

The 'Go!' days

Steve Senior reflects on a classic flight of his 1996 season



STEVE SENIOR

Late summer 1996 provided me with more than the usual number of flying challenges; the Nationals and Open at Piedrahita swiftly followed by the finals of the PWC in Chamonix.

Till then the season had not been easy - long periods of unflyable weather saved by that rare stolen day when, magically, the Go! button was pushed. Rained out at St. André in spring and snowed on and frozen in Norway, where it's zero degrees at take-off and 10-up thermals take you to base where your Camelbak freezes solid and your hands refuse to feel anything - having to look to see if they're through the brake loops is not funny! And sitting above cloudbase at take-off for days on end at the Grenoble PWC and completing the week with no valid tasks flown. It must be time to do something else instead.

My glider, an Alto XMX with full race kit (thanks to the support of Chris Dawes and Airways), had been an excellent decision early in the season. The confidence I felt in its performance and superb handling helped me make the most of the occasional good days, both in competition and recreational flying. Arriving in Piedrahita a few days before the start of the serious stuff I kicked off with a 115km flight to Segovia, flying over the

beautiful city in the late afternoon, the strong shadows of the Cathedral and aqueduct contrasting with the pale, dusty landscape. The highlight of the flight had been a fast climb in a thermal that must have been more than 200 metres across. Several sailplanes, a family of eagles and three paragliders all converged to whoop it up together, each group then leaving at its own speed to glide in silence.

Two days later and another classic sky. The usual route to the Villatoro pass, then turning to fly the mountains on the southern side of the Avila valley. A blue day with a strong inversion forced a more relaxed pace than normal, but knowing the wind speed and direction at different altitudes helped decide speed-to-fly. My Aircotec Top Navigator (thanks to Paul at Airtrak for this) generates a picture of the drift as the glider circles in lift, using GPS updates combined with trailing ASI to give very accurate information. When a thermal grinds to a halt against an inversion, finding the core that might just push through can be difficult. The Top Navigator helps by plotting the strength and location of lift on-screen, leaving the pilot free to search for better lift in the knowledge that he can return directly to his previous position using his on-screen track. It sounds complicated, but it isn't!

With a much cooler airmass above the inversion, the thermals that did get through produced fast climbs - enough to combat the more northerly wind direction. Several transitions brought me to Avila, but rather than continue on, as we had done two days previously, I decided to turn back and attempt to return to Piedrahita. Choosing the more direct route home by simply following the road, I initially made quick progress, trying to stay as high as possible to avoid the easterly headwind at lower levels.

Having crossed the Villatoro pass many times from west to east, usually with the benefit of a tailwind, I anticipated a much harder task going in the opposite direction. At altitude I could still make good forward speed over the ground, but my Aircotec showed the increasing headwind as I descended. Using full speed on the glides, each thermal took me perhaps two km further than the last. Crossing low to the Piedrahita side of the pass, the wind strength was clearly evident from the straining trees, their upturned leaves shining a dull silver. The quarry to the south of the road proved reliable, and with my objective in view, connecting with the main ridge seemed the best option.

Setting off for the final glide, a pulley in my speed system snapped loudly, the glider jolting back into normal trim. To have this minor mishap force me to miss goal after so far didn't seem fair, and I thought of Chris Dawes, who had missed goal by metres in St. André the year before due to the same problem. His comment of 'Close, but no cigar',

hid the string of expletives I'm sure he felt! However, this time I got the cigar, and after over six hours in the air I landed in the park. Definitely one of the Go! days.

Chamonix? Well, with low cloudbases, long tasks, crowded skies but wonderful flying, that's another story. I'll save it for the next time.



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Climbing out near the pass

HUGH MILLER



Steve Senior aboard the XMX