

Feel the Strings

B Y R O B M C M I L L A N

It is never easy to write to the diversity of readers about a particular topic. Sometimes the issue is so complex that even the best in the country F*^k it up. This article is aimed perhaps at the advanced pilots, though there are still a lot of valuable lessons that everyone can learn.

Swoopin' the Learning Curve

On Australia Day, instead of standing to attention and singing Advance Australia Fair, a flock of swoopers decided to entertain the masses with a rendition of "Another One Bites the Dust (Water)". The inaugural Simply Skydive® Pro Blade™ event in Australia proved to have a steep learning curve for both the event organisers and especially the competitors.

It is essential that when you are learning new techniques that you stand back and check out the shape of your learning curve. If you try to jump straight on to the steep end and neglect the basics that are staring you in the face, then look out because you are likely to fall off. Here are some of the things that we learned.

Safety is Paramount

We have always known that safety is the number one priority, on any skydive. Though when you begin to change the parameters by adding a tunnel of windblades 10m by 80m, lots of water and a 40m x 1.2m concrete pontoon to land on then life dramatically becomes more exciting. *If the conditions of the day dictate that you shouldn't jump then don't.* If the landing area is not suitable then fix it before an accident occurs rather than wait for an accident to happen. Don't trip over the fine line between pleasure and pain, as chances go you'll land on the painful side.

Stackin, Up

During practice and competition we set a minimum safe exit altitude and maximum number of people per pass, in order to safely spread swoopers apart from one another. If you were to make a comparison between what happens on a bigger drop zone where up to 20 people per aircraft all seem to converge on the same landing area at once, it should make you wonder why we don't plan more amongst ourselves before emplaning. It makes you wonder why people that jump highly loaded canopies can't or won't float in deep brakes if necessary to allow the traffic pattern to flow rather than let chaos reign in the approach and landing areas. *If you are unable to fly slower on your pocket rocket in order to float and maintain your position in the approach pattern then you have two options.* Get off your canopy and onto something bigger to learn such skills to make it safer for everybody or go and land somewhere else.

Technique

The primary goal of this competition was to enter and exit the course as cleanly and quickly as you could. Speed wasn't necessarily the objective, if you wanted to stay dry. All the rules of landing still apply. *Land safely, land accurately, fly to stay alive.* It should be remembered that the skills necessary to negotiate the course are mastered at altitude and only performed close to the ground when you have all of the right ingredients. If you don't know the ingredients then seek knowledge from several experienced pilots. Be very wary of who you seek advice from and ensure that you filter the information that they provide.

To successfully negotiate the course it was imperative that your technique was finely tuned. Short sharp turns were never going to derive enough speed and wide carving turns didn't work either as you would lose a lot of speed through the turn. Arriving too low through the start gate either made it difficult to land on the pontoon or meant that you were going to have to drag your feet or body through the water resulting in a slow time or saturation.

If we bounced on land the way that we did on the water, then some of us wouldn't be here to tell you about how much fun we were having. Granted it is safer to bounce on water than on land, however it doesn't

necessarily mean that it is 100% safe. Water has a harder tensile strength than concrete especially when it is glassy. It is simply the displacement of water that absorbs the energy of you bouncing that permits you to continue living. We were not trying to kid ourselves about the significance of staying alive, though in the heat of the moment, it is sometimes easy to forget.

At the point at which you commit yourself to entering the course, the most appropriate technique was to apply less input over a longer distance, as opposed to stabbing a turn. Smooth efficient 270 degree turns at around 600 - 700ft worked best for most competitors. This wasn't made any easier by the fact that depth perception is much more difficult over water. By not having a good setup reference, the approaches became very entertaining to say the very least.

The Competition Groove

All of the competitors in this event had some degree of competition experience. Some had competed at similar events overseas, other have competed at a state, national or world championship level. Competition tends to bring out the best and worst performances in people. Good competitors will tell you that you should train to win but compete to do your best. You should aim to perform at your optimum during competition and don't try to push your boundaries too much. Set yourself a goal and work towards it not beyond it. *Fly smart, have fun, stay dry.* Competition is about turning negative energy into positive energy, feeding on it and using it to your advantage during the next round.

Col Porter - a former Australian representative - explained the term, "The Competition Groove". It is when your mind and body is relaxed enough that you can focus on the task at hand. You've got your eye in, you know where your setup point should be, you know when and how much to turn, everything is in its slot, you are in the groove. Sometimes just being able to relax into the groove is hard enough, though once you're there everything else just falls into place. We would often clap synchronously on takeoff or sing from the bellows of our lungs on jump run to help slot ourselves into the groove. Though once out the door, going for distance and speed and being all alone with no friends to help you stay in the groove, it suddenly became more difficult to remain there.

Intensity

We knew already, though it was definitely reinforced to us that swooping is an intense discipline. We learned that currency is priceless, and execution of safe technique is the number one priority. Jack Surawski was unfortunate to break his leg on the pontoon and since the event three of the swoopers have broken bones to various degrees on land. So we have reminded ourselves that this type of activity isn't simple to learn and the consequences are significant. No one ever said that this was easy.

There were two things that everyone agreed upon, the most significant being that this event was the most intense amount of fun that we have ever had. On the other hand, the 40 minute bus ride to the airport that we all endured was more intense than the jumps. Whilst jumping we are in control - well, we thought we were! Whilst driving, our lives were in the hands of the drivers and the other turkeys using the road. Among other near misses, after visiting Jack in hospital, on a wet slippery road not one minute from the hospital our bus was nearly side swiped by a station wagon. Some of us didn't even jump that day, though we still had our rush!

Preparation for an event such as this only extends so far, just when you think that you have practiced enough, you are very quickly reminded that too much is just never enough. The reality of doing what we did is very overwhelming and should never be taken lightly.

Rob McMillan
self portrait



FLY SMOOTH SAFE JUMPING