

CHAPTER NINE: CONTEST FLYING



So. You've read the book. You've practiced for hundreds of hours and you know you've got the maneuvers down "pat". In other words, you think you're a pretty "hot" stunt kite pilot.

Ready to find out how you shape up against the competition??

Stunt kite contests are now being held at hundreds of organized events around the country and around the world. Like many sports, competition standards will vary tremendously depending on the scope and seriousness of the event. Some contests are strictly for fun. Some are informal, and some are conducted according to detailed rules and with large money prizes and national "titles" at stake. Brace yourself ...

In this chapter, we're going to talk about the contests that are run according to internationally accepted rules. We'll tell you what specific events are being flown and give you some hints that will add a few points to your score.

If you're ready for events run "by the rules", you'll be ready for anything. Your self-confidence, practice, and ability will prepare you for almost any kind of competition you're likely to encounter.

A common rule book for stunt kite competition has now been adopted by the American Kitefliers Association (AKA) for use in the USA, by Stunt Team and Competitive Kiting (STACK) for use in Europe, Australia and New Zealand, and by the All Japan Sport Kite Association (AJSKA) in Japan. Each country hosts a series of events which lead to national titles for individuals and teams. National champions then gather each year for an international competition.

For a copy of the AKA/STACK/AJSKA Rule Book, write to the American Kitefliers Association at 352 Hungerford Drive, Rockville Maryland 20850-4117 USA.

LEVELS OF COMPETITION

The important thing to remember about contests is that, except at the most informal events, contestants are divided into categories based on their experience and ability. You won't have to fly against the "experts" until you've demonstrated that you're ready and able. So relax!

Think of your first competition as an opportunity to learn. Talk to the judges. Ask lots of questions. Find out what you did wrong and also what you did right.

Remember, it's your job to know the rules and your job to be in the right place at the right time. Stay informed about what's going on around you. Ask questions if you're unsure. Missing your turn is just like "blowing" a maneuver. You have no one to blame but yourself.

"Competitive Fever" -- That's what you get when you first step onto the contest flying field. You can practice for hours and be REALLY good. But step out in front of a crowd and judges, and suddenly you start acting like a rank amateur and do some of the dumbest things!

The best way to cure competitive fever is to COMPETE. Some people never get over the stage fright - but the more you compete, the less it bothers you.

Al Hargus III
Chicago, Illinois

Here is a breakdown on the different categories or classes of flyers:

Novice — A competition beginner who has not won or placed in previous events or does not feel ready to compete in a higher class. Many large scale stunt kite events do not include a Novice competition.

Intermediate -- For flyers who have won or placed in Novice or feel ready to compete at a higher level.

Experienced — Flyers who have competition experience, good mastery of flying techniques and a higher skill level than the majority of Intermediate flyers.

Masters -- For competitors who have won events in lower classes and feel that they have the necessary skills and experience to compete among the very best.

Open — Open to all flyers, regardless of the classes that they fly in other events.

Teams — Teams comprised of flyers with mixed skill levels are ranked by averaging. A three person team with two Experienced and one Masters flyer may fly Experienced Class; a three person team with one Experienced and two Masters flyers must fly Masters Class. If equal numbers of flyers have the same skill level the team competes in the higher class.

Generally speaking, competitors have the option of moving "up" at any time. But once you compete at a higher level, you have to stay there.

Flyers can compete at the same level throughout an entire competition season. But if they place first, second, or third, three or more times in a year, they have to move to the higher classification at the beginning of the next season.

When gearing up for that big event, work out all the details of your routine, and work on that routine in all wind conditions. Remember, contests aren't always held in perfect wind.

Put your ideas on paper, and refer to the diagrams frequently. "Plan your fly, and fly your plan." Rehearse until you know the routine by heart. Rehearse until you impress yourself! But also allow some degree of flexibility for those unfortunate and unforeseen circumstances.

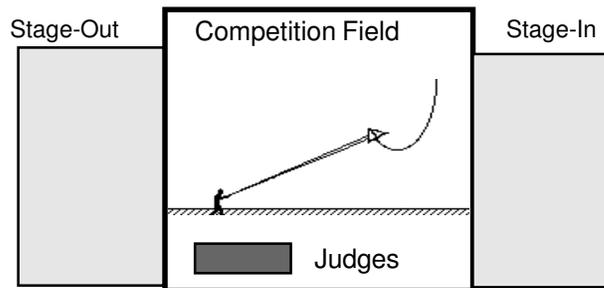
Bob Hanson
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HOW A COMPETITION WORKS

Stunt kite competitions are conducted on marked flying fields. Boundaries are outlined to give the competitors plenty of clear and open space to perform and to keep spectators safely outside the flying area. Individuals or teams then come onto the field in a pre-arranged order to perform.

