

RC Soaring Diaries

Let's make soaring contests fun again!

[Michael Berends](#)



Some of the happy participants after their first soaring contest. (image: Glynis Hern)

After being involved in RC soaring for close to 40 years now, I've witnessed it evolve through so many things both good and bad.

The development of the gliders themselves has been amazing to watch and the performance of the ships have just gotten better and better.

Unfortunately the downside of this is that I've also watched the contest participation in my part of the world (Canada) decline to the point where it's almost non-existent with but a few small patches of diehard glider competitors in a few regions of the country.

Through the 80s and 90s we had quite large club gatherings and contests every year in multiple cities. Some of my best soaring memories are from these events. Everyone working together running winches, retrievers and timing each other with such friendly rivalry. Most of the ships were built by the pilots and they flew them proudly, seeing their craftsmanship and efforts gracing the sky. It was always a great day of flying and camaraderie with all the participants.



Everyone getting ready for the day's events (image: Michael Berends)

I actually started seeing the decline when composite ships first started showing up at the flying fields. They performed so much better than what everyone else was flying and were hard to beat as they could 'work' the air

for every little bit of lift far better than their built-up counterparts. Quite a big step in performance but it came with a price. All of a sudden the cost of having a contest ship increased dramatically! Often putting it out of the budget for the normal hobbyist. This started creating a bit of a problem as doing well at a contest turned into a bit of a money game instead of hobbyists building affordable planes and enjoying competition on a fairly level playing field.

It also created a bit of embarrassment for those that were in a situation where they couldn't justify or afford the substantial sum of money for a competitive ship. It was like showing up to an Indy Car race with your old souped-up VW Beetle! You knew that you had to work twice as hard as everyone else, lacked tons of performance and were almost looked down upon even though you had a ship that was considered fairly high performance and a good contest winner just a few years before.

I knew this situation first-hand as I was in my late 20s at the time trying to raise a family and there was no way that I could possibly afford an empty composite airframe that cost twice as much as one of my built-up ships ready to fly with electronics.



Everyone ready and waiting to see what's in store (image: Glynis Hern)

As I watched the trend grow I saw more composite ships show up at the field, I also watched the clubs getting smaller and the attendance at contests start to drop dramatically until it became almost non-existent. Eventually, only a small handful of the elite still remained in the soaring club. We haven't seen soaring contests in this region for over a decade now.

Please don't get me wrong in thinking that I'm opposed to high performance composite gliders as I'm not and have a large number of them in my fleet. I'm just trying to describe what I have found to be some of the reasoning behind the declining participation in contest flying.

The big question is, what happened to the ability for an average RC soaring hobbyist to participate in contests? The majority of thermal duration contest

flying is F5J, F3J and F3K which are all world class levels of competition. The entry level costs to simply participate in these and even get a taste can be thousands of dollars. Even the fairly new F3RES class has some pretty specific gliders and strict set of rules to abide by making it a little difficult to get the 'normal' hobbyist involved.

All types of competitive sports have multiple tiers of participation, with the majority of them falling within the amateur realm and not using the premium equipment available. Why should RC soaring be any different? Why should the only available options be nothing but the most advanced, world class flying ships in the world? What about all the hobbyists out there that might like some new challenges?

After thinking about this for a few years I decided to finally do something about it. It was a bit of an experiment to confirm some of my thoughts and also had hopes that it might ignite some interest in thermal duration contests again.

I extended an invitation to quite a number of RC aviation enthusiasts that I know for an introductory thermal duration contest. It was a mix of powered pilots, glider pilots who had never flown in a contest before and some fairly new people to the hobby. All held on my friend's property, where we had lots of room.

The contest format was to bring any glider you have whether it was a pure glider or electric with no restrictions on size or wingspan. We also supplied a winch and hi-starts for launching which somewhat regulated their launch height. For the electrics the plan was to figure out the specific motor run time for each glider before the first round using a simple range finder to gauge their height so it was the same as the other launch systems. The task was set at three minutes with a spot landing task in a 15 meter circle.



Tom Link assessing the sky for the next round (image: Glynis Hern)

The response was better than I expected! Lots of guys had questions and some of them started dusting off old gliders that they've had sitting in the rafters for years with some even scooping up old gliders that people were selling.

