



BRINGING FUN BACK INTO COMPS

BY DAVE SHORTER

RIGHT: Current rules encourage crowded pre-start gaggles where gliders hang around for someone else to lead out first. Pre-start tactics determine results.

GFA IS LOSING MEMBERSHIP

We train hundreds of new pilots every year, joining them up as members only to see them lose interest and disappear. Why? Can't gliding capture the new pilot? Is it boring? Lacking challenge? Not fun?

Flying competitively with your mates can be wonderful fun, and to get bitten by the competitive bug is to add another dimension to flying. Having club pilots enthused, involved and interested in competitive flying is one sure way to reduce club membership dropout rate. It may not be for everyone, but if we could make comps more fun, less threatening and give a chance to all, we'd keep a lot more members in our sport.

THE SAME FACES AT EVERY COMP?

Why don't we see more new faces at comps? How do we develop new comp pilots if no one new ever turns up? I fear that very gradually, but steadily, competitive flying in Australia is dying.

Comps have a reputation for being dangerous - accidents happen, flying is close and gaggles are fierce. Furthermore, pre-start tactics seem to determine results, tasks that outland a high percentage of the fleet are considered OK, and newbies get left behind and straggle in late. Comps appear to be platforms for elite competition pilots who use the events for their international representative aspirations.

Why would a new pilot go to a State or Nationals comp in

Australia? Or for that matter, to an International one? Where is the fun for a newbie? Why worry?

Technology is overhauling the sport and creating new issues. FLARM reports of gliders flying ahead display their rates of climb, while tech-savvy pilots following behind get the benefit of this info. It's hardly fair for the guy who started early.

So how can we make comps more fun for everyone?

GRAND PRIX STARTING

First, we must get rid of the pre-start gaggles and start-time 'games'. Top pilots never lead out from the start - go five minutes ahead of the bunch and they'll all overhaul you while you mark thermals for those behind. I've been in pre-start gaggles waiting for half an hour for someone to make the first move. Meanwhile, the thermal dies and everyone in the gaggle steadily sinks - everyone goes down, until finally some sucker loses patience at the stupidity of the situation and starts on task.

A Grand Prix start solves this problem. Everyone starts over an extended line when the gun goes off. The situation is the same in yachting.

A limit is set for start height, lower than convection, so there is no need to hang around in a gaggle at the top of the nearest thermal - everyone must lose height to start within the height limit. So the fierce pre-start gaggles don't develop. Problem 2 solved.

To prevent congestion and large gaggles, GP starts are limited to a maximum of 20 gliders. A smaller number of, for example, 12 or 15 maximum could be set to further reduce gaggling. If more gliders enter the competition, then the fleet can be broken down into a number of tranches, each starting 20 to 30 minutes apart. The tranches can be seeded and regrouped daily to ensure fair competition.

HANDICAP CIRCLES

Introduce circles around task waypoints, to accommodate differing glider performance. Fastest gliders turn in a 500m beer can, while slower gliders turn short of each point at a larger circle. Computer programs exist to calculate the size of handicap circles. Boffins Computer Workshops in the UK has created a program that has been used by the BGA to handicap competitions. See handicaptask.uk At my club, Lake Keepit, Jacques Graells has developed a similar script for handicapping GP tasks. It works well!

BELOW: Simple scoring - first over the finish line wins.



SCORING

GP scoring is so simple. First over the finish line wins and scores 10 points plus one extra as winner. Following gliders progressively get 9, 8, 7 ... easy. The pilot with the most points at the end of the comp wins.

THE RADICAL BIT

Golfers are familiar with personal handicaps. You've probably been bored to death by an average golfer enthusiastically recounting how he won the weekend championship with a Stapleford score of 40 points. How can the average glider club pilot possibly ever be enthused by a win like this, with gliding comp rules as they are?

