

It was never going to be easy. My trusty Gradient Onyx is a brilliant DHV1-2 but the competition had some very fine machinery with well known names like Boomerang, Magic, Avax, Proton, etc. And pilot names that regularly appear in *Skywings* and *Cross-Country*. Relax, I tell myself, it'll be fun. And so it was.

The first day of the competition, Sunday 15 July, dawned bright and blue and the task committee responded with a 45km race to goal via turnpoints in the Piedrahita valley. One of the local villages responded with brand new barbed-wire fence across the lower take-off and a peaceful protest about who actually owns, and benefits, from the launch site.

Interestingly, one of the turnpoints was 'virtual', with no particular features on the ground. The GPS is revolutionising paragliding competitions, and although I'm not an experienced comp-head it's obviously great not to need cameras with all that handing in film stuff.

Our first launch of the competition. We don't get particularly high and no one makes goal. After the start gate at the corral and a run towards El Barco I have difficulty getting high enough to hit the second turnpoint and get back to somewhere with thermals. I give in, glide through the turnpoint and land at the road. It seems to have been a common problem and I finish well down but actually better than I expected, and a good day's flying seemed a good result in itself. Adrian Thomas wins the yellow T-shirt for the day. It's good to see a Brit winning the British open but a tad too early for celebrations.

On the second day we practice our briefings as we obviously didn't have enough on the first day. The weather is not good to us and those in charge are not able to set a safe task until 8pm. I don't like the task as it's a 40km ridge run that seems to test gliders rather than pilots. In the event I turned my radio volume down owing to a lot of unintended transmission and didn't hear the task had been cancelled due to strong winds on take-off.

I was not the only one to miss the cancellation. I admit it was getting just a little lonely but I thought I was just very slow. Several people made goal and I assumed I was the last to land at one minute to ten, having just taken a nice photo of the sun going down whilst on full speed bar in the smooth restitution. The land-by time was 10pm and, amazingly, Fraser Marwick on his Gradient Avax landed in goal a kilometre ahead of me with even less time to spare. Never mind, again. At least we got to fly and I'm getting to be an ace at strong wind take-offs. This time the week before I had spent two hours practicing flying into wind for just such a task, but it didn't occur to me to practice at night. Adrian is still leading.

The next day we had fewer briefings than the day before but the same number of tasks: none. It's a shame not to do more strong-wind launching, so most of us went flying for fun and to chill out. Adrian holds onto his lead. I got to meet him the week before when we both bombed, high in the famous

Villafranca pass. We went for a hike and re-launched, and being a bit of a gent he very kindly loaned me some gloves. Some idiot left mine in our landing field along with my map.

The briefings are getting even more professionally short. No flying due to strong wind, and we head off for lunch and more chilling out at the lake. We were all getting a bit over-chilled and some were starting to think a relaxing holiday might be a real alternative to flying. The week before had been good, with many of us flying past Avila. Cruising above those flatlands at 3,300m is the best seat on the planet. Happy days! Adrian is of course still doing well but I'm very worried he's peaked too early and may burn himself out. On the other hand I've heard that consistency is the key to competition flying.

A big change of mood for Friday 20 July, day six. We have a 76km task heading to what's known as the 'end of the world', around 15km west of El Barco, then to a turnpoint out in the flatlands in front of launch and then to goal back at Piedrahita. Very enjoyable indeed, but along with many others I land at Casas del Puerto. However, unlike most of the others I was on my way back from the turnpoint, so I finish nowhere near the leaders but definitely on the up.

The previous Friday had been the thirteenth and unlucky for some as I ended up in huge rose bush high in the Pass. This was not funny at the time as it took me well over an hour to get my glider out undamaged. I was however surprised how genuinely pleasing it was to discover that flat-mate Steve Senior had flown 193km that day. I guess it's being on holiday in a warm, sunny place that makes you into a nice person. Anyway, back to the competition: Adrian wins the task again and holds on to his overall lead. Nevil Hulett is a menacing second.

An even bigger change of mood for the final day. Pilots are stuffing sandwiches into harness pockets and making sure they have enough water. Others disappear into the thick bushy undergrowth, presumably to have a few quiet minutes thinking about how best to fly the task. This looks like a day to make up for the lost ones and the organisers respond in style with a race to goal 101.1km away. There is a quiet expectancy over launch with people moving more deliberately than usual. I can't wait to get up there.

