



Glider Racing - A Spectator Sport

Contributed by Jill McCaw

IT IS A well known phenomenon that if something moves and there is more than one of them, someone will try to race them. It is definitely true of gliders. Back in the early days of the sport competitions tended to involve launching and seeing who could stay up the longest. As pilots gained skill at finding lift and gliders evolved to make endurance flights easier, the only limit to endurance became the pilot. By 1939 Duration contests had been abandoned in favour of seeing who could fly the furthest. Then followed a refinement that involved flying to a point and attempting to come back to the launch point. This was a result of gliders starting to end up so far from home that they couldn't get back in time for the next day's competition. Thus speed became a factor and 'real' racing was born. This type of competition endures today.

Racing Classes and Tasks

Gliding competitions usually involve a week to ten days of flying with the eventual winner being chosen after a tally of accumulated points. It is possible to win a competition without actually winning a day, with consistent flying giving the best results. Gliders are handicapped to iron out the difference in performance between age, makes and models. There are also classes depending on wingspan and the presence of flaps. As well, at local level contests there is a club class for newcomers to the sport.

Gliders race around a set course and the fastest home wins. Simple? Not really. To start with, in the traditional style of glider racing, pilots can choose their own start time. The start gate opens fifteen minutes after the last glider in a class has been launched. This gives all pilots a chance to be established in lift before starting. It also

allows for tactical timing as weather varies over the course and expected wind changes and so on can be used to best advantage. With courses from between 150 km to over 500 km depending on weather and the level of competition, there are a huge number

Race Monitoring

These days, timing and turnpoint verification, precise position, height and speed along with unfortunate airspace infringements are all recorded on loggers. After a simple download at the end of the day, results can be finalised within a few hours of everyone landing back. A back up logger is always a good idea of course - modern technology is every bit as ready to fail when it's really needed as cameras did in the old days. GPS units can now take data and transmit in real time and clever use of gizmos like the SPOT trackers mean that the gliders' positions can be followed on the web. This means that the racing, happening miles from most onlookers, can be followed. It is exciting, immediate and for the first time since gliders became able to move away from the launch site, competitions are a spectator event.

A Spectator Sport

Gliding Grand Prix are a modern variation on the sport that has truly turned gliding into a fast paced spectator sport. Grand Prix are the one day cricket equivalent of a contest, held over a few days with short tasks where all gliders go through the start gate at the same time. There are cameras in the gliders,

on board telemetry, camera equipped helicopters following the race and real time computer graphic projections of the race status. Thus, Grand Prix event action is live, fast and furious.

Keep an eye out for Grand Prix events around the world via the website: www.airportslive.com.

More information

For more information on gliding in New Zealand see www.gliding.co.nz. For subscriptions to SoaringNZ email: soaringnz@mccawmedia.co.nz



All pictures taken by Jill McCaw at the Taupo nationals this year. Clockwise from top: 1) Auckland Gliding Club's Nigel McPhee and David Hirst, winners of the Open Class title 2010, flying the club's two seat Duo Discus. (Most gliders are single seaters. Handicaps apply to the glider, not to having two brains doing the thinking.) 2&3) Gliders and towplanes ready for launch. 4) Pilots help each other with route planning and tactics on the ground. In the air it is very competitive.

of variables that the racing pilot has to consider.

Tasks can be simple out and return or complicated courses with up to five or even more turnpoints. In the old days spotters used to go out to the turnpoints and visibly sight gliders passing overhead. The advent of instamatic cameras meant that a photograph could be used to verify a turnpoint had been rounded. It also meant that someone was up all night developing all the rolls of film before results could be finalised. Start and finish times were still done by teams of spotters with watches.