

# SOW THE SEEDS OF SUCCESS...

Tony Cronshaw asks two leading coaches about how club coaching can help early solo pilots acquire soaring and cross-country skills more quickly and, in turn, benefit clubs seeking to attract and retain members

**G**LIDING clubs around the world have been losing members at a rate of around 2 per cent each year over the past 10 years, and around 1 per cent each year in the UK\*. This raises questions about how to attract and retain aspiring new pilots, meet their needs for results and enjoyment, and compete in a market blossoming with new sports and activities. Tony Cronshaw asks leading coaches Bernard Eckey and Kevin Atkinson how coaching can help address these challenges.

**TONY:** *At Cranwell, where does coaching of soaring and cross-country fit in?*

**KEVIN:** We recognised some time ago that many students failed to make the transition from solo to cross-country. This is perhaps not surprising considering the variability of weather in the UK, a lack of cross-country syllabus and two-seat priorities towards basic lessons and passenger flying, even when the weather is soarable.

As a result, Cranwell GC adopted a new

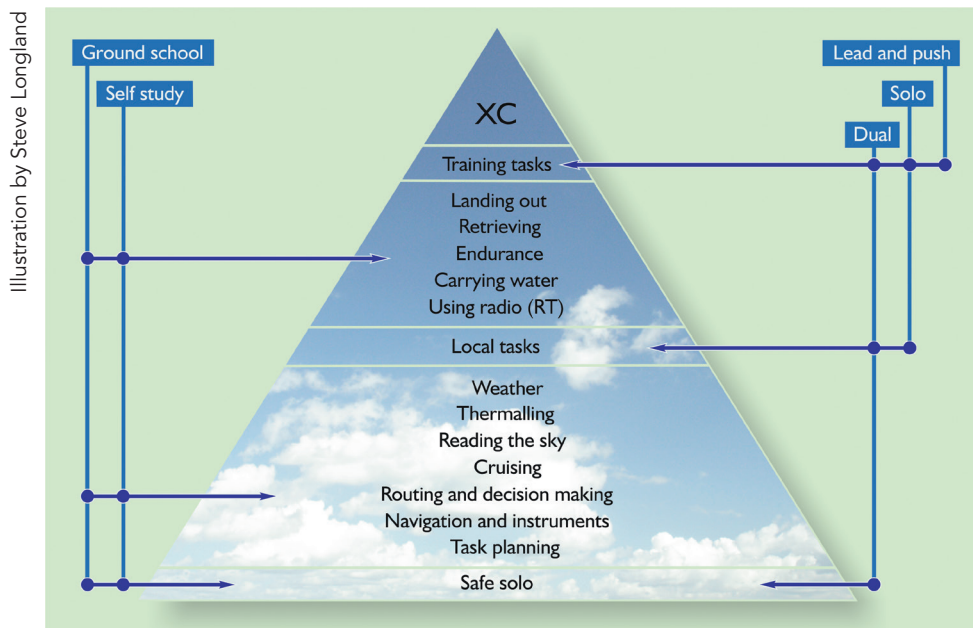
policy, which assumes that everybody joining as a full member wants to pursue gliding to a good soaring standard and that students should be introduced to soaring and cross-country during pre-solo training. We also re-prioritised our two-seaters for soaring, cross-country training, or badge legs whenever the weather is thermic, whether flown dual or solo.

**TONY:** *How does Cranwell's advanced training syllabus help with this?*

**KEVIN:** Our advanced syllabus (below) is embedded within the pre-solo syllabus on an opportunity basis and not left until after first solo. As a result, most students are proficient at thermalling and half have been cross-country – before going solo. Having introduced students to cross-country, our training syllabus continues their post-solo training through a mix of dual flying, solo flying, and “lead and push”. The photo (right) is an illustration (simulation) of the coach's view in lead-and-push, a technique requiring collision-avoidance skills by the coach and a radio call protocol between the two gliders. When I have presented this approach to meetings of instructors and coaches from around the UK, eg alongside competitions, I have had very positive feedback and many requests for help from clubs wanting to set up their own coaching schemes. I am also aware of other coaching programmes run by various clubs around the UK: The sharing of “best practice” is something I am sure we could all benefit from in the future\*\*.

