

REPORT ON THE 1st FAI WORLD SAILPLANE GRAND PRIX

Held in Saint Auban 2-11 September 2005

1. Organisation

The organising staff comprised about 20 persons. Since a Grand Prix is relatively simple to organise, this proved to be sufficient.

The facilities of Saint Auban are nearly perfect for such events, since there are enough accommodation possibilities in the Centre. The centre also has enough tow planes, computer material, and a workshop. The heart of the competition was in the hangar, where almost everything took place.

It is to be noted that it was possible for all gliders to be parked in the hangar next to the briefing hangar. The organisers also provided a handheld ELT to each pilot.

2. Participation

Due to the withdrawal of three pilots, the total entry was reduced to 17. Nevertheless, the level of the pilots was fairly high since 5 World Champions or ex World Champions were competing and three out of the top ten pilots in the IGC ranking list were present. It is to be noticed that several pilots had no crew and found assistance on the site. The organisers are grateful to the pilots for their understanding and collaboration. They all agreed to modify the rules in order to improve safety during starts and finishes, made many valuable suggestions based on their experience in-flight and sent their feedback after the competition (see attached document)

3. Time schedule

The length of the event seems to be the right one. It appears necessary to have two official training days (or, "test days" in the GP language) before the competition, in order to accustom the pilots to the new start procedure and to train the organisation team. Competition flying was scheduled from Sunday 4 to Sunday 11 (inclusive) with an air show during the two last days. It was, nevertheless, very difficult to organise the prize giving ceremony after a flying day (see below). We therefore recommend concluding the competition flying on Saturday, holding the farewell party on Saturday evening and the prize giving ceremony on Sunday morning as in most competitions. This would allow most pilots to leave soon enough to be at work on the Monday. The air show could be organised during the competition (on Saturday) or after the championship (on Sunday afternoon).

4. Weather

As usual at World Championships, the weather was most unusual. There had been almost no rain during the 6 months preceding the event, and many farmers were close to committing suicide but all the missing water fell during the competition week. The met man and the task setter (who were the same as 97) made the best of this poor weather and we had 5 valid competition days. Even if most tasks were small, and would have been heavily devalued in a conventional competition, the met man and the task setter are to be congratulated for this achievement.

5. Aerotows

In such a competition, it is important that all pilots are launched at about the same time. The 16 gliders were mainly launched to 1000 m AGL in less than 20 minutes by 6 tow planes. On the last day, 9 tugs even launched everybody within 12 minutes. This was only possible because each glider had its own towrope provided by the organisation. Despite relatively poor weather conditions, no relight was necessary during the event

6. Start Procedure

The start line was opened 20 minutes after the release of the last glider (and not 15 min after the last take-off, as written in the rules). This worked satisfactorily but it may be possible to reduce the time to 15 min after the last release. The competition director also decided to open the line even if pilots are unable to achieve the nominal start altitude or if some of them land back before the opening. In his opinion the only reason for not opening the start line should be a major degradation of the weather conditions really compromising safety.

During the two first days, we used the procedure tested successfully in Saint Auban in 2003 (the pilots had to stay behind the start line below the start altitude for two minutes). However, we soon realised that some pilots were diving at very high speed just before the 2 minutes not to lose too much energy during the 2 minutes. With the agreement of all pilots, we changed the rule, requesting that pilots simply cross the start line (after the opening) below a maximum altitude (generally 1000M AGL) and below a maximum ground speed (170 km/h). According to all pilots (see the feedback), this procedure was reasonably safe. Most pilots, however, believe that it would be better not to increase the number of competitors beyond 20. In order to prevent pilots from losing too much altitude before the start, if there is no lift immediately behind the start line, we also proposed to reduce the 2 minutes during which the pilots have to be behind the line to 1min. but the pilots had mixed feelings about this suggestion.

The pilots also agreed to reduce the length of the start line to 4km in order to make them more visible from the ground. The centre of this line was at the tower but the gliders would have been more visible if it had been located at the briefing hall.

7. Circling to the left

On some days, it could be seen from the ground that not all pilots comply with the obligation to circle to the left within 5km of the airfield. Most pilots believe we should keep this requirement before the start but delete it afterwards and that the normal rules of the air should then apply.

8. Monofrequency

To prevent team flying, and also to prevent people on the ground from sending information from the tracking system to the pilots, we propose to use a "monofrequency" (sealing the radio button on a single frequency). A majority of pilots seem to be in favour of this proposal.

9. Finishes

During the first days, some pilots dived after the last mandatory reporting point located on a small hill and flew in ground effect above the houses of St Auban. On day 2, one pilot crossed the finish line at low altitude and very high speed, but realising that he would be penalised, attempted to land directly and made a ground loop at high speed. Fortunately, the pilot was not injured but the glider was damaged. After this accident, we decided to set an altitude limit between the mandatory reporting point and a line located approx. 1.2 km from the finish line.

To get a more precise evaluation of glider altitude on the finish line we also installed a camera at the height of the roof of the hangar, on a metallic tower. Pictures of all finishes were recorded in order to document any penalties for finishes at too low altitude. All this resulted in safer flying during the rest of the competition.