The most efficiently run contests rely on a "Stage-In" Field, a "Competition" Field and a "Stage-Out" Field. Some also provide a practice area.



Flyers set-up and launch on the Stage-In field, move to the Competition field when they are called, and then move off to the Stage-Out field and land after their performance. This process reduces the time used for set-up during a contest and keeps things moving along. Competition fields are usually 200-300 feet square.

Whatever event you enter, be it Team, Individual Ballet, Precision, or whatever, you HAVE TO do it inside the boundaries of the contest field. The size of the field may vary at different contests, but the rules are -- if you go out of bounds, you get disqualified.

It doesn't matter if the winds are light. You aren't allowed to back-up off the field to stay airborne. If the winds are strong and you get pulled out -- too bad... In competition, you have to do it in the flagged-off field. Period.

Al Hargus III
Chicago, Illinois

A number of personnel are needed to keep the contest organized, fair, and safe. Fortunately, you only need to worry about a few of them.

Announcer -- Uses the public address system to announce the order or location of events, summon contestants to the Stage-In field, and promote safety. Also announces results and keeps spectators informed.

Pit Boss -- Controls the Stage-In field. Maintains flight order, tells flyers where to launch and directs them to the Field Director when it is time to compete. Always stay in contact with the Pit Boss so you don't miss your turn.

Field Director -- Runs the Competition field. Tells judges when contestants are ready for each required maneuver or program. Has diagrams of compulsory figures. Times all events and coordinates field safety. Informs pilot if they have gone over boundaries or run out of time. If you have questions, ask the Field Director.

Judges -- Rate each flyer's performance. Usually, at least three judges review an event. If more judges are used, high and low scores will be discarded before averaging.

There are two other things you need to know about formal stunt kite contests.

A **Pilot's Meeting** is generally held before each event. Contestants should attend to find out any last minute changes, how the event will be run, and their flying order. If you miss the Pilot's Meeting, you risk missing important information or changes.

All events operate under a **Wind Rule**. Actually, there are two rules: one for minimum speed and one for maximum speed. If the wind drops below the point where the judges feel each class of flyers can adequately perform, a recess, changes in required figures, or other rule changes may be announced. The same goes for high winds. If it isn't safe to fly, the event will be stopped.

Of course, at some point, the "show must go on". At that point, minimum and maximum speed go out the door and the only rule remaining is "**fly or die**". So if you want to win, be ready to perform in any conditions.

TYPES OF EVENTS

Contests currently focus on two basic categories: Precision and Choreography or "Ballet". Either category can be performed by individuals or by teams.

Precision-- Precision competition evaluates your technical flying ability. The rule book illustrates a number of precision figures. Event organizers pick between three and five "compulsory maneuvers" from the book and judge you on how well you can do them.

Compulsory figures are designed to test flying skill and precision in execution. Corners should be ninety degrees sharp or circles fully round. Scores will depend on how closely a figure matches the book diagrams - including direction. Speed through each maneuver should also remain constant, so remember what you learned about throttle control.

Usually, the compulsories are announced long before the event so you can practice them. Other surprise figures may be announced at the pilot's meeting. Examine all the figures carefully. If you fly something wrong, backwards, start at the wrong place, or leave something out, your score will reflect it.

Precision contests may also provide a two-three minute period for freestyle maneuvers. This is your opportunity to fly any maneuvers you like. Judges will be looking for the variety and difficulty of maneuvers, and the perfection with which you fly them. Showing a greater number of maneuvers, choosing maneuvers that are relatively more difficult, showing excellence in their execution, and planning the routine to "flow" from beginning to end will all contribute to a higher score.

If you're looking for a few extra points in Precision, remember these tips:

Some events are now running Precision in what they call "League Style". You are given a set amount of time to fly a freestyle program that includes the compulsory maneuvers. In other words, the required figures, flown in order, become part of the freestyle routine. This means you really need to plan your performance and practice.

Worried about remembering the required maneuvers? Try drawing them on your arm. It works!

- Know the required compulsaries. If you don't understand something, ask the Field Director or at the Pilot's Meeting.
- Don't begin any maneuver until the Field Director tells you the judges are ready.
- When the judges are ready, begin your maneuver as soon as possible. Bored judges give low scores.
- Call "IN" when you begin a maneuver and "OUT" when you finish it. Say it loud enough for the judges to hear.
- In freestyle, strive to impress the judges with your technical expertise. Try flying the compulsory maneuvers for the next higher class.
- If you crash before the minimum time limit in freestyle, you must relaunch to get any points. After the minimum, the crash will affect how the "flow" of your routine is scored.
- If you're having trouble with light or heavy winds, cut your freestyle short. Judges don't deduct points for short routines as long as they exceed the minimum time.
- If you're going to attempt a risky maneuver, save it for the end.

