

From: Max Bishop, Jury President, 16<sup>th</sup> European Gliding Championships, Pociunai  
Tel/Fax: +41 21 728 6442 Email: [maxbishop.lausanne@gmail.com](mailto:maxbishop.lausanne@gmail.com)

Bob Henderson  
IGC President

## REPORT ON POCIUNAI EUROPEAN CHAMPIONSHIPS

Please find enclosed:

- Report by Jury President to IGC President (Appendix D to Jury Members' Handbook).
- Protest from Belgium, together with Event Director's reply to the original complaint, and the Jury's response to the protest.

I have deposited at the FAI Secretariat, for safe-keeping in the archives, a file containing the full results and all the documentation concerning the Championships (task sheets, met briefings etc). Also, I have arranged for the FAI to receive a full photographic record of the event.

I enjoyed seeing old friends and catching up on news. Because we only had one protest, I was very under-employed, and this gave me plenty of time to observe and reflect. You already saw the suggestions for amendments to Section 3, Annex A, which reflected the views of all Jury Members and Stewards. It was instructive for me to become involved again in international gliding after a gap of over 20 years (having only done occasional Opening and Closing Ceremonies during my time as FAI Sec Gen). Here below are a few other comments, which are from me alone and may not have wide support. They concern in particular various aspects of what I see as the same big issue, namely how the gliding community interacts with the world at large. If the comments seem a bit negative and critical, this is only because I am worried about the long-term sustainability of competitive soaring, and hope that an "outsider's" view may help you. I want to emphasize that none of what follows should be interpreted as critical of the Lithuanian organisers, who all did an excellent job, fully respecting the Sporting Code rules.

### General impressions.

My first impression was how little had changed. It was like entering a time-warp bubble, cut off from developments in the outside world. The contest still lasted 3 weeks, including practice days. The way of flying the tasks was, to all intents and purposes, still pretty much the same as a generation ago – pilot-selected start times, same old incomprehensible scoring system, long wait to get the final results because of the 14-hour protest period. All the significant changes (AATs, start and finish rings, absence of high-speed finishes) were brought about by the introduction of GNSS data-loggers and none did anything at all to improve the attractiveness of the sport to on-lookers, rather the opposite.

Second, there seemed to be a high level of agreement amongst pilots and officials that Championships were for those competing, not for anyone else, and that the Grand Prix events took care of the need for the gliding community to reach out to the general public.

From: Max Bishop, Jury President, 16<sup>th</sup> European Gliding Championships, Pociunai  
Tel/Fax: +41 21 728 6442 Email: [maxbishop.lausanne@gmail.com](mailto:maxbishop.lausanne@gmail.com)

Third, there was evidence of an astonishingly widespread attitude that accidents only really mattered if there was death or injury. “Mere” material damage, even if write-offs, were just “broken plastic”, and that was a problem only for the pilot/owner concerned, according to the commonly-held view.

#### Public relations.

A casual visitor to these Championships would have found it even more difficult to understand what was going on than would his father a quarter-century ago. Then at least there was generally a big banner at the entrance to the site proclaiming the title of the event. There was usually a large, physical score-board on which results were posted so that bystanders could follow the fortunes of their favourites. And a large map on which pins were displayed as out-landing reports came in. It wasn't terribly exciting, but at least there was something to look at! All that has disappeared in favour of (rather unreliable) electronic display of tracking information and a website that is controlled neither by IGC nor by the organisers - <http://www.soaringspot.com/about/>. In the event, this did not much matter in Lithuania because it was quite a remote site and the public only came (in large numbers) on an evening when a concert by a well-known Lithuanian musical group had been arranged in the hangar. But I do think that IGC could lay down in its guidelines for organisers some minimal requirements to ensure that any visitors to the event know approximately what is going on and how competitive gliding works. It doesn't need great expenditure – just a few standard display panels (such as we had for the FAI Centenary) that can be printed out locally by each organiser, plus some kind of system for conveying basic information on the overall progress of the event to visitors.

