

Advice on Flying Rated Competitions

Competitions bring together groups of like minded individuals to socialise, learn lots, compete and compare their performances, all within a fairly tight set of rules. Comps are loads of fun!

This advice does not repeat information that is already available in the competition rulebook or commonly listed in any local rules. These two documents are essential reading before flying a competition.

Competitions, especially your first, can be daunting. You are not alone. Most people start out with nerves. Hopefully this advice will help to prepare you for the week. Be assured that the nerves will subside – often as soon as you get airborne for the first time during the comp.

Preparing

It is essential that the **glider and trailer** are prepared for your week away in the following areas (amongst others):

- Is the trailer roadworthy and does everything about it work properly including the electrics?
- Do all the instruments work reliably – especially the variometers?
- Do you have a spare tyre and inner tube (for wheels on trailer, glider and car)?
- Have you loaded all the latest turnpoints and airspace into your electronic nav aids?
- Are your loggers wired reliably? Do you have all the leads or memory cards to allow the scorers to download them? Do you have a backup logger (can you borrow one)?
- Are your batteries reliable; have you renewed them in recent years? They are not expensive!

It is also important that you are **personally** prepared for the week. Consider the following:

- Are you in current flying practice?
 - You will have to fly accurately in gaggles, return to possibly crowded airfields, as well as cope with outlandings. Can you cope? If not, get some appropriate training / practice.
- Do you know what goes on at a rated competition?
 - Consider crewing for a pilot at a competition – it will prepare you for all the ground based activities and timescales that occur during a typical day.
- Have you read the rules?
 - It would be a shame to lose points by being ignorant of the rules, but remember, no matter what the rules say, fly safely and have fun!
- Can you navigate accurately?
 - You may be flying in an unfamiliar area. Consider doing some flying in the area before the week to familiarise yourself with local airspace and navigation features.
- How's your airspace and altimetry knowledge?
 - Can you point to any feature / airspace on the chart and know what rules apply and how to avoid any airspace vertically (if you need to avoid it)? If you don't, the

majority of the info needed can be found around the edge of the chart. Other information can be found on the AIS website. Do you know what rules apply to temporary airspace flagged up by a NOTAM? Quite apart from avoiding the penalties and possible legal problems associated with straying into restricted airspace, knowing that you are definitely **allowed** somewhere will give you an advantage over someone who is not sure.

- Do you know how all your instruments work?
 - Practise flying a competition style task before the competition so that you know how the start line and turn point functions work. You don't want to be in the settings menu in a gaggle on the first day.
- Can you find someone to crew for you for the week?
 - Finding someone to help you and being a contact back at base will provide you with piece of mind, especially if this is your first competition. Stressing about who will fetch you as you forge out into a distinctly un-soar-able looking sky is not a thought you want on your mind.
- Once you are on site, walk the airfield perimeter. Consider arranging to fly at the site before the comp.
 - On the first day when you are on final glide and it's busy, you want to be sure that the corner of the airfield you are landing in is suitable.
 - Consider flying at the airfield before the week to familiarise yourself with the layout and local landmarks etc.

The first day

It is important not to be rushing around on your first day at a competition. Briefing will be ~0930-1030 on a decent day and, if the weather is reasonable, it's good to be rigged before the briefing. Try to get all the gear in your glider that you will require for the flight minus the items you will need at briefing. You might be asked to 'grid before briefing' and in some cases this is mandatory so that club flying is not compromised too much. Don't neglect the usual airworthiness checks you do on your glider in the rush to get on the grid.

Briefing

Often the task sheets will be out on tables as you arrive at briefing. These tasks may feel on the long side to you. Don't let this put you off. One of the nice things about competitions is that they stretch you; you **will** be surprised at how far you have flown by the end of the week.

The briefing will comprise everything from domestic arrangements to weather information to the task itself as well as any navigation warnings. It is **most important** to ask questions if you do not understand anything. It is preferable to ask these questions during the briefing itself, as there will be others that don't understand, or haven't even thought of your question. If you are really embarrassed, you could ask one of the organisers afterwards, but whatever you do; **ask**. You may find that if the task has been given out, some pilots will be plotting the task on their maps or in their GPS while the briefing is taking place. It is important to listen to the briefing rather than being distracted by map marking.

Take your time after the briefing. Don't be put off by people disappearing out of the room. If your glider is on the grid, the quiet time after briefing is the best time to get the task plotted onto maps and into your GPS or PDA. The pilots that do hang around are normally willing to help with any questions that you may have at this stage.

Here a very important principle starts to swing into action. From now on, find out things for yourself and don't just do things because another pilot is happy to do it. In other words, if your pilot colleague doesn't seem sure of the rules that apply to a bit of temporary airspace or where

a turnpoint is etc, find out to your own satisfaction from the organisation or another reliable source!

This principle applies while flying to a greater degree. If you spot perhaps the competition leader in what you think is restricted airspace, they probably **are** in airspace and will get a massive penalty (and possible follow up from the CAA). Play it safe, find your own thermal and come home squeaky clean.

Out to the glider

A checklist is most helpful while you are preparing your glider for flight. A list used here reassures that everything that needs to be in the glider is there, and everything that needs to be out (like car keys) is out.

Be flexible. The task may be changed, in which case you will have a limited time to prepare and mark up maps etc, so keep your map marking kit handy, as well as any kit you need to re-input a task to a logger / vario etc.

