

# The safety net



**PARAGLIDING IS DANGEROUS. IT IS ALSO REWARDING.** Have you got an acceptable balance of risk and reward? I suggest analysing your risk by considering three different factors: judgment, skills and equipment. Here's my own risk analysis:

**Judgement.** Good judgment is the first safety line of defence and mostly comes from surviving bad judgment. With 1100 hours logged over 20 years I've survived a lot of bad judgement but still screw up – I've flown into terrain-based rotor and got trashed twice so far this year. I accept that I don't understand conditions well enough in alpine mountains to make good judgements there. In the UK I'm good at assessing terrain hazards, cliff hazards and meteorology but I'm not perfect. I fly in the UK in very strong thermic conditions and dynamic wind strength at the upper end of acceptable range, and I occasionally push this too far.

**Skills.** The second line of defence when you've screwed up on the judgement. I fly around 140 hours per year, many of those in thermic conditions. I fly actively and rarely get collapses. I have had many symmetric and asymmetric collapses and am confident and current in dealing with them. Whenever I get a new wing I take it to a big coastal site and practice asym-metrics. I am happy with rapid descent techniques and have used big ears and bar to escape clouds on several occasions this year. It's a long time since I went on an SIV course and should go on one soon. I did spin my glider last year so can do better.

**Equipment.** The last line of defence, when your judgement and skills have let you down. I choose to fly an upright harness with no pod or stirrup, but it's very comfortable and good for a bit of wagga. It has good back protection and is in conformance with the harnesses used for wing EN testing. It is the safest type of harness. My glider is a top-end EN B with good passive safety.

In summary my judgement is pretty good (8/10). My skills are pretty good (8/10). My

equipment has high passive safety (7.5/10), so overall I am not risk-free but have minimised risks to an acceptable degree (to me) through a combination of factors which are all within my control.

**My reward analysis.** I love flying in many forms. Coastal runs are fantastic, pushing to jump seemingly-impossible gaps and climbing thousands of feet above the sea. I love climbing out from a barely-discernible hill far below as the views open up. The satisfaction from an XC flight is enormous. Competing in the Chabre and Gin Wide Open is great fun. Etc, etc. In other words, I find all flying very rewarding.

**What about my risk/reward balance?** I know I'm not competitive with EN C wings and pod harnesses, which leave me standing when racing at competitions. On the other hand, three competitors (out of 240) threw their reserves at the Chabre Open and Gin Wide Open in this configuration because of locked-in riser twists. I had a number of collapses which did not give me any stress. I had a lot of fun and, to quote Jocky Sanderson, "The best pilot is the one having the most fun."

I would like to fly further on XCs and place higher in competitions, but for me the risks associated with changing to pod harnesses and EN C/EN D wings are not justifiable, particularly as I choose to fly in the sort of very strong conditions that others will not.

**What's your risk/reward balance?** What would make you have more fun? What would make you safer? If you're starting out on your flying, the ideal path to more fun and less risk is really quite simple.

1. START OFF WITH A BASIC HARNESS AND A MID EN B GLIDER.

2. GAIN SKILLS, CLOCK UP AIRTIME.

3. DEVELOP GOOD JUDGMENT.

This is a time sequence and there are good reasons for it. You should start with equipment that will give you the maximum level of safety whilst you develop your wing-handling skills. Once you've got the wing-handling skills, and whilst you're still on forgiving equipment, you can develop good judgment. You will screw up by flying in inappropriate met conditions, flying into rotor, getting numerous collapses and figuring out what went wrong, but because you've got good skills and good passive safety you can deal with the consequences of poor judgment. With good equipment, skills and judgment you will have more fun, more safety and progress more quickly.

Conversely, if judgement gets ahead of your skills and you're flying a demanding wing, things can go badly and progress can be slowed.

Wing handling skills can be taught and practiced and should be a priority for progressing in your flying. They offer the fastest path to safer flying. With good skills, more than 95% of symmetric and asymmetric collapses can be stopped before they occur at all. Of the remainder, proper input will speed up recovery, minimise the extent of the collapse and allow course to be maintained.

Consider what your own flying goals are. What equipment do you need to achieve them and what skills/judgment do you need to work on to attain them?

*This article first appeared in the August 2015 issue of Wessex Airmail.*