

attitude EN-lightenment?

Kelly Farina, long time paraglider pilot, Alpine expert and XC leader

A DECADE AGO THE DHV WERE ACCUSED OF OPERATING AN UNFAIR MONOPOLY WITH THEIR PARAGLIDER CERTIFICATION SYSTEM and a new code was ushered in - the EN. This was intended to make things simpler, cheaper, clearer and safer ... and it worked for a while. Long live the New World Order!

But while the EN slept, its inflexible testing criteria seemingly set in stone, the B class slowly evolved into the freak show it is today. Advances in technology allowed aspect ratios to increase and prosper. The long-ongoing inter-constructor arms race, driven by the delusional needs of the end-user fed by misguided internet forums, saw the quest for performance pushed to the fore. Pilot safety was the first casualty.

It's no secret that aspect ratio is directly related to unforgiving behaviour in certain situations. Yet something happened along the way, setting once-taboo technology loose in the hands of intermediate pilots. When the cracks started to appear it was obvious that, among other things, wings had become lighter. Could the law of inertia be responsible? Could the fact that less weight means less inertia, and less inertia means less rotational energy, really be the only advancement paragliding has made, enabling higher and higher aspect ratios?

Lighter wings have other big advantages too. It is unquestionable that the reduction of inertial effects gives improved handling. On the dark side, however, this has helped ever-higher aspect ratios to infiltrate the B class. It is often said that "You can't cheat aspect ratio." Very true. However it has now become possible to cheat the testing criteria.

The modern B market has become unrecognisably wide. It was once the safe haven of the weekend pilot, but many of these same pilots have become seduced by clever marketing propaganda, fascinated by impressive performance claims. Such performance is believed to be the missing tool needed to transform weekend warriors into heroes overnight. The modern world often seeks quick and easy fixes: if in doubt, buy yourself better. This is echoed on forums where one reads, "I need ... I want ... extra climb, penetration, glide." These extras come at a price, although this too is nothing new.

Mostly it boils down to a simple lack of understanding, and the inability to really play the 3D chess game we call paragliding. Performance-obsessed pilots prefer to force moves with the material rather than flow with proper technique. We hear only an enlightened few spreading the far more realistic mantra: "Less mistakes made, less performance needed."

Some manufacturers weren't slow to exploit our weakness. Irresponsible marketing and reviews in magazines have seen second-hand markets worldwide swamped with particular models when pilots found they were too hot to handle. When the hype wore off and the honeymoon was over ... the emperor was definitely naked. It's simply unhealthy to put such highly demanding wings on any recreational pilot's wish list. It is the timeless story of the wolf in sheep's clothing.



Photo: Andrew Williams

How did we get to this pass? It happened slowly, and the arms race noted above perpetuated it. But once this runaway train gathered momentum there was no stopping it. The performance-addicted free-flying Joe Public wanted ever more "accessible" performance. Then the same Joe Public started crashing on "Hero" cams across the internet, leading to idle fingers being pointed, in every situation, at the pilot. Armchair experts were always able to point out what they could have done better. Really?

No single manufacturer can stop the circus the B market is becoming; to do so would be financial suicide. The number-crunching, performance-obsessed pilots would just choose the wing with 1% more whatever, irrelevant of the designer's notes. "It's only a B, right?" is argued on hills across the country. But unless something is done unilaterally across the board, no-one will get to fly a new breed of safer performance-for-all B wings.

Weaning ourselves off this steroid-like performance enhancement will prove difficult.

So what can be done? If we really want to seize back the B class and give it to the pilots for whom it was intended, the only way with current glider technology is to change the corrupted testing criteria: close down the degree of turn accepted after a deflation. These changes to the test procedures alone would see a reduction in aspect ratio, the main culprit responsible for demanding characteristics.

Other solutions rely on pilots acting much more responsibly and educating themselves to be able to make a fearless and honest assessment of their skills. That would require a change in consciousness I don't think we are ready for just yet - it will take a lot more accidents before that happens.

Weaning ourselves off this steroid-like performance enhancement will prove difficult. It's not impossible, but a change in attitude is definitely needed. If we were to stop chasing performance numbers it would take the pressure off the constructors to keep pushing for out-and-out performance.

And learning to fly paragliders properly would be a start too. Observation is the best secret weapon a pilot can possess, but impossible to achieve when concentrating on what is happening 8m above you. The greatest performance enhancement a pilot can invest in is themselves.

Understanding the path of real progression would be another step forward. The learning curve in the sport is shallow. Training in valid, correct techniques, and setting achievable goals are both required. Post-CP coaching is one way to achieve this.

Finally, we could re-brand the class war. There is something inherently counterproductive in the naming of the B categories. Years ago we dreamed of gliders with the combined safety and performance of the Buzz Z4, Ion 3 and Tequila 4. Now such dreams are very accessible, and fun for pilots too. Yet we call this category Low-End B. We stigmatise it, and as a result pilots aspire to fly something with more, more and *more*, believing it is what is holding them back.

Naming lower aspect ratio gliders in tune with what they are would really help. "Classic B" perhaps? After all, the B class was designed for the recreational pilot. High and low levels imply that the only way to progress means getting off a low level wing as fast as possible, even that flying one is a waste of money and time. In reality, if they learnt how to fly properly, most pilots would only ever need a "Classic B". To refrain from needing the extra performance, rectifying mistakes made, would make the sport safer overnight.

It's time to change the image of the Classic B, and the way people look and approach the sport. I applaud pilots who ditch their ego and fly 200km routes on Classic Bs. They are leading the way in proving that everything is possible if only we understand the rules of the game. Bravo!

Longtime Skywings contributor and former British team pilot Kelly Farina is the course leader and boss at Austrian Arena (www.austrianarena.com), where he has been coaching pilots since 2002. He is soon to release a book, 'Carving the Line' about flying techniques and true progression through the sport.