Diagnostic questionnaire for competition pilots

Practice techniques

1 Number of cross-country flights normally flown before the first big contest of the year (not counting flights of under 100km)

2 Typical length of flights in kilometres/hours

3 Are flights normally races against other pilots? Yes/No

4 Area in which you usually train:

5 Specific problem areas you have worked on (eg, weak weather flying, starts, final glides) and the techniques used?

Contest techniques

In the following questions, assess yourself as compared to the three best pilots you normally fly against, rating major strengths as 1 and weaknesses as 5

1 Do you make good use of the time between launch and start? 1 2 3 4 5
- techniques used?

2 Thermalling: overall, is this a strength or a weakness? 1 2 3 4 5

a) Entering and centring ability? 1 2 3 4 5
- techniques used?

b) Using other ships in thermals? 1 2 3 4 5



Exercising your mind before you fly will help you make the most of your practice flights – use this questionnaire to identify weaknesses

c) Relative comfort in crowded thermals (do you feel you will gain or lose in these)? 1 2 3 4 5

d) Ability to thermal automatically while planning inter-thermal moves? 1 2 3 4 5

e) Decisiveness leaving thermals 1 2 3 4 5

3 Inter-thermal flying: overall, is this a strength or a weakness? 1 2 3 4 5

a) Use of clouds 1 2 3 4 5

b) Use of gaggles 1 2 3 4 5

c) Use of streets 1 2 3 4 5

- recognition/use of dry streets 1 2 3 4 5

d) Confidence and effectiveness in ridge flying 1 2 3 4 5

e) Confidence/effectiveness in mountain flying 1 2 3 4 5

f) Effectiveness in dolphin flying (badly done, it works in reverse) 1 2 3 4 5

g) Recognition/effective use of operating altitude band 1 2 3 4 5

h) Other special abilities in inter-thermal flying? (specify) 1 2 3 4 5

Weather preferences

Which sorts of weather make you feel most or least confident relative to other good

pilots? Assume it's the last two days of a major contest, and you are 50 points away from first place. You would feel the most confident (1) or least confident (5) of gaining the needed points in which of the following conditions, and to what degree?

a) Strong (6kts+) thermals, cu and streeting 1 2 3 4 5

b) Strong thermals, scattered cu 1 2 3 4 5

c) Strong thermals, blue 1 2 3 4 5

d) Mod thermals with streeting 1 2 3 4 5

e) Mod thermals, scattered cu 1 2 3 4 5

f) Mod thermals, blue 1 2 3 4 5

g) Weak (under 1.5kts) with cu 1 2 3 4 5

h) Weak, blue 1 2 3 4 5

i) Extensive ridge flying opportunities 1 2 3 4 5

j) Extensive wave flying opportunities 1 2 3 4 5

k) Mountainous terrain 1 2 3 4 5

l) Hilly terrain 1 2 3 4 5

m) Plains 1 2 3 4 5

n) Other (specify)..... 1 2 3 4 5

o) POST task 1 2 3 4 5

p) Speed task 1 2 3 4 5

Attitude/psychological preparedness

1 General optimism in contests? (there are those that go out to get, and those who go out to get got) 1 2 3 4 5

2 Speed with which you recover, in terms of attitude, from low saves, near misses, tight situations 1 2 3 4 5

3 Ability to recover from a bad day 1 2 3 4 5

4 Ability to feel at home in strange countries, areas or weather 1 2 3 4 5

5 List the three most helpful sports psychology books you have read with brief notes on why/how you found them effective:

a).....

b).....

c).....

Psychology

Most sailplane pilots are hardware-oriented: interested in the latest computer, vario or nav device. Actually, if skills are reasonable, the key to success is mostly psychological:

a) Seligman's book *Learned Optimism* demonstrates conclusively that the single most vital element to success in many different fields is a positive attitude.

b) Note the pattern of those who have won multiple Worlds: Helmut Reichmann, George Lee, Ingo Renner. Most lasted under ten years. Skills remain, but obsessive energy burns out, the conviction of being the absolute best.

c) The ability to retain a positive, racer's attitude despite the ups and downs that

go with soaring; to keep your mind on the whole game plan and not to be derailed by bad breaks, bad days, bad contests; to recover instantly from setbacks.

d) The home court advantage and how to compensate for it: fly in as many different areas and contests as possible. US pilots are at a disadvantage from flying in too few, too strong and too similar areas. Many have worn a groove in the Minden-Hobbs-Uvalde circuit and get demoralised in areas with strange countryside and different problems.

e) Sports psychology is the area offering the biggest breakthroughs. Many excellent pilots get in their own way in big contests or in different cultures ... as in the Worlds. We all have "on" and "off" days and sports psychology can help to

eliminate the negative.

f) Separate score sheet results from your own knowledge of how you did. Know and acknowledge that you can win with a mediocre flight and lose with an excellent one.

Two final reasons to practise

a) Remember the flight I mentioned at the start: strong thermals, super streets? With all the practice, you'll do 100km more – won't that sound great at the bar!

b) With all the thought, energy and time you'll have put into practising, you won't be able to STAND the idea of losing. So of course you'll win.

Next issue: in the third and final article of the series, George Moffat writes about team flying in competitions