The day finally came and we had around 10 excited guys show up ready to see what this was all about!

After getting everyone sorted and explaining what the tasks were and what they had to achieve, my friend Chris and I — who were the only experienced RC soaring contest pilots — then started getting everyone comfortable with the launching equipment. Most had never flown from a winch or even knew what the heck it was all about. I also talked everyone through some landing

strategies and some thermal tips.

Then it was time to start the rounds. We set the duration task fairly low so the group could make the task with just a little effort and have the ability to have the challenge of the landing points too. I could see that there was a few things that the guys had to workout during the first round but that was to be expected.

As more rounds were being flown they just got better and better. Amazingly enough the best round of the day was flown by a pilot that had never thermalled a glider before, never flew off a winch or hi-start and flies mostly power. With just a little verbal guidance he was able to stay in some lift, make the task and also the best landing points of the day.



Phil Dessureault with the best score of the day (image: Michael Berends)

The lift got better as the day progressed and we decided to increase the duration task challenging everyone that much more. Some were getting their first real thermal flights circling in lift climbing like homesick angels. They then faced with the new challenge of getting their glider down in time so they didn't lose any points exceeding the duration.

The best part of the day was seeing this group of guys with ear to ear grins, timing for each other and helping their friendly competitor do the best they can, the playful banter that was constantly in the air and the cheering that was heard when someone was coming into the landing circle! What a great thing to witness. In all honesty I found myself in a few emotional moments as it reminded me so much of the contests I attended in my younger years.

We also had some breaktime fun flying a variety of different things from DLG gliders to some electric foamies. I was able to capture some FPV footage of the action along with the beautiful place that my friend Chris let us use to host the event in the following video.

Intro Soaring Contest Breaktime

Breaktime FPV footage (video: Michael Berends)

It really turned out to be an amazing day and was well worth the effort. Chris Gregg did manage to get first place for the day. He was the only other experienced contest pilot and a great friend that I used to fly with in those contests back in the day. Second place went to Carey Keating who has been involved in RC for decades and has always had a love for soaring but had never flown from a winch or been in a contest before. Third place went to Tom Link who has also been involved in RC for decades but had never flown a contest before either.

I do have to give an honorable mention to my friend Christian Minardi who's enthusiasm for RC flying always brightens my day. His excitement knowing he made the duration task with everyone cheering him on as he approached

the landing circle was my best memory of the day, and gave him a 5th place standing overall. Congratulations to all of them!



Chris Gregg launching his Legion Air showing everyone how it's done. (image: Glynis Hern)

The amazing part of all of this is that before the day was half over, there was already a buzz in the air with people talking about how much fun they were having and the question of when I'm scheduling the next one?

The experiment worked! Average hobbyists were once again interested in contest flying which confirmed my thoughts. I knew that once they were able to try it that there would be interest. Not only were they interested but in the following weeks I was able to see what this introductory contest started in motion.

A couple of pilots are already getting F3RES ships. Some others are

modifying what they currently have to be better for contests. It also started a bit of a fever in a few others practicing the tasks in anticipation for the next contest. The word got out to other RC aviation enthusiasts in the area who have reached out also wondering when the next contest will be?

With the help of my friend Tom we decided to hold another contest before the season is over. We did put a cap on the amount of participants we could accommodate and we were quickly surprised by how many people were interested and wanted to participate which surpassed our limits. The idea is for this to grow so we have increased our capacity to accept all.

We went from no contests for over a decade to two contests within a couple of months with the interest and attendance escalating rapidly. I also have to add that none of the participants are from an RC soaring club. They have mostly come from powered flying clubs which means that the amount of local glider pilots is also increasing because of these contests.

With all this being said, I'm so happy to see this amount of interest has been sparked because I decided to see if there was still a place for basic contest flying. I strongly encourage you to host a small introductory contest in your area and get more people interested in this great way of flying! Friendly competition just makes everyone better pilots as it makes you fly with intention and challenges your skills.

Let's make it fun again and get more people involved. I'm sure that some of them will enjoy it so much that they will want to pursue it further and advance into the higher levels of competition helping the FAI participation blossom also. Lets change the trend and help competitive RC soaring grow.

That's it for this month. Wishing you nothing but good lift until next time!

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