

Bad Attitude?

Over the past few years I've been fortunate enough to have been able to spend most of my summers indulging in my obsession, hang-gliding. There has also unfortunately been a lot of time available for navel contemplation during the all too numerous spells of atrocious weather. Hence I've got to know my navel well and have been surprised to conclude that my most enjoyable flights have occurred during competitions. Strange, as there is no way that I'm a competitions pilot, and I wouldn't be seen dead in aerosleves! Nerver the less I'm beginning to wonder if the majority of us are missing out on something that the hot shots are keeping to themselves.

My attitude has always been that flying is about enjoyment, not pushing back the frontiers. I'd rather be kind to my glider, my body and my mind than break a record. I've only entered a few competitions in my time. I've never done well, but I still enter them now and again. The latest one was the Airwave Challenge in 92. I had such enjoyable flying there I decided to write this article with the hope of touching a few nerves amongst fellow club pilots and possibly make them reflect, "Did they have a good time?".

Myself, Dave Tyrer and Nick Romanko, all Avon members, wasters and general layabouts, spent two months of this summer taking a pleasant sojourn around France and Spain. During that time we had some fantastic flying, with 13,000' cloud-bases on the best days in Spain. Nick flew a 100km triangle and we all had some excellent flights, but the best flying for me was during the Airwave Challenge in Laragne. Here the flying conditions were very average for Southern Europe, and none of us flew exceptional distances or gained great heights. At the time, I recall a lot of complaining was done about the wind direction, the crowds and especially the weather. Then why on reflection did I enjoy it so much?

I possess average club pilots skills and attitudes. I enjoy the odd 20 mile or so XC in the Britain and hate self retrieves. During the week before the Airwave Challenge I'd flown up and down the local valleys, sticking close to the roads and making the most of the available lift. But once I'd landed I always felt that I'd been very conservative in flying. The urge to be more adventurous was swamped by the need to stick to what I knew, be sure, be safe, stay up! My attitude was holding me back and putting a damper on my enjoyment. This attitude was a hard for me to modify, as being sure of staying up and keeping safe are major concerns of all pilots from when they first start the sport (and rightly so!).

Then came the competition. We decided to enter the Airwave Challenge at Laragne to uphold the honour of the Avon Club against the tyranny of the Thames Valley Club, who somehow failed to materialise. Laragne, is in the south eastern corner of France in the low foothills of the Alps, in an area confusingly called the "High Alps". I guess there must be areas called the "Very High Alps" and the "So High You'll Just Not Believe It Alps" as well, because these are not that high. Rather than the typical alpine scenery of sloping green meadows, chocolate box churches and purple cows, the land around Laragne is composed of steep rock faces and flat(ish) fertile valleys. Where the hills do slope gently they are usually covered with trees. In the heat of the summer the rock faces cook and turn the area into a mecca for Europe's foot-launched aviators.

With about one hundred competitors and locals it was always crowded on launch. I don't like crowds so I'd try and set off on the tasks as early as I could. I soon found that the best way to avoid large gaggles was to be amongst the front runners. During serious competitions, pilots gagle fly to gain maximum advantage from the conditions. I leave

that kind of thing to the birds. I like to have my airspace free of obstacles. My need for free air had me leaving lift, which normally I would have stuck with, and pressing on to the next potential thermal. Amazingly I managed to stay up. At the end of the first day I landed feeling more like Indiana Jones, than Chris Jones. I'd been adventurous, I was safe and I'd stayed up.

By the last day of the competition I was having a ball. I'd been flying faster than I ever imagined I could. Gone was the "be sure, be safe, stay up" attitude, to be replaced with, "be safe, be fast, be at gaol". Of course I was pissed when I went down and the others flew over my head, but so what! I knew I'd had as much fun, if not more fun than them. The competition had helped focus my thoughts and energies. Only for the briefest minute did I fall back into a waffle of indecision. I used all those theories I'd read about on where to find the lift, when to leave lift and when to stay with it. For the most part it all worked. Others went further and faster, but I felt that I'd used the conditions as well as I could. I had an excellent time with my new attitude. The only question was could I carry it forward into my free flying?

Sadly not, it is all too easy to fall back into my old ways. But there is still a spark there just waiting to be rekindled. I'd had a glimpse of what the hot shots get from their flying and realised that it was attitude more than ability that was holding me back. I believe that this is the same for the majority of club pilots. You may not want to compete seriously but competition is an excellent way of expanding the limits of your flying. Unfortunately the vagaries of the British weather mean that the most consistent flying is to be had elsewhere. I urge any club pilot thinking about visiting Europe this summer to think about spending a week at the Airwave or Solar Wings Challenge. Go with a team of friends or join a team when you get there. If you enter into the spirit of things and treat it as an adventure not as a test of your flying prowess you'll have a ball and will probably come home a more enlightened pilot.

I'm never going to make a competition animal, but slowly, ever so slowly I'm learning to be more adventurous, and I'm going to stick at it now that I know the rewards are so enjoyable. I did have a good time, but I know that there is an even better time just waiting to be had.