**TONY:** *How are the results looking so far?*

**KEVIN:** We introduced our advanced syllabus in 2012, a summer of rather poor weather. Nevertheless, I carried out around 7,000km of cross-country coaching that year for the benefit of dozens of up-and-coming students. Their subsequent progress has been stunning in comparison to the old “self-learn once solo” concept, with some entering competitions within just three years of first flight. In 2013, we counted 98



(Above) Cranwell GC's advanced syllabus is embedded within the pre-solo syllabus and (right) a coach's view of student in lead-and-push (photo: Ian Webb)

“achievements” (badge leg, first solo, type conversion, notable flight, competition entry, etc) from just 30 of our 60 members; a high rate of achievement. We are also seeing new members commuting quite long distances to the club, attracted by the advanced coaching opportunities.

**TONY:** *How does your role of lead coach work, and how do students engage with the coaching process?*

**KEVIN:** As the advanced instructor/coach at Cranwell my key tasks are to:

- Identify prospective good weather ahead and alert members to be ready.
- Arrange ground school as required (either to a group at the beginning of the season, or individual briefs) and to set up students with a clear understanding of what they are trying to learn, practise or improve when flying solo.

For the flying aspects, all of our instructors are capable of teaching areas of basic cross-country gliding. The club also has a competition/racing element which includes a number of private owners and, despite their understandable desire to rig and fly their own gliders, all ‘racers’ instruct. Advanced gliding is very much a team/club affair.

The FAI levels of achievement are representative of big steps. To the individual, at whatever level, all achievements are significant and represent a stepping stone to further and better flights. Flying a new type solo or achieving a personal best of endurance or height is significant to the individual. At Cranwell, we recognise this – usually in the bar!

Pilots are often unsure as to what they can realistically expect to achieve in a year, so I simply ask everybody what they want to try and go for, and advise if it’s a reasonable expectation, and what hoops they need to jump through to be successful.

**TONY:** *How does this compare with your perspective of coaching in Australia?*

**BERNARD:** Almost without exception, new solo pilots struggle when it comes to making a smooth transition into cross-country flying. Coaching was introduced throughout Australia to arrest the resulting high drop-out rate and to provide help and encouragement to interested newcomers. Now there are early signs that this is beginning to make a real difference, but it would be fair to say that some clubs and some regions are doing better than others.

The mental barriers for budding cross-country pilots are immense! It follows







Tony Cronshaw is an Ass Cat instructor at Cambridge Gliding Centre with over 1,000 hours gliding. His enthusiasm for helping the next generation of pilots includes running courses for visitors and members, and leading CGC's recruitment and retention sub-committee



Kevin Atkinson is the club coach lead for the BGA Aim Higher initiative ([www.gliding.co.uk/bgainfo/aimhigher.htm](http://www.gliding.co.uk/bgainfo/aimhigher.htm)). With more than 7,500 military jet hours (Tiger Moths to Typhoon), Kevin started gliding at age 13 at Ouse GC (now York), flying his first solo on his 16th. Kevin has over 3,500 hours gliding, including competing in UK national and regional competitions

✎ that we cannot expect them to overcome the many hurdles without providing some assistance. Stepping out of a well-established comfort zone, facing the possibility of an outlanding and perhaps even perceived navigational difficulties are only some of the many reasons why there is an understandable reluctance to venture beyond gliding range for the first time.

It is easy to identify the problem; the big question is what can be done about it! Taking up-and-coming pilots on cross-country flights in a two-seater is an absolute must and so is real and realistic outlanding training with a coach or instructor on board. Often the familiar basic trainer can be perfect for introducing newcomers to the pitfalls and joys of cross-country flying. Another useful exercise is to take a fellow member on a "lead and follow" flight in a single-seater, as long as the task involves getting out of gliding range and flying over unfamiliar terrain. A well planned and thoughtfully executed flight will give newcomers a tremendous boost of confidence and satisfaction. The joy coming from achieving something that was deemed to be nearly impossible only a few weeks earlier will light a fire that is likely to last for a long time to come.