Choreography or Ballet -- Ballet competition focuses on artistry and technical flying

To maximize points in Precision, fly big, fly slow, and make your transitions flow. Also, call "In" and "Out" as though the judges were standing in Northern Quebec.

By flying large maneuvers, you give the judges a chance to really see the move you're doing. Too often, pilots zip through a performance, and the judges are left to wonder whether or not the maneuver was done well. Remember, there is no time limit for compulsories!

The real key to winning in the freestyle segment of a program is a smooth, flowing transition from one move to another. Almost any pilot can fly the precision moves. Demonstrate a sense of planning and foresight in your routine. Try to enter a new figure in the same area of the sky where the last figure stopped, so that there are no wild or wasted moments setting up one move to another.

skill. Flyers perform freestyle to the music of their choice. You bring your own cassette. The main thing evaluated is how well the routine matches the music.

Music should be appropriate for kite ballet, having variations in mood and tempo that allows creativity and variety. Maneuvers should be timed and executed to the music. Judges consider the number and quality of maneuvers based on execution, positioning, smoothness, degree of difficulty and the utilization of the "wind window".

Here are your tips for improving ballet performance:

- Make sure you have handed in your tape and that it is properly cued and marked "This side up".
- Watch out for songs with very quiet parts. Many P.A. systems won't broadcast it effectively.
- Bring a back-up tape just in case something goes wrong.
- If the sound crew does start the tape in the wrong place, ask the Field Director for a new start.
- You don't need to use the full amount of time. Again, bored judges give low scores.
- Remember that performances vary with wind conditions. Be flexible enough to alter your plans if the wind won't let you keep up with your music.

Other Events -- Competitions are expanding to include a number of new or developing categories. Here are a few examples:

Entertainment is the primary objective of any ballet performance. The key is to produce an emotional response from the judges and the crowd. Most classical music or movie themes work well because they are designed to evoke emotions.

Within any routine, I try to generate anticipation, surprise, and tranquility. Tranquility comes from experiencing soft flowing music as the kite floats through graceful turns. Anticipation can be achieved by flying the kite on a collision course with the ground or other kites as the music reaches a climax. Surprise is created when the kite does something unexpected - like not crashing.

I try to keep routines fairly short and not risk creating another emotion -- boredom.

Ron Reich
San Diego, California

Innovative -- In this event you can try almost anything. Music is optional and there is no restriction on kites other than safety. Quad line, dual flying and dog stakes all fit in Innovative. You can even switch kites during your performance.

Train Ballet -- Stacks have their own unique appeal and beauty but often have difficulty completing technical maneuvers. The Train Ballet category allows you to compete against other stacks instead of single kites.

Pairs Competition -- It is difficult for a two-person team to compete against three, four or five flyers. The intricacy of multi-kite maneuvers places a pair at a clear disadvantage. In Pairs Competition, only two-person teams compete.

General Competition Suggestions -- No matter what category or event you enter, there are basic tips that will help you do better and have more fun:

- Practice in as many different wind conditions as possible.
- Check your equipment and tuning before you compete. Don't rely on new or unfamiliar kites and line.
- Watch the contestants ahead of you to see what the wind is doing.
- Make sure the Pit Boss knows who you are and where you are.
- Be ready to go when it's your turn. Never keep the judges waiting.
- Recruit a good relaunch crew. No one plans to crash. And remember to brief your crew so they know what you want done.
- If you do crash, stay calm. If it's a musical event, keep track of the song so you can get back into your routine as soon as you relaunch.
- Think positive! Don't be nervous. If you say, "I'm gonna crash!" you probably will. Fly to please yourself and you'll always do your best.
- Accept bad breaks graciously. Be a good sport. Congratulate the people that beat you and always thank the judges and field crew.
- Learn from everything - good and bad - that happens on the field.
- Enjoy yourself! Enjoy yourself! Enjoy yourself!

Competitive flying is an excellent way to test your skill and improve your ability. The best advice we can give you is to PRACTICE. Study your maneuvers, know the rules, and watch the other flyers for new ideas. Then PRACTICE MORE.

Like we've been saying all along, finesse, precision, and delicacy of control distinguish an expert stunt kite pilot. Good Luck!