



# Top pilots No. 3: Steve Ham

*Our series of interviews with Britain's top paraglider pilots continues with Steve Ham, British team pilot, former British Champion and British distance record holder, answering questions put to him by current British Champion Adrian Thomas.*

## Part 1: Background, climbing, gliding... and winning

**Adrian Thomas:** You've been flying at top level in the Nationals for more than a decade. You were National Champion in 2002 and led until the penultimate task last year, finishing second overall on a serial wing. Tell us about the highlights and low points, and how competition flying has changed in that time?

**Steve Ham:** I started paragliding in 1991 when I moved to Spain to set up Airwave Spain, but had previously flown in the hang gliding League. I had just started to have some minor successes such as a 2nd in the Spanish Nationals. Like many hang glider pilots at that time, notably John Pendry, Bruce Goldsmith and Robbie Whittall, the move to paragliding comps came very easily. Early successes were relatively easy; we were accustomed to racing XC tasks when paraglider pilots were more interested in spot landing, making interesting French pastry shapes with their gliders or getting down after an interesting day climbing.

My first paragliding comp was the Spanish Nationals at Algodonales in 1991. I had just done a two-day paragliding course and logged a few top-to-bottoms. The first task was my first soaring and XC flight and I managed to finish 2nd on an Airwave Taboo. It seemed the same as hang gliding but with really bad performance. I recently flew a Tecma Boomerang (a comp hang glider from 1991) and, compared to my current FR3, the reverse is now true. The early paragliders would never have wooed me away from hang gliders, but my epiphany occurred in September '92 when Bruce Goldsmith lent me a prototype Voodoo at the hang gliding League in Laragne - a glider with sink rate and glide fit to chase records.

The early 90s were a fantastic time for development in paragliding competitions, and in the British Nationals it seemed as if each event was a push for the UK record. In my first appearance in '92 I held the record for some minutes until Richard Carter flew over my head for a few more km. Richard blazed a trail of UK records till I managed to secure it in 1995 for almost ten years.

The PWC became the dominant competition in the early 90s, with John, Robbie and Bruce and Pat Holmes, Jocky Sanderson and John Silvester following the circuit and scoring important results. Since that time few British pilots have committed themselves so strongly to the PWC except Steve Senior in the late 90s, and more recently Russell Ogden. Of course Bruce has been a constant force throughout the whole period.

My involvement in the PWC started in 1994 when I organised and directed a round at Piedrahita (also in '95, '97 and '99), and became a committee member and PWC Technical Delegate until 2000. As organiser and task-setter I tried to push for longer

XC tasks rather than the shorter, enclosed fish-bowl style of the Alps at that time. The Piedrahita PWC in 1995 is still my favourite event. After getting three valid tasks in the bag, Joe Hayler (TD and former British hang gliding team manager) encouraged me to push the limits. We set a 140km out-and-return, and then a 170km goal. Many of the Alpine pilots were incredulous, but with 50 or so in goal on each day (the flight being comparatively easy along the famous convergence line) Piedrahita's fame as an XC and competition venue was made. It was also Bruce's first PWC win.

Regarding skills and the type of tasks flown, I don't think much has changed since the late 90s. Many of the top names such as Christian Tamegger and Bruce continue as before with improved gliders. But John Pendry or Peter Luethi, top pilots in 1997, wouldn't find things so different at the top if they were to return to competitive flying.

What has changed, especially in our UK comps, is the professionalism of the organisation. Until Calvo became our organiser and meethead in 2001 the meet director would also be a pilot competing in the event - a very unsatisfactory situation. The lend-a-hand spirit still exists at the British Nationals, but the scrupulously fair and impartial direction from the top makes all the difference.

With GPS technology there is the option to run a much slicker and fairer system of scoring. For the 1998 Europeans at Piedrahita I had to hire a mobile photo lab and have a large staff just to check the 200+ films each night - around 2,000 turnpoint images! Now a few laptops and a small dedicated staff can process the tracklogs far more accurately and efficiently.

**AT:** Who are your main competitors and how do you set about beating them?

**SH:** It's exciting to fly an XC task in good conditions. Some time after the start gate you'll usually end up in gaggles with the usual pilots, all of whom you will be able to recognise from afar by their style of flying, the way they hang in the harness, glider colours, etc. Often people talk of gaggles as if they had their own personality; of being slow, afraid, timid, rubbish, etc. Clearly it is best to be in a gaggle described as fast, skilful, etc. This is often found near the front, comprising the top pilots and progressively shedding the less able.