**TONY:** *What is the starting point for a pilot considering using coaching?*

**BERNARD:** I recommend the pilot follows the planning process as outlined in chapter six of *Advanced Soaring Made Easy*. The first step is for the pilot to sit down for a few minutes to draw up a plan based on his/her aspirations. The planning sheet (see top

right, and available at Aim Higher) is ideal for planning three-six months ahead. This is an evolution of the three-year planning sheet in my book and has been trialled successfully at Cambridge GC.

We must remember this is the pilot's plan and the objectives are his/her objectives. The next step is for the pilot to note down known problem areas, and get input from a coach on suggested learning steps towards the chosen goal. Whilst some of these steps may need dual flying to make a breakthrough, the pilot will be able to "self coach" on many other steps, as discussed in chapter four of my book.

**TONY:** *Can you give an example of how this would work for an early-solo pilot, who feels to be on a "learning plateau"?*

**BERNARD:** An early-solo pilot might be experiencing problems such as being "shot down" in favourable soaring conditions. The pilot probably realises he/she has difficulty finding thermals, or, when one is found, difficulty centring and exploiting the thermal properly. In this case, the pilot's chosen goal might be to achieve a first one-hour flight (therefore finding and working a number of thermals). To work out the steps needed to achieve that, the pilot would identify relevant theory to read up and get advice on flying exercises from a coach. This may need a diagnostic dual flight to identify skill problems such as: banking too shallow; poor control of airspeed when circling; wandering of circle position; thermal centring technique inconsistent, etc. The plan would therefore include a number of "stepping stones" of flying

## 18 METER NATIONALS

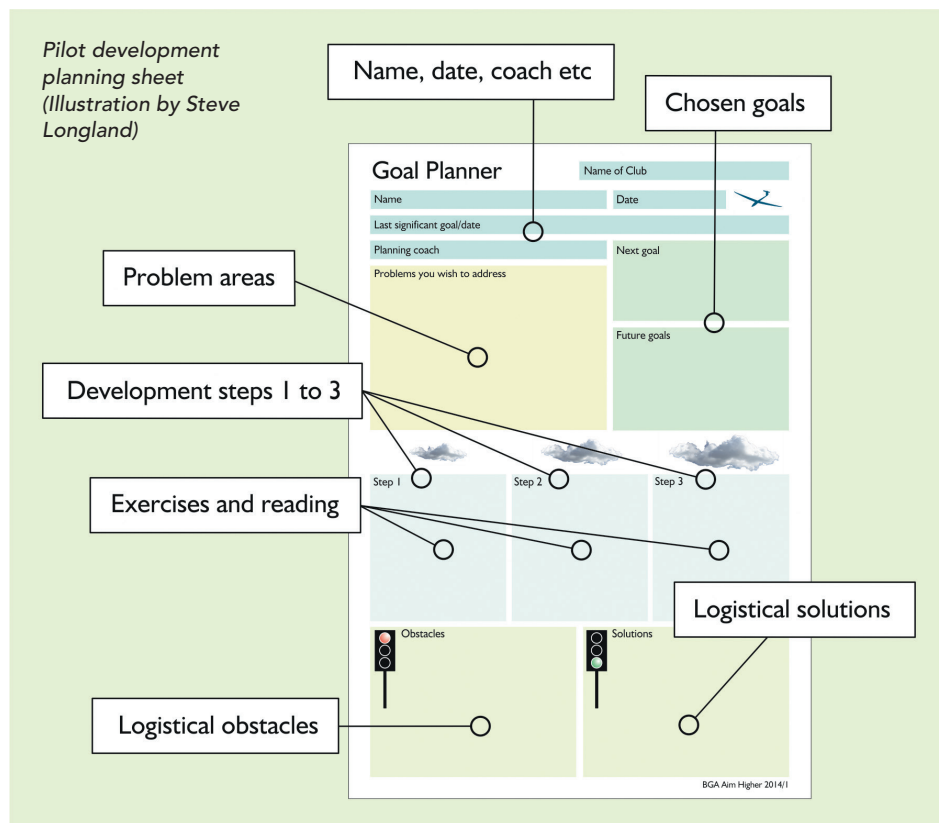
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exercises and key areas of study. The pilot is then in a great position to know exactly what to work on, and will make steady progress towards the chosen goal. Further examples of goals could include: first flight beyond gliding range; first voluntary outlanding; first 50km (100/200/ 300km) flight, etc.