The start gate is an 85km radius round the goal field, roughly just before the pass. I make several mental notes to be patient and wonder if it would be useful to write it down a couple of times as well. Studying the map I come to the same conclusion as everyone else: the southerly wind will push any convergence north so I decide to head for the small northern hills once past the pass. I also decide to fly very conservatively and make sure I get over the pass as I'm not sure what effect a southerly wind will have (it's usually a northerly of some sort).

With some justification people are slow to launch when the window opens as some early gliders get way too low. At race start time I am sticking to the plan and slowly climbing high at the pass. Other gaggles seem to be specking out both ahead and behind but some gliders are already landing, so I keep re-reading my mental note until I eventually stop turning and head off with the pass far below. The small gaggle from the climb-out has dispersed but a familiar yellow Avax appears at my shoulder and I wave to team-mate Fraser Marwick. Fifty metres, sunglasses and a full-face helmet and I can still see a big grin!

The plan was to go a bit faster at this point and chase all the thermal markers but they are all circling slowly and lots of them not that high. We get a slow climb and Fraser and I go into wait-and-see mode. Things improve and Fraser heads off. I stay

waiting and watching and see Fraser get very low - too low - and decide to head north in search of new team-mates. About an hour of mediocre lift later I'm on a long glide from above 3,000m and spot Fraser again. He had obviously been low again but was climbing steadily and I can just slot in below. I do so and nothing happens. I do a quick search. Nothing happens. A sigh of relief as I see two other gliders climbing about half a kilometre off and drifting quickly my way. I slot in below them at about 150m above the ground and for the second time fail to go up. Soon down to about 50m I pick out landing places but choose a clump of windy-looking trees for a last chance.

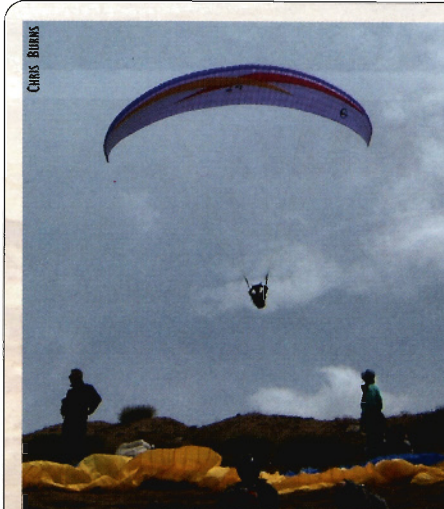
And it works! I keep flying straight and force my hands up as the glider is pulled along before diving and biting into an absolute peach of a thermal. For the next 1,500m I watch the averager wander between 9 and 1,200ft per minute before the lift slows and I again see Fraser and his gaggle off to one side and now a couple of hundred metres below. Fraser later told me that I was so low he assumed I had landed with a dusty walkout, and that feeling sorry for me was too negative an emotion. He could feel sorry later when he had more time. What could I say - I'd done exactly the same an hour earlier.

As Avila approached the sky looked empty and it seemed clear that everyone was well ahead of me,

well spread out above the never-ending flatlands that merge into the ever-present haze. For me though it feels wrong to race as the climbs are so far apart and I keep topping out, going down, topping out and so on. It feels very British, but I can do British. Not much more exciting happens as the ground passes rather slowly below. Avila comes and goes. A sailplane enters my particularly nice thermal at exactly the same height and cranks it in for a few turns but turning the wrong way. I converse using international sign language. G something 07, if you're out there I have a message for you. And I meet a friendly pilot from Majorca at 2,700m and think paragliding is an odd sport at times.

After five hours flying and nearly 90km I can see goal and it's like the kiss of death. Down and down and down I go until I hit my last thermal of the day. It's a good one full of swallows and housemartins but I can do nothing at 10 or 15m off the deck and land on the warm sandy Spanish soil. A hot walk out after a really satisfying flight is such sweet torture and the two or three miles to the shimmering road pass lightly.

The goal field bus arrives within 15 minutes on its way home, and much to my surprise it's mostly empty. The goal field was far from full and the Spanish plains must have been littered with hot ships. Carlo Borsattino has deservedly won the



Carlo's way

Carlo Borsattino explains how he won the final task at Piedrahita

I must confess to thinking that the final task was a little too ambitious at the time. But what the heck! Pilots were very hesitant at first as things looked quite stable despite though the forecast (and Steve Ham) telling us that it was going to be a good day.

