



New blood at the British Open

Peter Logan tries his hand at National-level competition

Good to leave behind - the Pena Negra launch PHOTO: RICHARD BUNGAY

Back last year the folks running the British Championship, Open, Nationals (whatever they're called) decided to open up the entry requirements to pilots a bit more like me - a reasonable amount of comp experience but not Advanced Pilot yet. I didn't think of signing up until I got a call from Dave Smart, a mate in the Dales club, asking if I wanted to come along. After convincing me I wouldn't be out there for just retrieve duty, I signed up and got some flights sorted.

I was hitting the ground running as far as my flying was concerned. The weeks leading up to the Open were taken up with a long weekend at the Lakes Charity Classic followed by a fortnight with the family and wing in Anney. Adding up to pretty much a full-on month of flying including Piedrahita. This didn't diminish the slight concern I had about the conditions Spanish mountains can throw at the unwary pilot in midsummer. This became less of a worry as the comp unfolded, unlike some other fliers - more on that later.

Arrival, and straight into the presentation night for the Dutch Open/100th-edition party for Cross Country. Vats of lager and free cocktail-type substances. Less said the better. As we ease into day one we scrounge a lift up to Pena Negra to get some practice in. We have a loose plan to go up and have a look at the Villafranca pass which is supposed to be a bit of an obstacle. Soon after, I'm approaching it at 4,000m amsl, just starting to fly in and around the wisps. How easy is this?

Shortly after turning round I'm struggling back at mountain level with a headwind preventing any progress. Dave lands in a gnarly valley and I use a bit of remaining height to press on to where it widens. I set up an approach to a field without thorns, wires, trees, crops, etc, and am a bit perturbed to be sinking into it at over 5m/s. It stops in the last few metres and I land and pack up. A nice few hours in the air, but it's not all plain sailing on here.

Task 1 was set with more turnpoints than you can shake a stick at, all within the Piedrahita valley. Initially it seemed rather complicated with the race start being set at Turnpoint 2, but it was all for safety and getting people spread out in the air before race start time.

I get off to a shaky start by delaying launch until the time when the take-off starts to get strong. A lull turns into an almighty gust and I'm lifted back, but manage to get my arms up so the wing's flying

OK - its just me underneath that's a mess. A good call by Alan the marshal sees him just give me a helpful shove rather than brake my wing onto the fence behind, and I slowly eke out in front with a bit of bar on. The task window opens and closes a few times after I leave as more gusts come on launch. I settle into some close thermalling and feel pretty good by Turnpoint 2.

The first decision is here: stay out in the valley or head back to the mountain for guaranteed lift? I didn't trust the valley route so I'm one of the few to head back to take-off. Turnpoint 3 was well out in the valley and my plan was to head straight out from Pena Negra once I got parallel. It was not to be. Some gliders are fast and some are slower, but when it comes to going into wind mine's a barrage balloon. It was really the only time in the comp I wished I was on a hotter wing as I saw-toothed slowly forward, alternately taking the climbs back and gliding out. My forward speed on half bar was getting on for 13km/h and the turnpoint was 13km away. It was all getting a bit soul-destroying. I landed by the main road, not too far away from fellow Dales Club pilot Chris Fountain who'd spent his time low in the valley to get the same distance. Sometimes it's as broad as its short.

Task 2 is a big 'un, an out-and-return to Avila 50km away with the return leg into wind. Launch was more dignified but I was almost out of things a few km later as I radioed in a pilot down and lost a load of height flying over to get a closer look. Like a loon, he was making his ground handling look exactly like someone getting dragged. Over the Villafranca pass things were looking rosier with a few 5m/s climbs and plenty of markers. I didn't really have a master plan for the rest of the flight and just followed whoever looked like they were doing OK. This turned out to be a long diagonal across the high plain of the Avila valley, and most people reached the turnpoint easily.

A familiar story next ensued: turn round and it all gets very difficult. This time it was taking a long time to get to any climbs and they all drifted strongly south, meanwhile I'm trying to get back home to the west. Most people who were still up were soon pinned on the range to the south and I resigned myself to some slow but thankfully high progress back home. It slowly dawned on me that I was the first one of the group to leave on the glides. One of the guys "letting" me lead turned out to be a housemate at Steve Ham's (you know who you are). It's the last time I'll be making all the running for others for a while - it's stressful!