#### Class structure.

A straw poll indicates that even the world's (or at least Europe's) best competitive glider pilots are totally incapable of telling you who all the reigning World Champions are in the different classes. So if Championships are just for the pilot community to know who is best, they ain't working! It's pretty obvious to everyone that there are far too many competitive classes and that there is no logical explanation for why they are needed – only an historical explanation of how they came into being. The difference in average task lengths in the three flapped classes was really quite small. The total task lengths flown by each class during the whole competition were:

15m: 2 917 km  
18m: 3 059 km  
Open: 3 196 km

So there's less than 10% difference between 15m and Open. If you compare speeds achieved, the insignificance of the differences between classes is even more striking. Taking the three really classic racing days we had (3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Aug), the combined average speeds of the winners over those three days were:

15m: 123.7 km/h  
18m: 128.9 km/h  
Open: 128.7 km/h

Given these figures, I can only imagine the difficulties a national federation applying for funding support from their government or national sports authority would encounter if they

From: Max Bishop, Jury President, 16<sup>th</sup> European Gliding Championships, Pociunai  
Tel/Fax: +41 21 728 6442 Email: [maxbishop.lausanne@gmail.com](mailto:maxbishop.lausanne@gmail.com)

were trying to justify separate subsidies for 15m, 18m and Open classes... There is not even a satisfactory answer to an obvious question an intelligent outsider would ask: "Is the Open Class Champion the best of all?" Here's a simple initial suggestion: World Championships only in 18m and Standard Classes. Other classes: Continental Championships only. The ultimate goal: one World Championship only, in one class. (I know, I'm dreaming! But really the status quo is indefensible for anyone who looks at it objectively. The number of classes has been increasing at a time when the total number of glider pilots has been declining.)

### Safety.

We broke three gliders in Pociunai, two Standard Class and one Nimbus 4dm. All three could well be write-offs. I would guess that the total value of these gliders must be between 300K and 400K EUR. That's over ten times IGC's annual expenditure, at least three times IGC's total reserves and about a third of the FAI's annual turnover. Yet these losses seem to generate scarcely a ripple amongst the competitors. The mantra is "*nobody hurt, therefore not important*". People seem to ignore or forget that these accidents:

- will probably have an adverse effect on insurance premiums, thereby driving still higher the overall costs of gliding for everybody,
- will very likely receive media coverage, tending to reinforce the idea in the public mind that gliding is a dangerous, elite sport for rich people, and
- may involve local accident investigation/civil aviation authority officials, whose views of gliding will be influenced negatively – especially when they see the kind of fields that two of the Pociunai pilots were trying to land in (officials from both Poland and Lithuania were involved in the Pociunai accidents, so we scored negatively in two countries).

It is obvious that accidents, even when there are no injuries, are good news only for glider repairers. So what more could be done? Quite a lot in my opinion. Attention has quite properly focused in recent years on improving survivability (energy-absorbing cushions, reinforced cockpits, whole-aircraft recovery systems etc). The "Safety Pays" initiative rewards pilots for installing safety features in their gliders. Those efforts must obviously continue and be reinforced. I may be entirely wrong but I don't see as much attention being directed at finding new ways of preventing accidents (the human factors angle). It seems to be accepted wisdom in the community that "boys will be boys", people will push their luck and accept high levels of risk to win, and that's life. But that assumes that nothing can be done to change this state of affairs. Here are some simple measures that, in my view would have a positive effect on the contest accident rate:

- Devote three or four times more time to discussions on safety at IGC meetings, thereby sending the message to delegates, pilots and manufacturers that improving safety is absolutely IGC's top priority and that broken gliders DO matter.
- Put in place a formal accident evaluation procedure. I was astonished that there is not likely to be any evaluation of the possible lessons to be learnt from the accidents we had in Lithuania. Obviously, we cannot replicate the scientific investigations of properly resourced and expert accident investigation authorities. But we can, for instance, impound the data-logger traces of pilots who have accidents in FAI competitions, and examine them in conjunction with Google Earth, to see if they were flying dangerously (e.g. too low over unlandable terrain, as seems to have been the case in Pociunai). Armed with the results of this analysis, the pilots involved (and witnesses if any) can, if appropriate, be formally interviewed. In other words, it must become clear to all pilots that IGC takes ALL accidents very seriously and does something formal about them. At the moment, precisely nothing

happens, even though I am virtually certain that an element of culpability was present in at least two of the Pociunai cases. Far from being made to feel shame, I had the feeling that there was even enhanced sympathy for the pilots concerned – because they had survived a close call... and “there but for the grace of God go I”.