Give yourself plenty of time to settle down before launch. A few quiet minutes sat in the cockpit before launch to study the map and think about airspace and likely good soaring areas on the first leg can be a godsend. Use this time to think about likely start times given the weather and how the conditions look from the ground.

Airborne

The first thing to remember is that you must not land out before starting! If there is any doubt about staying airborne, go back and land at the airfield. If you land out, it's game over for the day; you will not be allowed another competition launch.

Pilots will often collect in a few gaggles before starting. Sometimes these gaggles are the right place to be, but sometimes they are not. Consider finding your own thermal – often upwind of the start sector to relax before the start.

If you are not used to flying in gaggles, they can be challenging. Remember your blind spots – above and behind around to below the nose. Keep a really good lookout, but if things get too much or a glider disappears into one of your blind spots, **gently** roll the wings level, while looking under and behind the upper wing and fly away. Do everything very smoothly (unless there is imminent risk of collision) to avoid flying into someone else you have not seen. Remember the principles of circular motion – if you are catching up with someone in a turn, reducing speed may make things worse (you are increasing your angular speed). Conversely, if they are catching up with you, the best thing might be to tighten the turn by gently increasing bank.

You cannot normally join a busy gaggle directly. You need to start on the outside of the turn and gently creep in, keeping a good lookout all the time. You will learn very quickly that if you do not look out properly (from the tailplane on one side, above the canopy to the tailplane on the other) you will have some close calls or worse. This is a time when you really do need to have your head on a proper swivel, constantly.

If you don't understand any of the above, get an experienced comp pilot or your CFI to explain it to you before the comp.

The start and the task

If you are unsure when to start, it's usually better to go sooner rather than later. Don't get caught up in the waiting games at the start. As a general principle, starting on the upwind end of the line is often the best, unless there is an obvious cracking thermal somewhere else. From then on, **enjoy the flight**. Don't worry too much about what others are doing and remember if conditions seem tough, they probably are for everyone! Obviously there are times when following others will teach you a lot. Some competition pilots may not like you following them; they may even tell you so. Unfortunately for them, this is all part of learning to fly competitions, but try not to get constantly in their way. Experienced pilots will sometimes have a legitimate safety issue so it is always worth listening to this advice.

Remember the principle that **blindly** following others is a bad idea. There have been many competitions where pilots have entered prohibited airspace because someone else was there. This applies to field landings as well. Don't assume that another glider in a field means that that pilot's field selection was good. He may have been lucky and missed the wires, or he may have a broken undercarriage! Have a good look yourself.

Finishing and landing

So, you have triumphantly returned from the task. It's been a tiring day, and you may be about to meet with some challenges. If you have lots of speed or height, you may decide to 'go around' into the circuit after crossing the line. Read the competition rule book carefully to avoid penalties, and above all use your common sense. Remember that energy increases by the square of the speed – in other words 90 knots will provide for hardly any height after a pull up. It may be better to simply land ahead if there is room. The key here is to keep things simple and therefore - safe.

It may be that there are lots of gliders landing at the same time, leading to a congested airfield. This often happens after a short task in the afternoon when everyone completes the task within a few minutes. Make sure you have your radio tuned to the finish frequency and the volume is turned up. If you are surrounded by gliders on the run in to the finish line, make a radio call to inform others about your intentions on arrival. Keep things as simple as possible. The usual practice is for the first gliders to land long to allow others the whole airfield to land in behind them. Try not to taxi towards obstructions or other aircraft – aim for a large gap if possible, or stop well short. Your radio call may be along the lines of 'Kilo Fox will be landing long / Left / Right / short at Bicester. Include the airfield name if it is not obvious. Avoid turning Left or Right during your ground run unless there is a very good reason for it – the pilot behind you will most likely be expecting you to keep straight and you may turn straight into them if you taxi off to one side. If you think there is no-one close behind you, it may be more sensible to land short. The key here is to use common sense, and try not to do anything unpredictable or nonsensical.

After landing, remember that you need to get your logger or memory card to the scorer's office within a certain time (this usually means taking these to control). Remember to put your batteries on charge ready for tomorrow. Once you have sorted the glider it's to the bar to await the results, and, as the RAFGSA would say, for beer and medals!

Landing out

Landing out needs to be treated as in normal practice. Some pilots may perceive that they should push the limits because they are flying a competition. Wrong! If you damage your glider, you won't be flying it tomorrow, and you are therefore out of the comp. As one prominent World championship pilot once said to me; if you haven't found lift in the last 2 – 3000', the chances of finding it in the last 1000' are pretty slim. You may as well plan to land before you get too low

and live to fight another day. Lots of accidents in competitions are pilots pushing on too low without a plan if things go wrong.

Once down, apart from the normal procedures of finding the farmer etc, you must phone control. It is likely that they will want your lat and long from your GPS in order to score the competition as soon as they can. It is possible to use that data to give to your crew for the car GPS, but beware of the format of the numbers. It is utterly useless to wait by the glider if the main road is a long way away. Wait by the main road so that when your crew turn up you can direct them down the farm tracks to your glider. Don't forget that control will be waiting for a phone call to ensure that you are together with your crew and don't require further assistance. If you forget, you may have to buy them wine to compensate for them waiting for your return at midnight!

Conclusion

Comps are great, but they require a large dollop of common sense and teamwork to enjoy the week safely. If you have prepared well, and are willing to sometimes sacrifice a bit of performance to do the safe thing, you will have a fantastic week with lots of likeminded people.

Mike Fox
National Coach
April 2011 (V1.1)