For the last few years Bruce, Russell, Adrian and Mark were the ones to keep an eye on in the Nationals. Mark is the only one not to have got the title yet. I'd put him ahead of most of us on strong racing days. In the past, as long as the event was long enough, you'd beat him overall as he would eventually drill himself into the ground on some impossibly long and over-optimistic glide. This year I imagine the Devon boys Innes Powell and Craig

Morgan will be an important threat.

How to beat them? By a better choice of route, or leaving early on a tightly-judged final glide at trim. I am far more fearful of wrapping myself in the glider than any of the above-mentioned names when on the max-speed final glide.

**AT:** What is needed to get British pilots competing successfully at the top level?

**SH:** They need to be already pretty good, and have a huge amount of time and money to do as many high-level comps as they can. Unfortunately, few of us fall into the latter category.

**AT:** You've been fly-guiding at Piedrahita for years, taking pilots XC and pushing for the European XC record from your home site. Does this help with competition flying?

**SH:** I achieved the European XC record in 1994, but from around 1996 the success of my fly-guiding business has pretty much prevented me from doing it again. When I fly with clients I will always land with the last one down. Our pace of flying is normally slow to reduce the number of bomb-outs and I spend a lot of time hanging around waiting in the air. This pretty much limits any big record flights and is a little contrary to comp flying, though it's good practice for waiting at the start gate. Three times in the last ten years clients have given me the go-ahead to carry on for a big distance. The last was with Frank Goodman (72 at the time!) who landed at around 140km and encouraged me to go on (to 245km).

**AT:** Do the skills you have learnt in guiding translate into competition flying?

**SH:** Each day I am observing and trying to analyse mistakes that pilots make. Recognising a bad decision is often as important as making a good one. With guiding I am leading out all the time - not something it is often wise to do in comps - but being accustomed to it makes it less of a worry... especially if the gaggle doesn't follow and chooses a different direction!

**AT:** What are the most important skills for a competition pilot?

**SH:** Being calm and able to focus. On the last day of the Worlds, Bruce was winning and did not expect to have to fly to take the title due to the poor weather. When the weather turned flyable he was able to calmly concentrate on the task, flying in very stressful conditions (wet ground, weak climbs, low base and a leading position) on the most important task of his life. Definitely the best sporting performance I have ever witnessed.

**AT:** Can you say something about the way you climb?

**SH:** I am always trying to maximise the climb by moving around the core, tightening up on surges even for just a part of the circle. It's very important to monitor and change the speed of the glider and bank angle in all but the weakest homogenous climb at the end of the day. Those pilots who prefer to lock their thumb to hold the brake down are throwing away a large percentage of their control and feel of the glider and will lose out in climb. Apart from the obvious visual clues, I am very tuned into any lateral movement of the glider, especially when low down as the thermal will draw air towards it. It is important to be clued into how the air feels around a thermal and how your glider reacts to it - the increased turbulence, wind noises and changes in ground and air speed. Otherwise you can end up flying close by and missing it.

**AT:** How fast do you fly on glide? Does technique matter as much as it does on climbs?

**SH:** John Pendry said that although he climbed the same, he always glided better than the rest. Sniffing out lines of lift on a glide can make a fantastic difference on the arrival height at the next climb. I am always pretty relaxed in a climb (apart from those 100+ gaggles at the start gate) as I don't have to think much to climb effectively. However, on the glide, unless there is something (a glider or bird) obviously climbing ahead, you may be within minutes of going down unless you use your senses and experience to the full to locate a thermal. As for glide speed, unless you are on the final glide you tend to match your speed to the competitors around you. It's usually around 40km/h, but swiftly going up to around 50 - 55 as soon as an obvious climb is spotted ahead, to perhaps 60km/h or as much as it will go if on a final glide - if conditions and my usual cowardice permit.

*Next month Steve covers gliders, training, planning and Piedrahita.*



Main image: Steve at the World Championships, 2007. Inset: Steve hang gliding in the early 1980s and flying the Voodoo in 1991





Steve Ham PHOTO: ADRIAN THOMAS

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## Part 2: Background, climbing, gliding... and winning

**Adrian Thomas:** You flew a serial class wing last year (Magic 4), then jumped onto an Airwave FR3 for the Worlds. Why were you flying serial, and how do the serial and competition wings compare? How important do you think glider performance is for competitions and XC.

**Steve Ham:** For competition flying having performance equal or better than your competitors is essential. In a utopia where all competitors were on equally matched machines it would not matter. But even in class events there are some serial wings which give advantages over others. On my FR3 at 50km/h the glide is very, very good and the feeling of security high; on the Magic 4 I would be at full bar and nervous of any turbulence, and depressed by the glide performance drop-off. If there is no serial class category in an event I just won't bother with a serial wing. If the whole comp was on a DHV1 it would be just as fun an event... though not as much fun as it would be if they were all on DHV1s and I was on an FR3!