10. Replacement of damaged gliders

The Rules used at the Grand Prix allow a damaged glider to be replaced. We feel that this is giving a wrong message about safety and propose to prohibit such replacement by using the same wording than in Annex A. (This has been modified in the GP Rules issued in November)

11. Scoring

The scoring, based on a daily time scoring (with time penalties) and an overall place scoring, worked well. However, the place scoring used created some dissatisfaction among the pilots. Very small differences in time (or in distance, in the case of outlandings) sometimes resulted in a very large difference in points. Finally, this kind of scoring was very harsh for pilots who received no points at all. Some pilots would prefer an Accumulated Time Scoring system giving a time ranking like at the Tour de France. Another possibility would be to stick to place scoring but to give points only to the 9 first finishers. (This is the choice which has been made for the GP Rules issued in November)

12. European Sailplane Exhibition and Air show

In order to increase the number of spectators, a European Sailplane Exhibition with an air show was organised during the last weekend. This attracted about 1000 spectators on the field, half of them being estimated to be glider pilots as FFVV had sent 6000 personal invitations to their members. The participation of most manufacturers in the gliding exhibition definitely showed that there is room for such an event in Europe. The FFVV intends therefore to organise this exhibition every two years. During the air show, several interesting demonstrations took place (electric-powered motor glider Antares, microlight motor gliders, electrical winch, microlights with aerotowing capabilities) showing all the latest trends in gliding. More conventional displays of glider aerobatics, formation flying by three open class gliders flying to music, wonderful old-timers and large-scale glider aeromodels were also part of the show. This demonstrated that a spectacle centred on gliding might be of interest for a large public. Of course, this air show also took a lot of interest away from the Grand Prix and from the tracking, but the fact that some people reproached us that there was too much to see is a rather a compliment for us. Nevertheless, in the future, it will probably be better to have some animation taking place during the time gliders from the GP are away, without conferring an air show format on these demonstrations.

13. Prize giving Ceremony

On the last Sunday, despite the task being very short, all but one glider landed out, so that we had to wait for the flight recorders before establishing the final ranking. Since we also had to comply with the required 2-hours protest time, the time schedule became very tight. Finally, we managed to hold the Prize giving and Closing Ceremony on time, because all pilots agreed to reduce the protest time to one hour.

14. Complaints and protests

There were no protests and only one, non-written, complaint. The protest time after publication of the unofficial scoring should revert to 24H, to give sufficient time to the pilots and team captains to study the results (in our opinion, this problem also exists in conventional championships).

15. Tracking

The tracking worked well. We had only ten tracking units, which were allocated by drawing lots on the first competition day and to the 10 first pilots in the overall ranking for the other days. (In the future, the boxes should be allocated as a function of the ranking during the last official training). These boxes were hand made prototypes because the final units will only be delivered at the beginning of next year, due to availability problems with an electronic chip. Setting up the system is not that easy but fortunately a technician from vPos assisted us.

The pictures were displayed on a large screen in the briefing hangar and commented live. Simultaneously, screenshots were taken every 30 seconds and displayed on Internet. An attempt was also made to send video pictures of the tracking on Internet but this did not work, the connection in Saint Auban being too slow to allow broadcasting videos of sufficient quality.

The pictures were selected by the commentator in such a way as to display alternatively 2D (map views with 3D pictures taken from the inside or from the outside of the glider). Unfortunately, there was no separate sound system in the briefing hall from outside. Thus, during the air show, the comments about tracking were often covered by the air show commentator. It is also to be noted that the optimal selection of the pictures needs perfect knowledge of how to use the Silent Wings Viewer, as well as some video producer skill. In the future, it would be useful to have two screens, one permanently showing the position of the gliders on a 2D map, and another one showing 3D pictures from the inside or the outside of the gliders. It would also be desirable to send live comments on the tracking to the net, either by typing the comments or sending them per audio.

It is to be noted that some presidents of other air sports federations (microlights, paragliders) were present in Saint Auban and were impressed by the possibilities of the tracking system. There are probably other markets for the team who developed the system.

16. Website

A special effort was devoted to our website (<http://www.cnvv.net/wsgp/>). News was sent live during the competition. Tracking pictures, videos, and an interesting dynamic flight visualisation provided by the German company IDU mbH Zittau were also available. The site was visited by more than 23000 people and attracted a lot of positive feedback, which can be still found on the site.

17. Media Response

There were only a few articles in the newspaper. The only major newspaper reporting the Grand Prix was the well-known French daily, "Le Monde". This poor result is due to a lack of involvement of the FFVV's PR working group who failed, perhaps, to recognize the scope of the event. This is probably the major flaw we had during the Grand Prix.

18. Video

The organisers had signed an agreement with the Hong Kong Company, *Leading Edge*, who intend to produce a 28-min. commercial video to be sold to international TV Channels. Two people from Leading Edge came to St Auban at their own cost and took footage during the training period and during the competition. We are looking forward to seeing this product because, judging from some of the pictures, we could see that this video should be a fantastic tool for promoting the Grand Prix, Saint Auban and Gliding in general.

19. Feedback from the competitors

The feedback from the competitors (which can be downloaded here: <http://www.cnvv.net/wsgp/en/accueil-en.htm>) is very positive. Obviously, they had fun and believe this kind of competition has a future.

20. Conclusion

Even if all was not perfect, we hope that this 1st FAI World Sailplane Grand Prix has set a milestone in gliding. We have demonstrated that a gliding competition does not have to be boring for outsiders. We are convinced that we now have a product we can sell to the media and to potential sponsors. It is up to us to develop the concept and to strengthen its base.

R.Stuck
Competition Director
25 September 2005