



ALL PHOTOS: TIM KING

# HOW TO BE A BETTER PILOT

CFI Tim King continues his series aimed at the beginner paraglider pilot

## NO 6. CLUB PILOT AND BEYOND...

Notching up the hours over winter on a safe and fun instructional week - Aglou Beach in Southern Morocco

If you've recently just passed out of school, or did so last season but are now low-airtime and rusty, the start of the new season, whilst being a very exciting time, can also be quite a daunting one.

The umbilical chord from your school has been severed and the freedom of the sky is now yours. But those critical site and weather decisions need to be made and made correctly.

You should not be completely on your own though. Having joined your local club, it's important to meet other pilots of all levels and perhaps to 'buddy up' with some to make your next step as enjoyable, safe and fulfilling as you possibly can.

To continue to safely in our sport there are several crucial stages in the learning curve you need to succeed in and move on to the next level. At each stage your skill and knowledge level will leave you just a little bit vulnerable. We must therefore proceed with the correct amount of respect and caution for the elements and terrain that we are exploring.

In the first stage after gaining your CP qualification and leaving school you know very little, yet you must gain experience without taking unnecessary risks.

The second stage typically occurs 25 to 35 hours later, when your confidence has developed and your skills have improved. You have enough knowledge to get yourself into a whole world of trouble - or pleasure.

There maybe a third stage later on, when you venture into XC flying and fly in ever-more

challenging conditions in search of longer flights.

In fact one of the great things about our sport is that we never do stop learning, and indeed experiencing new vistas, sensations and thrills. However our sport is a bit different to most in that our errors along the way can not be too great - the consequences are all too obvious.

When teaching qualified pilots, one of the hardest tasks for a paragliding instructor or coach is to guide the pilot to the very edges of their comfort zone, and often slightly beyond, for them to gain the skills and experiences needed to cope with a wider range conditions, climates and terrains whilst remaining safe.

Most instructors have many years of experience at judging this scenario, but there will be times where you, the novice pilot, will have to make those decisions for yourself for the very first time.

**Stage 1.** Get the best gear for your level that your budget will stretch to. Modern gliders are so much safer, easier and lighter than ever before. Harnesses too are better designed with great protection and reliable reserve containers.

Build your network of flying mates, preferably of mixed abilities. The majority of pilots are very approachable and are all too happy to help out.

Most clubs have a network of club coaches ranging from low-airtime to extremely experienced. Sometimes a low-airtime coach will be able to relate to your needs better than the coach with 1,000 hours, as they can still remember what it was like to be in your shoes. At the very least they should be able to give you a thorough site briefing, and maybe some local

weather knowledge too. It is important to let the person that you are seeking advice from know your experience; whilst conditions or the site may suit the experienced pilot, it may not be suitable for the novice.

When you arrive at the site, spend a bit of time taking in the conditions and the environment. Make an assessment for yourself first, then seek advice and compare the two. This is an important learning process; you will find you will improve upon each time you make your assessment in this environment. Each day is different even though you may be assessing the same site, in fact each hour can be different! Start with your basics and apply them, then add any new knowledge that is necessary to understand the new environment.

With any aviation sport, continuity and frequency are very important factors in being able to stay on the pulse. In our sport weather constraints, family and work commitments all conspire against us, preventing that next fix of aviation nectar.

Winter layoffs are the worst, though many operators offer winter flying opportunities in sunnier climes.

However unfamiliar terrain and conditions mean you are still at a stage where you really require an instructional course rather than simply guiding. You can increase your airtime and thermalling experience whilst others are sitting it out in the wind and rain, but choose wisely!

Spring often produces our strongest conditions of the year. The sun is gaining strength and the airmasses are cold, so our thermals are strong. Couple that combination with a stiff north wind



Preparing for launch in the Alps under instruction - the life-experience rewards are huge!



The beauty of the Alps... but first learn how it works

and the thermals can become rowdy and torn. It may be time for active flying and off the clock climbs – or for waiting just a little while to pick your moment a tad later in the day. Meanwhile, sip hot coffee and watch the entertainment.

**Stage 2.** You have stuck with the sport, and probably been rewarded with some awesome experiences. And probably a few buttock-clenching ones too! Remember, you still know very little, but enough to get you into the trouble that's lurking round the corner.

You will be more confident now, and perhaps familiar with the nature of those bubbly thermals and starting to get to grips with active flying. At this stage it's important to not get caught out by changes in conditions or unfamiliar terrain. You will be flying in conditions that are more testing for you and will thus be flying closer to your limits. Only slight changes in conditions can push you into a whole new area of unfamiliarity, and right out of your comfort zone into the danger zone.

Environments such as the Alps are beautiful and stunning to fly, but a deep understanding is required before venturing in this direction. Again there are many courses offering to host you and your wing, but make sure it's suitable for your ability.

It's no good going in spring expecting to get a taste of your first thermals. At this time of year these are mostly for the very experienced pilot. The novice or intermediate will have to settle for some top-to-bottoms early and late in the day. Fantastic if you have been skiing in the day, but know your limits. Likewise, learn to thermal before going on a dedicated XC course so that you can get the most out of it.

So enjoy the learning curve. Never stop soaking up the information and fly with respect for the air, and you will have some of the best life experiences ever.

Oh... and keep practicing the ground handling.

*Next month: High wind canopy control and management.*

*Tim King is CFI of Sky Paragliding ([www.skyparagliding.co.uk](http://www.skyparagliding.co.uk)). An earlier version of this series of articles appeared in Skywings in 16 parts between October 2003 and June 2005. The present series has been substantially revised and updated.*



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*Suitable for new CP's upwards.*

**[www.skyparagliding.co.uk](http://www.skyparagliding.co.uk)** Contact: Tim King 0776 726 4211 / [info@skyparagliding.co.uk](mailto:info@skyparagliding.co.uk)

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