

# How to Infinite Tumble... and why you can't!

Matt Gerdes gives up acro flying



MAIN PHOTO: WENDY SMITH, INSET: OLIVIER LAUCHERO

An aerial photograph of a paragliding event. In the foreground, the back of a paraglider in a black and orange suit is visible, looking down at a paved road below. The background shows a large parking lot filled with cars and trailers, surrounded by industrial buildings and a clear sky.

Hi, I'm Matt Gerdes, and I quit flying acro this weekend. Not because I was scared or bored. I quit because acro is no longer acro as it was when I flew acro... last week. OK, I still find myself in the occasional loop, or SAT, or wobblecopter, but that no longer counts as acro, sorry. The bar has been raised too high.

This weekend I watched Felix Rodriguez link 149 Infinite Tumbles. It was pretty damn cool to see. First, he hopped out of a helicopter over a crowd at the largest paragliding event in the world, the BaWü Airgames. Then he wound into a steep spiral and simply reversed his weight-shift, added some right brake and held on. What happened next is this: he used a lifetime of paragliding experience to finesse weight-shift and precisely-timed brake input to tumble directly over the middle of his wing 149 times. And he could have kept going. You can't even begin to comprehend how hard this is, even if you think you can.

There are now almost 20 pilots in the world that can make at least ten or more turns of the Infinite. These guys come from places like Hungary, France and Spain. They have names like Pal, Antoine, and of course Raul and Felix. They smoke cigarettes, they sleep in vans, they can out-drink you when they want to and they can go without beer when they have to. They're disciplined like that.

They are the best at what they do, and they love what they do. They train full time. They have no other job besides paragliding. They throw their reserve parachutes at least a few times per year.

How many times did you throw your reserve this year? Three times, four times? No? Then you're not even close. Pilots who had this manoeuvre perfected before you even knew it existed have thrown their reserves more times in the past year, training, than you have in your entire life. That's a measure of both how good they are, and how hard this manoeuvre is.

Do you smoke? Drink beer from a can and live in your van for half the year? No? Then you're even further away than I thought. Statistics show that you are 96 times more likely to Infinite Tumble if you spend at least three months per year training in Organya, Spain, and six months per year on the road doing the Acro World Tour in the European Alps and South America. You haven't even heard of Organya? Then it's hopeless, I'm sorry. You might as well quit trying right now. And don't think that starting smoking is going to help, either. I was just kidding about that.

How many wings did you burn through this year? One? None? It's just a fact that real acro pilots need up to four wings per year, due to the stress this manoeuvre exerts on their wings. In fact Felix Rodriguez used his wing harder yesterday than you do in five years. Unless you can actually fly hard, in which case I probably know you, in which case I don't apologise for this article, because you know my sense of humour. Here's the kicker - even if you begin to understand it, you're probably gonna need two more new gliders by the time you get close to doing it for real. I hope you're sponsored, although I can't imagine why you would be.

Think you're getting close? Get into the middle of the hardest manoeuvre you can do, maybe a pretty vertical high-speed tumble, then tape one of your eyes shut. Now what? Lost, confused? Pretty hard, isn't it? Well, Felix can infinite tumble with one eye. That's how much better than you he is. And don't give me that crap about how he's had most of his life to adjust. I don't want to hear your excuses.

Have you ever fallen into your wing? Then you're not trying hard enough. No one has ever learned the Infinite Tumble without falling into at least a part of their glider. Want to keep trying? Go ahead.

So you can't do the Infinite Tumble. Don't let it get you down, especially if you're over 30. Are you? Then forget it, again. Every one of these guys was nailing consecutive high-G tumbles and perfect off-axis McTwists in their mid-twenties, if not their teens.

If you're still wondering why you can't, or thinking that maybe you can, let me tell you what else is wrong with you.

Your first problem is that you haven't flown with these people.

These men are driven by something. They're mad. You don't know what it takes to do what they do. I'd rather jump off of a three thousand foot cliff in the arctic wearing a squirrel-suit. And I did, and they weren't that impressed. That's how intense these guys are. They're mellow, most of the time, sure. Raul and Antoine have an almost Zen-like calm about them. And Felix is just such a nice guy, right? You have no idea. I'd tell you more about them if I thought I could get away with it. I have to live near these guys.

Your second problem is that you have a job. A stupid, lousy job that takes up all of your time. You have to quit that crap, and start loving paragliding more than anything else. You have to devote one hundred percent of your time (or at least 96%, since there's one other important thing in life) to training acro. You'll also need to learn a bit of Spanish and French to fit in.

Finally, you're just not that good. By now, if you're any good at all, you'll have known about the Infinite for at least two years, which has been long enough for every pilot that is capable of doing it to learn it. The moment I heard about it I knew I'd never bother to try. The new guys getting it are young. They're the guys that just started flying a few years ago. They're the guys that didn't even have hair on their nuts when you started flying. Seriously, some of them weren't even born then.

Not to worry: you can still have fun. You can still loop and SAT and do those old-fashioned easy-cheesy tumbles. But just so you know: there are hardcore leading acro pilots and then there's pond scum, and it's important to know yourself. Don't get confused, and don't misrepresent yourself, because now everyone knows the difference, and I'm glad these boys showed us what the difference is.

PS. I'm joking...simmer down!