

The Consistency Issue

Those of us who fly cross-country regularly will know about the problem of maintaining consistency. Coming up with a good, solid result, flight after flight is important, and if we choose to carry our efforts on into the competition arena, then this aspect of our performance is vital to our overall success. As is often heard around the traps, you can't win a competition in one day, but you sure can lose it! Winning a run of days is worthless if that is followed by one disaster, and all scoring formulae are based around this premise. In George Moffat's book, "Winning on the Wind", he wrote a wonderful chapter called "Winning by not losing". I have read many articles on various facets of other sports that follow this same philosophy, such as "Putting for the garbage bin lid instead of the hole" in golf.

I call this idea "The 95% rule". This came from a conversation with Andy Davis at the New Zealand World Comps. Andy is a long time member of the British team and a twice world champion, so it may be fair to say that he has some idea of what he is talking about. In a nutshell it means flying slightly back off the edge, not pushing at 100% all the time. The effects of this approach to our flying are manifold. It means that we fly in such a fashion that we do not need any luck – we don't have to have things fall our way to put in a good flight. It will mean that if we have luck run against us, that the results will not be disastrous.

In practical terms, what am I proposing? What decisions in flight will help our consistency? It is all about never placing yourself in a position where you have only one option left.

- Always look a very long way ahead for changes in the weather. Watching closely what is going on more than 40 or 50 kms ahead will mean that you are not caught out by a sudden change in conditions. Don't fly out under heavy high overcast and find yourself saying, "Oops, that was not very smart". Be ready to slow down and take the last good climb right up to cloudbase, before you have to set out into the gloom.
- Don't push so hard down to low level that you eventually have to take a really weak climb, just to survive. Quite often the most important climbs you decide to take, even on a very fast flight, are the slightly weaker ones that will keep you right up in the good air in the best working height band. Using a climb that is only 2/3 as strong as you have been using for a couple of thousand feet costs very little in time. You don't need to take it all the way to the top of convection, just take it as high as you need to in order that you again have more than one option. If you push on past that slightly weaker climb, you may indeed run into another strong one, but more likely as you descend into the super adiabatic layer you will be forced to use rubbish to stay afloat, and that will start to cost you dearly.
- Don't rely on the last cloud in a line to give you a climb. Some days have areas that are working higher under cumulus, and you can bet that if you push on low to the final cloud it will be finished by the time you arrive. If you are getting close to the end of good, reliable-looking lift, stop and use anything solid that will get you up to a safe working height, without trusting the last sign of good lift. Then if the last cloud does have a good thermal you can top

up in it, and if it doesn't, you may pat yourself on the back and keep motoring on with options up your sleeve.

- A situation that does not come about too often in Australia, but needs to be kept in mind, is the issue of "parking". It may happen that you are faced with a total lack of convection ahead, at least for the present, and to fly on will result in a certain outlanding. Looking far ahead will help you to decide when the only option is to wait for something to happen. Usually, once this decision has been made, the actual waiting process is simple, but if your mind is still in racing mode, you will be doomed. You may need to travel sideways to track to proceed, or simply to sit and wait. This is one of the most difficult decisions that I have personally faced when flying overseas, as we almost never see such techniques here. Remember this, if you are sitting in a paddock, you have certainly run out of options! While still afloat, there is a chance.
- Have your crew remind you as you close the canopy to simply shoot for a good, solid day. Aim for 900 points, not 1000. There is no need to do anything special; you can only do your best. The surprising thing is, if you operate this way, you keep yourself out of trouble and give yourself the best chance of winning the day too!

What does this flying at 95% feel like? This is an important thing to consider, as it is here we start to delve into the sports psychology aspects of competitive flying. "95% feels relaxed, it feels easy, and it feels as if we have plenty of time to make all our decisions. There is no need to rush, and it is as if the flight unfolds in front of us. If we fly so that we never have just one option left, then there is time to consider the next decision in a far more relaxed manner.

If you frequently find yourself saying, "If only I had taken that three knotter back there", or "I really need a climb right now", then it is a fair bet you are operating above your ability. You should not need to have luck on your side to put together a good flight. Believe me, I have been there! You may think that winning a day would be fun – you get to take home the wine and have the full attention of the briefing as you tell the world how you did it. But if this fun is interspersed with derigging practice, then you should consider relaxing and backing off the pressure on your skills and luck. 95% is a good place to be.

Work on some of your new skills for the rest of the season. Most of the competitions are over by now, but there is some lovely flying to be had through the autumn period from most sites in Australia.

Keep safe.