

## ten thoughts for ten hours

Roger Edwards offers wise words for new club fliers

Leaving school and joining a club can be a nerve-racking experience - it certainly was for me. You leave an environment where you are top-of-the-pile, other than instructors of course, and enter one where you swiftly realise that all your training only covered the tip of the flying-knowledge iceberg. You'll have the opportunity to put your new-found skills to the test in conditions stronger and less predictable than those the school let you fly in, and sometimes in conditions that will scare you witless.

Having reached the end of my first flying season, in which I miraculously achieved some worthwhile airtime despite the efforts of the weather, I would like to humbly offer some suggestions to help you through this tricky period. It's worth having some rules of thumb, and these are all things which helped me, even if some of them only became evident in my post-match analysis.

### 1. Talk to anyone and everyone

This leads to so many things: you'll make friends more quickly; you'll find out who is who in terms of experience and coaching; you'll get advice and - from having found out who is experienced - you'll be better able to judge its value; you'll feel less foolish asking those stupid questions that you will inevitably have; and it may save your life...

On a number of occasions I've seen red ribbons turning up and just getting on with it, and in one case an accident occurred. Us other low airtimers were sitting out the suspect conditions, waiting to see what the more experienced guys made of it before flying. Had the pilot been chatting to us, he too may have decided to wait and hence avoided the resultant pain.

### 2. Make some rules and stick by them

This is hard to do at first as you will be exploring your own and your wing's limits, but have a go. You can always adjust them later. Set an upper windspeed limit and a wind-range limit. Make a judgement as to when busy becomes too busy for you, when rough becomes too much of a rollercoaster.

As your hours and variety of experience build you may be tempted to fly outside these limits: try not to succumb. This can be frustrating, but is not so bad if you set yourself regular review points: when I finally get to ten hours I'm going to consider flying in slightly stronger winds, at 15 hours I'll review again. Be realistic though - don't up the limit just because you've done the hours - ask yourself if you are really ready for it.

You may find club members offering you advice on whether or not they think conditions are OK for you. This is usually worth listening to, but still make your own decision - you are the only one who knows how you are likely to handle the

conditions and how you are feeling on the day. If you take off and it's horrid, get down.

### 3. Listen to your inner coward

If you carry out tip [1] you will find that all pilots have one and it's nothing to be ashamed of. Be aware that some days your coward will be crying louder than others - he might have a good, subconscious reason. If he's making noise you will fly more nervously and hence not as well, so draw your pre-set limits in. Some days he will be on holiday so enjoy yourself, but don't use it as an excuse to exceed your limits - they're made to match your skill, not your confidence.

### 4. Don't just get in the air and fly - practice!

This is the big temptation, to just fly. With ten one-hour flights you could get rid of your ribbon, but would you really be ready to? How many landings would you have done? How many launches? If it's a consistent, smooth soaring day with easy lift, take the opportunity to practice top landings. If it's too light to fly but still keeps the wing inflated, ground-handle. Nil wind and you've got a big field to hand, forward launch. Believe me, you'll be thankful of it when you are on a heaving mountain launch with a queue behind you.

On each flight decide to work on something: becoming more aware of brake pressures; active flying without nervously looking up at the wing; more weight shift and less brake in turns; whatever. Sure, some days you will just want to relax and enjoy a long flight. No harm in that - just don't make it every flight.

### 5. Keep an eye on the experienced guys

If they are milling about on the ground unenthusiastically, find out why. It might just be a tea break but it could be something nasty they've spotted about to happen with the weather. Don't pay too much heed to what the skygods are doing though, unless they are staying on the ground. Their rules don't necessarily relate to mere mortals like us. But do listen to them if you have the opportunity - you'll learn a lot.

### 6. Before flying, speak to someone who's been up

Ideally, this would be someone who has recently landed. Get their opinion on the conditions. Their experience level doesn't really matter so long as they don't have a penchant for over- or understatement. Often a fellow red-ribbon pilot will give you a report more relevant to your experience level.

### 7. Ask questions

If something happened on your flight that you didn't understand or that you have a theory about, ask someone experienced. They may even have seen it happen. Their input is likely to give

you the missing piece of the puzzle and turn the experience into knowledge. If the weather is doing strange things, ask someone if they know what's going on.

Personally, I like to formulate a theory and then ask. Sometimes it gets shot down in flames, sometimes I can be satisfied at having used my knowledge effectively. This is a valuable skill because in the air that knowledge is all you have - there ain't nobody to ask!

### 8. If you can't fly, observe flying

On a day busy enough to keep you on the ground you'll get a headache trying to work out how collision avoidance rules are being used, but it's good practice. Get an idea of what sort of height is safe to 360, where the lift is and how it's working with the prevailing wind direction or thermal cycles. There's always something to pick up.

### 9. Do some retrieve work

If conditions aren't good for you but people are going XC, your help will be gratefully received, and when you finally make it XC yourself your book of favours-owed should be bulging with possible retrieve drivers. On the way back to the hill you will have a captive knowledge-base who will be buzzing and more than happy to answer questions about what they did on their flight. In fact, you most likely won't have to ask as they'll be keen to share it with someone who has vague idea of what they're on about.

### 10. Just keep talking to people on the hill

OK, a repetition of the first tip, but this is the most useful thing you can do, both to learn and to enjoy the social atmosphere the club offers. In time the great British tradition of mutual piss-taking will begin and then you'll know you've truly been accepted into the fold.

The early hours of your flying career are frustrating. Everyone seems so much better than you, you nervously fluff launches, get dragged, end up down the bottom and suffer many other ignominies. Just as with getting your CP, you need persistence and determination, but it will start coming together and you'll feel more and more in control, on the ground and in the air.

One day you'll find that that strong wind launch went smoothly, you've enjoyed working the rough stuff and you're thermalling away over the back for your first XC. Then you'll realise what all the effort's been about, and that it really was worth it after all.

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