**TONY:** *Are there planning techniques to help pilots deal with “time poverty” or logistical problems?*

**BERNARD:** Getting ourselves organised to go soaring means lining up three “ducks in a row”: (1) Personal free time, (2) Suitable weather, and (3) Access to a glider. To help pilots find solutions to some of life’s logistical obstacles, the planning sheet (above) has a “traffic lights” section where we can list the main obstacles affecting us and a space opposite to explore potential “green light” solutions.

Spotting suitable weather was discussed in an earlier article (S&G Feb/March 2014): We will only have a few days forward visibility of suitable soaring weather. As many people’s diaries become crowded in the short term, it can become impossible to take a day off when a “good day” does arrive. Putting provisional dates into the diary to act as “place holders” for potential gliding days may be one solution: If an approaching date

looks unsuitable, cancelling the slot enables us to do something else productive – it’s a case of “every stratus has a silver lining!”.

Another logistical problem can be getting access to a glider. If access to club gliders is unpredictable, it might be worth talking to your club about setting up an online booking page for club gliders. Or, when the time is right for the pilot, to take the decision to join a syndicate.

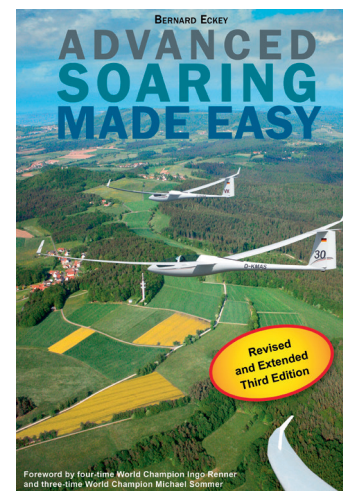
**TONY:** *Finally, what steps would you recommend if a club is thinking of setting up, or revitalising, a coaching programme?*

**KEVIN:** I am always pleased to hear from clubs to provide advice on coaching. I have had a full professional career in flying training and my passion for cross-country coaching is to help clubs within the BGA to encourage their membership to enjoy what is probably “the last of the real fun, challenging, yet safe ways of flying”. My aim is therefore to promote a faster track opportunity for people to learn. The reward for any coach is, of course, to see his students succeed. The reward for the club is seeing many more long-term committed members.  
\* John Roake’s *World Membership Report 2000/11*  
\*\* Please get in touch ([kratkinson@yahoo.com](mailto:kratkinson@yahoo.com)) if your club runs coaching and would like to share ideas for “best practice” in the future.

## TAKING UP-AND-COMING PILOTS ON CROSS-COUNTRY FLIGHTS IN A TWO-SEATER IS AN ABSOLUTE MUST AND SO IS REAL AND REALISTIC OUTLANDING TRAINING WITH A COACH OR INSTRUCTOR ON BOARD



Bernard Eckey is a pilot, instructor, record holder and head coach for South Australia. He flies an ASH 25 and has 3,500 hours (including multiple 1,000km flights and one 1,116km FAI triangle)



A revised and extended third version of Bernard’s best-seller is now available. At 432 pages, it has almost 100 additional pages compared with the second edition and costs €49.90 plus P&P. To purchase, contact [eckey@internode.on.net](mailto:eckey@internode.on.net)