I didn't get back over the pass but it was entertaining just trying to stay up in the evening air. One last thermal from a rocky valley took me back at an angle of just 30 degrees, my glide back taking me just a few hundred metres further forward. Six hours in the air for my longest flight to date (77km): three hours to the 50km mark and another three for just 27km back. That's just how much you have to work when the conditions are against you. A major point to note is that those reaching goal had set off early enough so that getting back over the pass wouldn't be an issue due to the thermals weakening later in the day. Still, the day was worth two hamburguesas and an ensalada Espaniola to celebrate a big flight. Er, plus the all-important rehydration.

Task three is another cat's cradle in the valley. I'm pretty much last to launch. Soon I'm high enough and above a fairly rough inversion, but I'm now so far back over the hill that my only option is to sink to a valley down the course. I really get drilled and have to take three low climbs to get back out, but each time I bounce off the inversion. At this point I'm pretty glad I'm on the Allegra as the air's giving me a right kicking, all not too far from trees and boonies. I make about 13km and land out, not entirely unhappy. It's good to fly with a purpose as it gives you a reason to put up with air that's not fun, but there are limits.

As I pack up I have the radio on for a bit of company. A few people radio in that someone's on reserve and seconds later a broken transmission from my mate John Ellison confirms that its him. He'd been up high with bar on and had a tuck that spun his wing and neglected to spin him as well. With no control he'd rightly thrown his reserve which was too small - his XC Trainer recorded a 10m/s descent rate so it was no surprise that he broke his ankle.

It was slowly dawning on me that we had a fair attrition rate that I'd just assumed was normal up until now. In the last three tasks there'd been six reserves thrown and a further two impacts too low for reserve. Not good for the image of the comp and certainly not good for relations with Avila hospital. Most pilots thought that the conditions really weren't anything to worry about. It's worth noting that seven out of the eight total deployments were on comp gliders.

Task four and Steve Ham's getting giddy with the task setting. 85km to a turnpoint past Avila and then back to it to give 119km. It's pretty cloudy on launch and the wind's light over the back. A few heroic forward

launches get cheers but there's no guarantee on staying up. An early group gets off as the wind swings lightly up the hill and they creep along the face. No one fancies it that much and the wind switches to over the back again. When the wind swings again everyone is off as they don't want to get stranded on launch when the window closes. It's soon a bit silly as around a hundred pilots are trying to maintain at ridge height with the lift slowly fading. There's nothing really happening here and I join a few others to head out into the valley on a gamble.

I have to confess a bit of guilt at this point. I was only a couple of hundred feet above the two wings in front. They turned in something but soon landed out. For me it was zeros from two hundred feet, which slowly developed into a 2-up and I climb out looking down at them to 3,000m. I should be glad but I'm flying nervously after John's accident yesterday and the reports of rain further down the course don't lighten my mood. Over the pass the flying starts getting ridiculously easy and I rarely descend below 3,000m. Progress was quite quick past Avila for those that made it out of the Piedrahita valley, and I find that with a slight tailwind I'm giving little away to much hotter gliders on my DHV1-2.

Just to illustrate how good the lift was (convergence, I'm told), I witness a reserve deployment a few km in front of me and spend my time radioing details in and trying to see where this guy's going to land out. This all takes a fair amount of time but I only lose a couple of thousand feet. Shortly afterwards a familiar story unfolded and a group of us were making the most of a few light thermals after turning around at the turnpoint. A great way to finish a huge (for me) flight of 91km.

The wind blew strongly over the back for the next three days so we hit the poolside. Overall, it's got to be the best week's flying I've had. Sign me up for next year! Thanks to Chris, John and Dave for supplying a bit of confidence, and to the marshals and Calvo for sterling work.

Tips for new bloods

- **Treat marshals nicely. It might cost you a round but it does give you a halo for a while.**
- **Don't mess about with your GPS or instruments. Have them set up to work without you having to think about them. And anything new you need to get used to is going to take away from the task in hand, so it's not worth bothering with.**
- **Take off with the middle of the field at the latest. You'll be flying tasks at half the speed of the folks that make the podium and you'll want plenty of wings around to mark routes and lift.**
- **Do stuff you wouldn't normally do and take some risks. A hard bit of advice to give but how else are you going to push your PB and fly better? You might not like the bit of air you're in at the moment, but if you get 50km further it's not going to matter too much.**
- **Once you've got the task, give yourself a few minutes with your map and work out what the wind's going to do to thermal drift, and which side of a valley's going to work best. Is the wind change above any inversion going to help you with the task?**
- **The old one - don't dither or change plans halfway through. Piedrahita sink'll put you down quicker than an All Black forward.**



Convergence saves many a task PHOTO: RICHARD BUNGAY



Above: Classic Piedrahita view - from orbit PHOTO: RICHARD BUNGAY BELOW: Endless mountain, endless road PHOTO: PETER LOGAN