I flew serial last year because in 2005 some of the top end 2-3s were going better than my comp wing. My Magic 4 definitely glided as well as the previous crop of comp wings, but gliding alongside the latest protos was very demoralising. For XC flying it doesn't matter too much. Last year I mostly flew a DHV1-2 for fly-guiding, and this year I am flying a DHV2 Mustang. The glide at trim - what we glide at for most of the time on downwind open XCs - is more than adequate, and the security is of course

very reassuring when conditions turn problematic.

**AT:** You seem to be very relaxed about competitions and to find it easy to fly at top level. What sort of practice and training do you find most useful?

**SH:** The best practice is to do lots of events. Failing that I will impose little goals on local flights, or games such as setting limits - only taking thermals above X strength or taking nothing till I get within X metres of the ground. I'll also use clients as moving turnpoints, racing from those at the front back upwind to those in the rear.

**AT:** How much planning do you put in before a competition task?

**SH:** It depends how well I know the area. If I am aware of certain effects which often happen at the venue (winds coming in, convergences setting up, overcast, etc) I will plan for these eventualities. At an unknown venue I'll talk to those who might be in the know, get the GPS programmed and get off early enough to be at the start gate in time to see what the wise ones do, and to get a good look around down track

**AT:** Do you get nervous before a task or during one?

**SH:** I may appear relaxed but it doesn't feel that way inside! The mental side in flying is the key aspect to success. After all, after a thousand or so hours most of us have the mechanics of handling the glider to a similar high level, so all that sets the champions

apart from the rest are their observations of conditions and terrain and their decisions. However our glide slopes are pretty poor and we should not over-intellectualise. If a sailplane can be compared to a finely-balanced rapier, a paraglider is very much a club of a weapon. Very blunt direct aggressive tactics are often the best.

**AT:** Why Piedrahita? Is it really the best place to fly in the world?

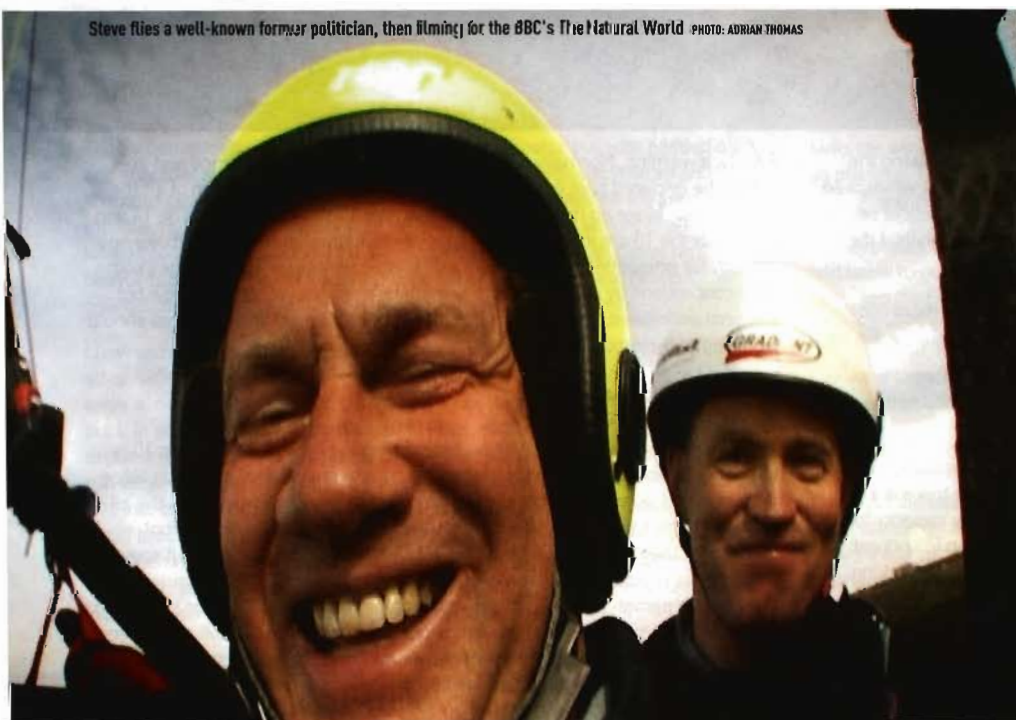
**SH:** The Meseta (central tableland) of Spain really does regularly provide some of the best gliding conditions in the world. Piedrahita is just one stepping off point along 300km of the dividing range, but with the advantage of a tarmac road to the top of the hill.

