PRESS INFORMATION

Glider Racing

Competitive glider racing is a world away from most people's idea of glider pilots making their way leisurely around the sky. At the top level, the world's best pilots race around courses of similar length to and at similar speeds to Formula 1 motor racing Grand Prix events.

To the racing glider pilot (or, indeed, to any pilot flying cross-country), height is the equivalent of fuel in the tank. In their state-of-the-art sailplanes, these pilots are constantly reading the sky, trying to establish the best course to take and working out where the strongest climbs will be, enabling them to climb fastest before setting off at high speed to the next likely source of lift. The glider pilot is often looking two or three climbs ahead, whilst watching what his opponents are doing, learning from his team mates' radio calls, and flying his glider in the most efficient way possible.

A major gliding competition, such as the World Championships, will involve racing over a number of days, typically around 10. Each day will start with a briefing, at which the day's task will be unveiled. Depending on the weather conditions expected, this will involve flying a course of anything between 250 and 700kms (although in exceptional conditions, races of over 1000km have been set), rounding various checkpoints on the way. The exact route taken is left to the individual pilot.

The field will line up in grid order and the gliders will be launched using a fleet of tug aircraft. Ten minutes after the last glider has been launched, the start line is declared open and the pilots are free to start on the task. Each pilot can choose to cross the start line when he determines conditions to be optimal. From then on, it is a matter of completing the course in the fastest

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possible time. On occasions, when conditions deteriorate, pilots may not manage to return to the finish point and may have to land out at another air strip or in a field. In these situations, the pilot that manages to go the furthest wins the day.

Points are awarded for each day's flying, based on time taken and/or distance covered. These are accumulated throughout the competition and the pilot with most points at the end is declared champion.

Pilots may choose to fly individually or, as is becoming increasingly the norm, team flying tactics may be adopted. When team flying, the pilots will stay in close contact with each other as they fly round the circuit of a typical contest day. They use radio to constantly exchange information and ideas on how best to use the weather conditions and where to find the best thermals. In this way, they can help each other avoid mistakes, and 'leap frog,' with the higher pilot at any moment pushing on to explore better lift, allowing his team mate to then fly directly to the 'good air.'

Proof that a pilot actually completes the course by rounding each turn point in the correct order is provided by data loggers carried on board each glider. These use GPS fixes to map the route taken and the height at every point of the flight. After landing, the logs are downloaded to computers and analysed. Points will be deducted if, for example, the trace shows that the pilot has penetrated controlled airspace.

Gliding is one of the few competitive sports where men and women can compete on equal terms. Out two-time women's world champion, Sarah Kelman, regularly competes in open international events at the highest level.

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