

Lessons I've learned in my first few competitions

By Tim O'Neill (Duffer PG pilot)

So, this is your first comp? Or maybe it's your tenth and, like me, you are tired of filling out the last half of the results? The only way to improve is to set reasonable goals and critique your mistakes. I've flown 5 major comps now, most on DHV 1/2 and DHV 2 wings and have learned many valuable lessons that I would like to pass along. These lessons will add to your enjoyment, help you identify your mistakes, and hopefully, help you improve your performance.

First – SET REALISTIC GOALS

My goals are, in order of importance:

1. **Get to goal consistently.** If you don't get to goal consistently your score will suffer. Racing to the dirt is a frustrating way to spend your day. Besides, there is often beer at goal – need I say more? If you ever feel like you are embarking on a death glide, look for alternatives that will buy you time and allow others to catch you so they can aid in the search for lift.
2. **Make Good Starts.** There are few things more exhilarating than being in an ideal position and at the top of the stack when the start bell rings. Practice makes perfect. Ask guys how they judge their starts. Conversely, if your start is bad it's not the end of the world. Better to leave late and high than be the low guy in the valley for that first crossing after the start.
3. **Never get Low – Or Fly Alone.** Remember, these are goals. Stuff Happens. But I can tell you this – If you find yourself alone AND low, you are in very bad shape. Increase your odds of making goal by staying with the gaggle, even if that means slowing down a bit to allow the gaggle to form at the top of the thermal. This is one example where going slow to go faster is the way to fly.
4. **Make Smart Choices.** This is last, but not least important. Consider this caveat to be all-encompassing. Don't fly anywhere or in conditions you wouldn't on a free flight. If you think it's unsafe, fix the situation. Getting parked or rotored just isn't worth it. The Rat Race is one of the most safety oriented comps you'll ever fly in but YOU are the only person responsible for your safety. Do a good job so your loved ones can enjoy your stories when you get home.

I have learned some lessons by screwing the pooch on some tasks. Here are some of the lessons I've learned the hard way so you don't have to.

Be ready to launch early. Then Launch early.

Get your gear ready before you get to the hill – Clear your track logs. Have your tape ready to copy the task route. Lay out & organize your kit. BE READY TO FLY BEFORE THE TASK IS CALLED.

I launch at least 35 minutes before, and usually 50 minutes before the start. I am now confident that I can stay in the air if anyone can. This confidence allows me to sample the air, explore the start cylinder for lift, and try to make my own start rather than get caught low in the gaggle at the start.

Get a GOOD START

As stated above - A big lesson I learned is that being with the leaders, but being low-man, as you cross the valley is not as competitive as being behind and high. Go fast by slowing down if the climbs haven't come at the right time.

Stay with the Gaggle.

It's not easy to stay with the lead gaggle but you MUST try. If you get dropped, the second gaggle is an excellent place to be. It is easy to drop back (actually let them catch up) to the 2nd gaggle and be the 'high-guy' when they get to your thermal. It is sometimes amazing how close the second gaggle is (in time) to the leaders when getting to goal. Remember, getting to goal is the goal. Often, the leaders race themselves into the ground, allowing the next batch of gliders to tip-toe through the weak patch & make goal.

Don't get low - or alone.

The worst moments are the desperate last ten minutes of flights where you find yourself low & alone. Without help, the chances of finding a low save are very small. **It's all about making high probability decisions. - Even bold moves must be done with good odds.** It's like playing poker & knowing all the odds - Going all-in looks bold to someone who doesn't realize the hands showing are in your favor 75% to 25%. Don't ever get impatient and go on a death glide. Look for better odds & take your time.

Don't Give up - Until it's time to give up.

At my first Rat Race I crossed the goal line so late that the beer was gone & I almost missed the last bus to HQ. I made two extremely low saves and had a solo epic flight that I'll never forget. The fact that I finished 90 minutes after the leaders didn't faze me in the least. Don't give up! Keep on flying.

On the other hand. . .

On the last task of the WCPC, I had goal *almost made*. I glided into Boaz Peak low, hoping to get to the 1k circle, get a bit of lift, and then glide into the goal cylinder 1.75k (about a mile) away. As it turned out, I turned away from the 1k cylinder with 250 meters to go because I was heading downwind, into steeply rising terrain, in crap air, and I heard my inner voice say, **"Tim - You are not going to get extra attention from the ladies, or rich, or famous, if you make this turnpoint - Do what's smart & fly the jet."** So I did what I knew I should, turned & made a safe landing, on my terms, in a nice field. No fame, but I get to fly another day. If I'd pushed it, I might have made goal, and the additional points would have put me in 26th place overall, instead of 29th. Worth it when the down-side was ugly? Nope. . .

We fly these crazy things to have fun – SO HAVE FUN. Look for improvement and insight, so the next comp you enter will be even more fun than this one was.