

British Paragliding Open Piedrahíta, 17th - 23rd July

Sponsored by Edel and incorporating the 3rd leg of the British Nationals, this competition was preceded by the Nationals training camp during which 15 of the newest Nationals pilots received coaching from Richard Carter and Judy Leden. The first British Paragliding Open descended on Piedrahíta, a large village 120km west of Madrid and to the north of the 6,200ft main flying site of Peña Negra. Unlike three years ago when the Nationals first came to Spain, we arrived at the right time of year: temperatures of 30 - 35°C, high pressure, occasional convergence and a cloudbase generally above 12,000ft. The site had changed considerably, too. The local council had spent several million pesetas clearing the site of scrub, erecting a building at take-off and a repeater station 18km to the east to allow radio transmissions into the plains extending eastwards towards the beautiful walled city of Ávila. 30 guest pilots from Spain, Venezuela, Denmark, New Zealand and Japan had entered this first Open, making a total of 69 competitors.

Day 1

Registration and initial briefing compete, the assembled mass headed up the hill to prepare gliders, cameras and equipment. Flying in Piedrahíta is a very civilised affair; briefing isn't until 11.30 am, allowing pilots to stay up late in the bars and discos and have a lie-in in the morning. Met information from the glider station at Segovia gave the day's estimated high as 30°C with very good thermal activity from 12 am to 8 pm and 1/8th cloud cover at 2,300m. The task was to be a 76.2 race to goal with one turnpoint near Ávila and then north-west to goal. No-one was to make it, many being decked at the pass 15km from take-off, but the task was won by John Silvester flying 62.8km, closely followed by Mike Cavanagh, Venezuelan Guest Leopold Turco, Bruce Goldsmith and Neil and Rob Cruickshank. The take-off had been in quite strong conditions and the wind was howling at the pass, making crossing it quite hazardous unless you were quite high. Unfortunately Pat Dower was to experience this at first hand; he went over quite low and about 2km beyond suffered



Bashful trio of 1994 Nationals top three

severe turbulence in rotor and fell to the ground, breaking his leg and arm. Using the radio, help came quickly, although the Spanish Red Cross who came from Piedrahíta showed a degree of inexperience. As I write he is comfortable in Ávila hospital.

Day 2

The task set was a little more ambitious: a race to goal near Segovia 101km away. The wind was only 6 knots from the south-east and conditions were still good. Rob Whittall showed he had returned to form, leading Rob Cruickshank and Sarah Fenwick to goal and leaving Pat Holmes and Judy Leden 2km short. A free-flier, affectionately known as Spinner, lived up to his nickname and joined Pat in the hospital at Ávila with some not too seriously cracked vertebrae. Good flying, but not a good start on the injury front. The day was also notable for Sarah Fenwick setting a new Ladies declared goal record of 101.1km (subject to FAI confirmation).

Day 3

Another beautiful day, but the wind on take-off was stronger than predicted and the initial task was cancelled. We all headed down to a gorge 4km away and spent the afternoon swimming, returning to take-off at 7.30 to fly a small 19km out-and-return task. Only five pilots made the second turnpoint and Jocky

Sanderson was the only pilot to make it to goal.

Day 4

For the first time in the history of the Nationals a triangle task was set, and achieved by seven pilots, giving Judy Leden and Sarah Fenwick jointly the Ladies' 50km triangle record. The day was won by Leopold Turco, who beat John Silvester by four minutes. It was also a memorable day for guest pilot John Highton, who celebrated his 59th birthday by completing the triangle. There is hope for us all!

Day 5

Task 5 seemed impossible to most pilots yet Steve Ham, local expert and unofficial European record holder, suggested that it was possible in the conditions. The 89.1km out-and-return to Ávila and back was therefore set and, remarkably, 20 pilots (28% of the field) reached goal, John Silvester getting home 25 minutes ahead of second-placed Rob Whittall. Unfortunately this was to prove the final task, the sixth day producing strong winds and making take-off impossible. Nevertheless, five days of good flying left the group generally flown-out and enjoying the well-earned rest day. The pilots seemed to have enjoyed the event and enthused that it should be continued next year. There had been several niggles