



Exploring Sports

An interview with a paraglider

INTRO

My name's David Snowdon, I'm a competition paraglider pilot, have been flying for a number of years, over ten, I fly at international level, fly in the British Paragliding Cups, in the national championships and in the Paragliding World Cup series. The majority of my training is done as a self-taught pilot as it were, having said that we do have occasional national coaches who bring in their expertise to assist us in various aspects of the sport.

I've been participating in paragliding for about fifteen years now, to which twelve or thirteen years of that has been to a competition level.

NUTRITION

From a diet point of view a good general diet is usually sufficient, generally good food: A good balance between proteins and carbohydrates. I tend to find when I move up to competition levels I start to move into a more carbohydrate based diet and try to build on that, the carbohydrate diet gives you a good release of energy over a period of time and it helps with muscular action. The weeks prior to the carbohydrate diet, you may build up on proteins just from a muscular point of view and a general physical build-up point of view.

Re-hydration is extremely important during the competitions, we're flying at altitude, we tend to lose a lot of body moisture. It's finding the balance between the amount of fluid intake and not allowing that to be a diuretic, because when flying at altitude of maybe 3-4000 metres for a period of 5 hours, you don't want to be in that situation. I think isotonic drinks are extremely important, especially in a competition situation because you're able to absorb the minerals into the body a lot faster rather than having just water or other fluids, just sat. We do tend to lose a lot of fluid through sweating or breathing and such like. It's a balance between the amount of fluid that you need to take in, and the amount of fluid that you'd like to take in and keeping that balance right always helps with the on-going flight.

COACHING & PERFORMANCE

There are various roles in terms of coaching in paragliding; at beginner level all the basics of aerodynamics are taught. These things become second nature to the pilot as they progress. Perhaps in the second or third season of paragliding the pilots may choose to run down to a competition level to which they are then given assistance within the competition, sometimes, being mentored by individual pilots or their friends who then show them more intricate development.

We tend to teach ourselves quite a lot at the upper level of the sport and we learn something new every day which is quite unique. It's not like a game of tennis as it were, where you're hitting the same ball over the net every day, the air is always different, things are always happening that are different, you're flying in different environments so there's always something very new to learn.

I tend to do all my own coaching; I think it's all about self-discipline. It's really a development and understanding and pulling out the bits that I need to know from the people around me and then applying it. It's that application that brings you up to the next level. I think on a general basis I'm quite tough on myself. You got to be able to recognise in yourself what is weak and then develop that so it becomes a strength.

I think from a trainer point of view, physical trainers aren't that necessary because basically we are a skills based sport with physical requirements so therefore we're able to utilise general physical fitness and if we need to improve on that we can do through general things

like cycling or weight training a little bit, so general good physical fitness is important but the skills levels are far more important.

The fittest you need to be for paragliding is when you're doing your initial training, mainly because there's a lot of top to bottom flights where the pilot will fly from the top of the hill to the bottom of the hill, walk back up the hill and then fly back down again. Now this carrying probably between 10-20kgs of weight on his back and he's climbing maybe a hill of 500ft. You do that ten times a day and you've done 5000ft of altitude and strangely enough the fitness comes and is derived from there. When you're actually then going into a normal paragliding environment when you're doing general training you can get away with not being fantastically fit. Then you move onto the competition aspect of it and the physical then develops into the mental side of it.

There's a tremendous amount of self-psychology, self-understanding, when you're actually flying in, say, an Alpine environment against steep rock faces, maybe 1000ft high and you're scratching very tight to them trying to get up in a thermal, you understand the psychology of it... if you allow fear to override your decisions, you're actually making bad decisions. Having said that, the fear aspect can be the safety belt as it were, if you understand that, if you come across a fear situation then you're actually flying out of the comfort zone and you shouldn't be in the environment that you're in.

There are various qualities that make a good paraglider pilot, things like tenacity, skill levels obviously; understanding of various parts of the requirements of a paraglider pilot such as aerodynamics, thermic activity, meteorology, changes in weather patterns and such like... and a pilot develops himself from that.

MOTIVATION

I came into the paragliding in my early 30's and that followed on from mountaineering. I've been a solo sportsman for a number of years participating in things like windsurfing and mountaineering and rock climbing, where maybe you're on your own or with a partner, and similarly with paragliding, we tend to be either flying our own or with one or two other people.

Some of the benefits of being out there on your own are because you're actually making your own decisions you make your own rules for the day. Having said that, from a competition point of view you tend to be driven by the gaggle; the group of pilots flying together. But... again you're flying as an individual so you've got to make your own decisions and hopefully the gaggle are making the similar sort of decisions.

The sport is actually a 24/7 sport mainly because of the build-up. In the flying season we're always looking at the weather, we're always making sure that we're ready to go, we're reorientating work schedules, and we're reorientating our lives in fact to be there on the day. Time is not a linear thing in paragliding; it's all about the weather.

The sport generally is not that expensive if you compare it to something like motor sports and such like, the actual costs of the rig and the equipment costs in the region of about £3,000, if you bought new, having said that, to go through the actual training would cost probably in the region of £2,000 to get you into a position where you're going to be a solo pilot.

The motivation comes from being able to pull together various different skills, understanding weather, meteorology, thermic activity, how the air works, what rising air's all about, how it works in the dynamic environment of mountains, small hills or flat lands. All these various aspects make it very intriguing as being an adventure sport as well as something which you might consider to be intellectual even.

It's an individual sport and the benefits are personal really. To win is not necessarily to get across the line first, to win is to get to goal, to achieve what was set by people who are probably wiser or more understanding of the particular area you're flying in....So there is a tremendous amount of return from being able to be out there doing it in these competition environments where people have been graded to get to those competitions and you're actually then comparing yourself with your peers, not necessarily out there to beat them but to fly with them.

I've got very little out of paragliding in material terms, it's cost me a fortune, and over ten years of paragliding it's cost me about £100,000. You're not in it for the money, there is no drive and motivation from that point of view but the returns from a personal and experience point of view are amazing.

Following the sport and what the sport can bring has taken me around the world four times, and there is still yet more to explore, it's a fantastic return, in terms of life. I think I'll probably continue paragliding as long as my leg's will stand it and I do know there are pilots out in the paragliding world who are in their nineties and who still fly, maybe a rare occurrence but why not, we can fly until there is no more air left.