**AT:** You were at the Manila XC open when some pilots got into trouble with a Cumulo-nimbus. How was it for you?

**SH:** There were about 20 pilots ahead of me aiming for a gap between the Cu-nim, which had a lot of rain coming out of it, and a large Cu that was growing at a tremendous rate. The gap ahead still seemed viable for me and the pilots ahead, but those behind would have little chance of getting through before the two Cbs joined up. I made a fast glide of about 10km to get ahead of the gap, taking no climbs at all as there were large areas of very powerful lift - we were almost under the Cb shelf. Having got into the clear I could see pilots just a few km ahead climbing again in a slightly overdeveloped sky. But the wind near the ground had now reversed due to the draw of the Cb and any weak climb would have taken me back towards it. Many of those behind hung back while I rejoiced in my sinky glide to the ground. Dav Dagault, who had flown a similar route to me, made around 125km to win the day, but landed in conditions that perhaps only a few pilots with his abilities and cool could have handled.

I successfully surfed a Cb front for 164km back in 1993. In 1994, in similar circumstances, I ended up under my reserve and going up. Since that time I have been extremely cautious of any building cloud, but of course our attitudes to risk are altered dramatically in competition flying. The day after the Manila Cu-nim incident, in a Jury meeting with Will Gadd and Stefan Mast we decided to give the pilots greater option for invalidating a task. None of those pilots pushing the safety envelope did it for fun, but only because the pilots continuing ahead of them would beat them by a large points margin if they had landed early for safety. This situation rarely occurs these days since a safety committee will monitor the route and stop the task before there are problems. However in an open XC event there is no set route and it's difficult for the organisation to be aware of changing conditions for all areas. In reality it is safer flying a competition task than free-flying

Steve flies a well-known former politician, then filming for the BBC's *The Natural World* PHOTO: ADRIAN THOMAS



an XC, as if you have a problem there will always be plenty of pilots following the same route to see you and assist.

**AT:** In the last few years you have made a habit of popping over to the UK for a week and posting 150km+ flights in the XC League. Any hints or tips for those of us who live here about how you manage it?

**SH:** I normally only get between four and six days a year in the UK during the flying season. Although many of those have been spent sheltering from bad weather at the nationals, my selective memory always equates UK flying with great conditions and a wonderful picturesque landscape. I suppose my motivation to make the most of the few days I have plays an important part. People are puzzled that I am willing to go out on the most dismal of days with great optimism and talking up a potential big day. These days, with the huge array of forecasting available on the net, it is easy to get into the habit of being too selective. In the old days any sort of good forecast on the BBC evening news would get me so excited and over-imaginative that I would be dreaming up all sorts of convoluted XC adventures to get to the

coast on my hang glider from an Avon site. I didn't manage it very often, but the drive I had made me learn that a lot is possible even on the visually most disappointing days.

**AT:** Where do you see paragliding going in the next ten years?

**SH:** Since I started paragliding our glide angle has doubled and safety improved immensely, and I hope that trend will continue. One of the sport's principal problems has always been the low take-up by new participants, possibly linked to its poor media coverage and the belief held by many of the general public that paragliding is for unhinged danger-seekers, or similar to the parascending they see at the beach. Admittedly, if they came across some branches of paragliding such as speed gliding or accuracy they would perhaps be right in their assumption. The biggest media coverage ever in paragliding was of Ewa's recent Cb experience. Although we would consider this bad advertising for the sport, the fact that many newspapers explained a little of the background of the competition and some basic meteorology has probably changed many people's understanding, or at least made them aware of the sport.

On the PWC Committee and the Brits Comp Panel I would often sit through hours of debate on how to bring young people into the sport. I actually think we should concentrate on the age bracket of pilots who have traditionally been involved in paragliding. In the World Championship the average age of the competitors was over 40, the winner being 46. Our current British Champion is a 44-year-old distinguished Professor of Oxford University. Many past winners, male and female, have been middle-aged professional people - role models far more likely to attract the people who tend to stay in the sport. I think paragliding shares a lot more with golf than with other adventure sports. It is mildly intellectual and undemanding physically; mental preparation is more important than physical prowess, and practice over many years leads to improved technique and greater appreciation. And you can carry on with both well into your retirement years. Imagine just a small percentage of the golf market captured by paragliding! The coffers of the BHPA would be full, we would probably own many of the sites, and maybe in ten years time we would have captains of British industry networking in the hills on a Sunday afternoon!