- Accident evaluation could also include an obligation on crew-members or contest organisers not to touch a badly damaged glider until a comprehensive set of photographs had been taken of the wreckage and the field and its approaches. In the case in Poland involving a Swiss glider, the crew even tried to disobey the local police who had told them that the wreckage could not be touched until the government accident investigators had visited the site. This fact is reported on the Swiss gliding federation’s website (for those who read German): <http://sfvs.wp.tracklog.ch/?p=1156> (10 Aug 2011). The tone of this report is quite typical of what seems to be the prevailing attitude: “Who do these people think they are, wasting my time and stopping me from taking my property away?” The notion that a major accident may become a matter of public, not just private, interest is absent from the thinking. The photos taken of crash sites could be used for educational purposes, and even in extreme cases for taking IGC action against a pilot who had repeatedly flown too dangerously (e.g. “naming and shaming”; ban on participation in FAI contests).

- Given that we have access to the data-logger traces of all pilots flying in FAI Championships, it should be quite easy and inexpensive (as Visa-Matti Leinikki confirmed to me) to develop a piece of software that analyses these traces for the levels of risk taken by competition pilots. When pilots are identified who are consistently flying at an excessively high level of risk, they can be first warned, then penalised, and finally banned if necessary. The notion has to be implanted in people’s heads that when they are flying in one of our competitions, they are responsible for up-holding the reputation of IGC, FAI, and the entire gliding community, not just their own reputation.

- Task setting. After the accident to the Polish pilot, the Organiser reminded pilots at the following day’s briefing that they had been warned at the beginning of the contest about the difficulty of finding suitable fields in the area in which he had landed. IGC could issue much more specific instructions to task setters, requiring that they only set tasks where the terrain along the track is such as to ensure that competitors will remain within gliding range of a landable area (given the day’s forecast wind velocities) provided that they stay above a reasonable height. Going one stage further, GNSS data-loggers allow organisers to create “competition prohibited airspace”. If the contest area includes, for example, a large forest (as was frequently the case in Lithuania), or some other area of unlandable terrain, then that forest or area could be covered by a “flat-cone”-shaped area of prohibited airspace, with appropriate penalties for incursion. The prohibited airspace would be shaped to ensure that if you stay out of it, you should be within reach of a decent field to land in.

- Championship site selection. It is obvious that the selection of a Championship site has big implications for safety. The next European Championships are at Vinon. The great scope for major accidents there is well-known. Experienced mountain pilots will have an enormous advantage. The fundamental difference between flat-land and mountain contests has been talked about for decades (at least since the first Rieti Worlds in 1984), but the system for selecting sites has not changed. We wait passively for bids to arrive, and then we put them to a popular vote in plenary, based – amongst other things – on last-minute presentations. A safe site with a dull presenter can easily lose out to a dangerous site with a lively speaker. And all kinds of vested interests come into play. Instead, the IGC Bureau should decide which are the best sites for World and Continental Championships (weather, terrain, quality of organisation etc) and then solicit bids from those sites, providing central support as necessary.

From: Max Bishop, Jury President, 16<sup>th</sup> European Gliding Championships, Pociunai  
Tel/Fax: +41 21 728 6442 Email: [maxbishop.lausanne@gmail.com](mailto:maxbishop.lausanne@gmail.com)

And this brings me to my most radical suggestion:

**Matters of safety in general, and contest site selection in particular, are too important to be left to popular democratic votes.**

Instead, the principles of parliamentary democracy should apply. The people (in this case IGC delegates) elect their representatives (IGC Bureau Members). These representatives are chosen because of their special abilities and expertise. They should then be allowed to make decisions. If the plenary does not like those decisions they can change the Bureau.

As we all know, the gliding movement is an immensely conservative body. All the suggestions I have made are most unlikely to be adopted in popular votes because the people voting are generally those who have done very nicely using the present system, and see no imperative to change. But the world has changed, enormously, these last decades, and a reluctance to change with it can only mean one thing, long-term: further decline.

Finally, let me make a small observation about something which, for me, encapsulates why the IGC Bureau needs to seize the initiative and take hard decisions on important matters without putting them to the popular vote. I understand that the simplified scoring system, which had been in Section 3 as an alternative to the 1000-point system, has been removed, because no Championship organiser had opted to use it. Well, they wouldn't, would they? Why should they? They know it would be unpopular with pilots and that IGC would be unlikely to bring pressure to bear on them to use it. So of course they opt to stick to the familiar, trusty old system that they are so used to. Removing the option of the simplified system from the Sporting Code is not just a retrograde step; it's a clear signal to the gliding community that IGC reflects opinion, and does not seek to mould it. I believe that should change.

Again, my apologies if all this comes across as a bit critical – I don't want to play the role of Cassandra – but I am sure you would want me to describe things as I saw them. I won't be the least offended if you decide to delete and forget this report!

Looking forward to seeing you in Belgrade.

Kind regards,

Max



18 August 2011