So why not handicap the pilots? There is enormous difference in the speeds achieved by the 'guns' and the average, competent comp pilot, let alone someone new to the game. Not only do our top pilots regularly achieve speeds 10% better than the second rung pilots, but the same faces also win every day. Although new club pilots are much slower, they can be encouraged to join in by setting tasks that allow them to get home, and occasionally share in the glory. I remember that my first 300km XC task in a Club Libelle took me over seven hours. A good pilot in a modern glider would be three times faster. We need to find a way to include slow pilots like this, and give them a 'chance' to win. Handicapping pilots is the only way to make this possible and to enthuse and encourage them.

But I hear a chorus ... "You can't do that!" "But you can't have the worst pilot winning!" "How can you possibly create a fair handicap?" "Who maintains the handicap?" "How can you possibly select Australian representatives from a handicapped comp?" ... and so on. But I ask, "Why not?"

At our Club, after a lot of input from Jacques, we now run regular 'Mini GPs' where club pilots fly GP tasks. Pilots are handicapped according to assessments of ability. This causes plenty of jovial challenge and good-natured banter, but it gets people involved. If you win a day, you get slapped down with another 5% handicap. If you don't win, your handicap is relaxed by 1% for the next day. Eventually, everyone will win a day.

Tasks are flown in GP format with handicap circles at each point, based on the combined personal and glider performance handicaps. It's good fun.

NATIONAL, STATE COMPS AND REGATTAS

These principles could be extended to all competitions within Australia, including Nationals comps.

- Grand Prix starts along a 10 km line – max. start height 1,000ft less than convection
- Split the field into tranches of, say, a maximum of 15, starting 20 to 30 minutes apart.
- Use circles around turnpoints to adjust task distance according to handicap.
- Simple GP finish scoring.
- Initial handicap based on previous competition experience – something like Table 1 below.
- Adjust handicap after each race – similar to Table 2 below.
- Carry forward adjusted handicaps to ensuing comps and regattas.

CHANGE WILL BE CONTENTIOUS

No matter what is done, if change is introduced, it will be contentious. Remember when glider handicaps were first



ABOVE: Bob Dircks reckons it's about time he shared in the glory and beat Bruce home.

introduced? The conservatives like flying the way they have done forever, those who pack away countless bottles of wine from day wins will be disadvantaged and the cliques will be disturbed. Whatever is done will be argued about, and no matter what system we employ at comps it will never be 'fair' - whatever that is.

The most important existential issue for our sport is not fairness, or the winning, but the enjoyment. Flying gliders needs to be fun, companionable, inclusive and rewarding so that people keep coming back. If we make our competitions fun and inclusive, we will grow our numbers and develop more pilots into highly skilled contest players and enthusiastic members.

The future of our sport requires us to innovate and change. Otherwise there'll be no gliding movement when all us old-timers die off.

PS "Believe it or not I truly look forward to the day when Bob thrashes me across the line!" – Bruce Taylor.

Highest Experience Level	Handicap
Placegetters – International Comps	1.20
Competitor – International Comp	1.15
Placegetter – Aust. Nationals Comp	1.10
Competitor – Aust. Nationals Comp	1.05
Placegetter – State Comp	1.00
Competitor – State Comp	0.95
Competitor – Regatta	0.90
No Comp Experience – 300km XC	0.80
No XC Experience	0.70

Table 1 – Initial Handicap

Day Placing	H'cap Adjustment
1 st Place	Plus 5%
2 nd Place	Plus 2%
3 rd Place	No Change
4/5/6 th Place	Minus 1%
7 th Place or more	Minus 2%
10 th Place or more	Minus 3%
Outlanding	No Change(?)

Table 2 – Handicap Adjustments

HOW CAN YOU DETERMINE THE BEST PERFORMER TO SEND OVERSEAS TO REPRESENT OZ?

This has been a principle objective of National Competitions in the past, and an issue that still needs to be addressed. National Competitions Committee (NCC) should be up to the task of assessing pilot performance and capability without needing a competition placing to do that. If a formulaic method was required, the results points multiplied by handicap may do, or an assessment using raw speeds achieved could be another approach. I think the NCC members are very capable of knowing who among us have the potential for a podium finish overseas. Moreover, podium possibilities should be the only ones warranting the organisation's support.