After a bit of a wait with few pilots taking off, Steve Ham, Russell Ogden and Mark Watts launched and started things going. After an initial scrabble we found that things were actually working quite nicely along the ridge and we all scuttled off in the direction of the dreaded pass. Steve Ham showed everyone the right way to go and we all met up around the quarry area. Again everyone got quite hesitant and a serious amount of 'gaggle drag' ensued.

With a big flying circus of us boating about around the pass we soon managed to find the best bits of lift and a few of us made the big push over the

pass. Decision time comes around at this point, with three main options: the 'usual' route following the small Avila mountains to the left, stick to the middle of the valley and go straight (usually only when it's booming), or take the longer route over the higher mountains to the right. I arrived first at the pass and decided to go right and a few of others came as well. Most pilots went for the left route over the Avila hills, and some pilots that had started right decided to head back for the main gaggle and safety in numbers.

A few other pilots, including Ondrej Dupal and Nevil Hulett, came behind us, following over the peaks of the mountains, and it became clear that this route was working well - at least for the moment. On the other side of the valley the multitudes could be working their way across towards Avila town. Meanwhile our little troupe jumped from thermal to thermal working large areas of disorganised lift. It was actually much better to just keep pushing on; you could have wasted the whole day just sitting around in weak lift and going nowhere. Fortunately Ondrej kept up the pace, and we went along nicely between us.

At this point Nevil shot off into the flats, taking the direct route towards Avila, and Ondrej headed more right around the hills. I kept along the line between the hills and the flats, and used my GPS and the usual guess-timation to help me find bits of convergence. Having a sensitive glider that gives lots of feedback, and climbs well, helps with this I think.

As I approached Avila there seemed to me to be a change in the wind and the lift line seemed to be shifting across the valley towards Avila. At about this time a large area of high-level convergence, seen as a line of wedged-up alto cumulus, moved its way across the Avila valley and created fine lines of lift and areas of heavy sink. The effects of this on the wind could be clearly seen by watching the changes of ground speed and drift on my GPS. I decided to turn 45° off course and follow this line, straight across the valley towards the south-east corner of Avila.

day and I note, a little sadly after joking about him holding onto his lead on the non-flyable days, that Adrian Thomas is not on the bus. Fraser on his Avax was seventh and last into goal and is sitting halfway down the bus looking like a Cheshire cat on Vodka-Red Bull. The bus stops and I buy the beers.

Nevil Hulett won the British Open with Carlo Borsattino second and Adrian Thomas third. As for me I did well enough - 25th - on the final score sheet, but I also believe in the old adage that the best pilot is the one having the most fun. Using this criterion I reckon me and the rest of the world came out just about evens. Or maybe I was just ahead.



The local cops keep a relaxed eye on territorial hostility

At this point I could see various small groups of gliders scrabbling and squabbling their way around in odd bits of scrappy lift on the west side of Avila town. I arrived quite high from the lift I'd gained on the eastern side of the valley and the good glide I had across the valley, and flew straight to my favourite spot over Avila where I often find a good climb (not always, but very often). There it was - a nice thermal averaging 4.5m/s up to around 3,500m. Strangely enough only one glider flew over to join my climb, a Columbian guy on a yellow Boomerang who later made goal third but wasn't in the comp because his thin-lined Boomerang wasn't certified.

At this point I thought that I might be in a leading position (high and in a good spot), but then I realised that a few km ahead of me, and high, was my good friend John Nicholas from South Africa who was flying a storm all of his own way up ahead. As luck and paragliding goes, John then took a glide from orbit to the ground and didn't find a single measly bit of lift, so I took heed and went a different way. Thanks John!

From Avila to goal I just followed the sailplanes that were arranged along the convergence line to Segovia and beyond, using my GPS to find the best bits of lift and letting myself slide towards where it was taking me rather than fighting with it as I always used to do. I did get quite low at one point, and have an eagle to thank for finding a low save which took me all the way back up to 3,200m.

Strangely, the strongest and most consistent climb I had all flight was the very last one. I was thinking: 'Anything, give me anything, just a weak dribble to get me into goal!' - and walked straight into a sustained 5.5m/s (peaking 8m/s+) and left it at 3,400m, still climbing like a rocket. I glided into goal with 1,500m to spare to find that I was first in! Yippee! The next pilot in was Windtech team member Oliver Thurman on his Quax, 17 minutes later.