

Pilot to pilot communication in Regionals

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A grand experiment will begin this year (pending SSA approval): Pilot-to-pilot radio communication will be allowed in regional competitions.

Why? This has been one of the most requested rules changes for several years now, and strongly supported on the fall opinion poll. US pilots at world glider contests are noticeably disadvantaged by lack of team-flying experience. While in general we structure US contests for the safety, pleasure, and participation of US pilots rather than as training for world contests, where a bit of training can be added without cost it's worth doing. Communication for purposes of mentoring has been tried at several regionals by waiver, and people were happy with the results. Most of all, pilots seem to like to talk to each other on the radio during their recreational cross countries (!) Perhaps they would enjoy contests more if they could talk during contests. We are here to have fun after all.

There are some potential risks. Team flying was banned all these years in the fear that the "little guy" would feel he couldn't compete without a big-name team mate, and would therefore not come to contests. Building contest participation is one of the rules committee's most important goals. This is an experiment, and feedback from pilots, especially new pilots, whether the change makes them more or less likely to participate will be very important to whether we continue the experiment. If you like the idea, make sure the new guys have fun too.

It is important that we all display good sportsmanship. Whether the "little guy" feels excluded depends a lot on the sportsmanship displayed by the "big guns." If someone not on "your team" calls you, consider being helpful. You will establish a chit in the team-flying favor bank. More importantly, he won't be put off by the whole thing, turn off his radio and go home. Rude or exclusionary language, secret codes, and so forth will lead to the whole thing being abandoned.

There are operational questions. Obviously, we can't have everybody chattering away on 122.3 in the 10 minutes before start while the CD is trying to talk to task advisers or announce a task change. We didn't write a lot of rules here, but it is important for CDs and pilots to think how radio communication will work for the numbers of pilots and classes at their contests, and we will codify "best practice" advice as it emerges from experience.

A part of sportsmanship includes not talking too much. We do not have many radio frequencies available, and it will be best if all team flying in a class can happen on one frequency. This will require each of us to talk as little as possible.

How will this work out in the air? There is a lot of talk about the close pair flying that happens at World Championships. I think this will not end up being a major part of the story at US regional contests. Pair flying is very difficult. And we do not have two pilots from each country making for natural two-pilot

teams. The difficulty of pair flying, and the ability to work together with larger groups of pilots will, I think, produce a new dynamic unlike what any of us are expecting.

I hope very much that this change will lead to a lot more mentoring. Bring a newbie or two to the contest and fly together as a minnow pack to teach them contest flying. Show them how to center a thermal, fly in a gaggle, and leave on a final glide. This could really take the edge off the intimidation factor for new contest pilots.

I expect that we will expand to radios the loose team flying that we already do. If three or four pilots find themselves together crossing a blue patch, now they can talk to each other to help coordinate spontaneous team flying.

I anticipate also that loose groups of buddies will help each other out, now in the air as we all do on the ground. The buddies in your retrieve self-help group are now also your find-a-thermal self-help group. Not being a jerk will become more important, which may not be the worst thing to happen to contest soaring.

And, last but not least, there will be some serious, pre-planned team flying. This does not have to happen in groups of two, and I expect somewhat larger groups will form, mixing true team flying and mentoring.

Here are some short thoughts on team flying.

Once separated, it is very hard to find each other again. Even continually broadcasting positions, one can fly right by the other. If you separate at all, you are giving up on team flying for the rest of the flight. Make sure it's worth it. Sometimes it is. More often than not, it isn't. Are you really sure that your teammate's choice of which thermal to go to is that much worse than yours that you want to throw away team flying for the rest of the flight?

You have to get together before the start. This is much harder than it seems. Agree on a general strategic plan of where you will hang out, and when you think you might want to start. When you find each other, follow a simple rule: low guy chooses where to go, high guy just sits on his tail. Then you don't need to talk. This is hard. You will not like where low guy goes, and you'll want to go find a different cu. This is a good moment to consciously de-stress. The clock is not running, and being in the wrong place for a few minutes is not worth losing your teammate.

You may have heard great things about the French flying side to side like glue, constantly sharing information. This "pair flying" as opposed to "team flying" is very hard. Doing it effectively takes hundreds of hours. If you try it, you will find yourself paying all your attention to not running in to your teammate, and none looking at clouds or for other gliders.

A looser formation is better, at least to start. Usually one has a bit more energy and is "leader," while the one with a bit less energy is "wingman." The wingman's job is to leech like crazy until he gets the same or more energy and can take over as "leader." Both teammates consult on general strategy, spot birds, cus and other gliders while doing this.

Everybody likes to lead, and nobody likes to follow. Being the follower is much, much harder, and will be the skill you need to develop.

So, don't be so close that collision is a worry. Never be so far away that, if your buddy finds a great thermal, you would not be willing to go over where he is to share it.

Coordinate big decisions, such as when to leave thermals and which way you're going. You must roll out together and you can't pick each other out in a gaggle.. Going 45 degrees the wrong way from your teammate and then crossing bad air to find him will be costly.

Develop a short, clear, and common terminology.

Vertical separation is better than horizontal separation. 500' below your teammate, you are still flying the same thermals. 2 miles behind and you can't see where he is.

Be decisive. If you're behind and in a boomer, don't say "it's kinda good back here." Say "Bravo Bravo, 6 knots, Come back half a mile." Out ahead, I can't see where you are or make the decision.

You will find that team flying by and large is a drag on your performance. Some of your precious attention is diverted to your teammates, and you have to fly a bit inefficiently. The whole point of team flying though is that, when the inevitable low spot or blue hole arrives, you are together. You pay a bit along the way, so that you have a buddy or two with you when things get really tough. It will take a long time to persuade yourself that it works. You'll see the loss in performance and inevitably become split up along the way.

Radio communication will be an interesting experiment, with the potential to increase our enjoyment of contest flying and steepen our learning about this ever challenging sport. Keep some notes about your experiences this year, as the rules committee will certainly be watching the experiment evolve.