

BEHIND THE SCENES IN PIEDRAHITA

by NICK DOLAN

You've probably read or heard about the Mega Flights, huge tasks and the records broken in Piedrahita, 1995 PWC during the week of 14-21 July. Seven days of competition, 7 days of sunshine and 6 tasks completed and validated. What you haven't heard or read about is the effort, enthusiasm and dedication that went on behind the scenes to make this one of the most successful and enjoyable competitions of the year.

For me, it all started one dark night during December in a little bar on the outskirts of Piedrahita, where in my naivety (and with a little help of Spanish beer) I offered Steve Ham, the Meet Director my help in the PWC.

Subsequently, Steve asked me to be the Scoring Manager, which I accepted. Not really knowing what was involved, I then elected to go to the Feltre PWC in Italy to learn about the scoring system and watch the Sky Gods spec out. Apart from getting some good flying in, and meeting some great people, I came away with a copy of the scoring program and sense of being up the proverbial creek without a paddle.

Over the next couple of months I played with the scoring program, wondering how I was going to pull this off. Steve informed me that the local government organisation would be providing a computer and printer. So, being a computer geek, and knowing how reliable these things are, I planned ahead and prepared a portable to take with me as backup. I headed for Piedrahita a week before the competition, hoping to get some flying in before the real work started.

Arriving on Saturday I finally got my accommodation sorted out, which unbeknown to me was in front of the town convent. This seemed kind of nice, but I paid for my drinking sins on Sunday morning. The nuns insist on ringing the Bells from 7 am every 15 minutes, for what seems like an eternity! My room was 20 feet away from the bells on the 4th floor. It is not advisable to drink heavily on a Sunday night.

Sunday was blown out, so we checked out



Take-off from Piedrahita, Jockey Sanderson and sherpa (ph: Nick Dolan)

the competition headquarters and decided that night to begin entering the pilot details into the scoring program. I was presented with a file full of faxes, bits of paper, registration forms. On closer examination, it looked like we had

more than the maximum number of pilots allowed into a PWC (the new 95 rules dictate that a maximum of 130 pilots with 5 wild cards per competition). Well since we didn't know who would or wouldn't turn up, we entered them all into the system.

Two days were spent entering the pilots details and printing the registration forms for the pilots to sign. The idea was to have all the registration forms ready in PWC number order to speed up the registration process.

For 2 more days there was: more typing, printing instructions, signs, notices and other information in English and Spanish to post around the town, cleaning the offices, organising the few already arriving pilots, visiting and talking to local officials, checking on retrieve arrangements, buses, flags, landing sites, organising the headquarters, attending an auction (that's another story), etc. We did however get enough time to get a couple of flights in during all this.

But on Thursday afternoon upon arriving at Take-off, we found the local cattle men putting up a barbed wired fence across the back of the take off area, their idea of which being to keep people in, not cattle out?

The land owners are a consortium of people in a local village 10 km away, they wanted more money and other rewards for the use of their mountain. Steve and the Mayoress of Piedrahita spent 5 hours (well into the night) negotiating with them to take down the fence for the competition. In the end they agreed to replace the middle section of wire with 'non-barbed' wire. These cow folk can be mighty stubborn.

Damn, it's Friday already! Registration is due to start at 7 pm and all kinds of questions and issues still needed to be resolved. The amount of work grew exponentially with arriving pilots. Still no news on the retrieve buses, workmen to organise, get the computer and printer from the Town Hall. What's happening with the barbed wire? Where are the radios from the civil government?

More pilots arrive... Retrieve and organisation communications need to be set up... Flags have to be taken to take off and cemented in. Oh no, one of the Japanese pilots had an accident! (10 days in Avila hospital with a broken femur).

I think you get the picture, organised chaos, go, go, go...

Good thing I brought out my trusty portable and printer, 'cause, the local government was still using black boards and carrier pigeons when it came to technology.

7 pm, pilots are queued outside waiting to register. With so many unregistered pilots, all we could do is put them on the reserve list, and inform them that it was up to the PWC committee to decide.

The PWC rules state that all competitors must register and pay the entry fee 30 days before the competition. 130 pilots had registered already. We had 175 pilots outside! and quite a few of these were world and national pilots who had not registered or paid. Some pilots had even travelled over 2000 km to come to the competition. How anyone can travel all that distance and not read the rules or check they are in the competition is beyond me, but then they are *Sky Gods*.

Also, due to the insurance company raising the stakes on Steve on Wednesday, we were going to have to charge the pilots another 2000 pta each (though according to the rules we could have charged them another 2800 pta). The entry fee was 13000 pta, plus 2000 pta for late payers, to cover the Insurance Premium.

Registration finished at 10 pm. Relief! Now to deal with the reserve list. A total of 125 pre-registered pilots had turned up! 50 more were waiting to hear if they were accepted in the competition.

It had to be a PWC committee decision, but the PWC Technical delegate would not arrive until Saturday night, after the first Task had occurred.

Initially, the decision was *NO*, 135 pilots only! But then, a top pilot, a country man turned up at midnight - you guessed it, not registered and hadn't paid! Immediately they asked to let him in. The reply was *NO* - not unless they were prepared to let everyone in! Steve had, with some wisdom actually planned for 150 pilots to attend the competition, and we reckoned that at a squeeze 175 wouldn't cause too many problems. So the go ahead was given by the PWC - Thank God! We wanted everyone to fly and have a good time. So 9 am Saturday we registered the other 50 pilots.

The Start of the Competition.

10:30: First briefing. Time to get ready. Weather looks good. Let the show begin.

Once up the hill, the pilot representatives were elected to help determine the tasks each day.

1300: Task 1 briefing at takeoff, *Pena Negra*. - a 79 km task with a turn point 8 km away to spread the field out. Conditions were strong and takeoff was like normal English takeoff, which made the Europeans look like students taking off for their first top to bottom. Of course once off the hill, it was a different story.

The Window opened at 13:30.

A number of the organisation staff, pilot and spectators, etc. helped the fledging flyers off on the start of what was to become a very memorable week.

Meanwhile, the 'Goal Team' (Fernando, Amy, Tasha and Bus) headed for the start gate point to prepare the start gate. They would then have to rush to set up the goal - not an easy task for 3 people. Set up the start gate marker (usually an open arrow head, pointing in sector to the first turn point), open the marker within 20 seconds of the official start time & rush to goal to set up the finish line, align video cameras for disputes, prepare score boards, etc. and sit in the sun waiting for the pilots to arrive. The goal normally did not close until 8 p.m. - A long day, in 35+ heat.

[BACK AT HEADQUARTERS]

Prepare landing slips, get computer ready, liaise via radio, monitor emergency frequency and have some coffee. Once the official start window was open, all the vehicles left to start driving around the countryside for the inevitable retrieves. The radio and retrieve co-ordinators made their way up a mountain for better radio coverage and set up the mobile antennas.

Just after the start gate opens, we start to get radio messages for retrieval. The first pilots start arriving at headquarters to hand in their film and landing co-ordinates, usually with head bowed low. Data entry starts... Every pilot fills in a landing form which must be entered into the scoring software and a checked against the film later. A frenzy of radio chatter, co-ordination, retrieves and

decisions occur all afternoon.

Once all the pilots had been accounted for, 2 people set off by car to Salamanca around 11 pm (70 km away) to get the films processed. We print the results for the day's task, pin them up outside and head for some dinner. A stroll down to the Plaza, lots of questions, gripes, praise, stories later. The film team arrive back and start checking the film. It's 2 am; the rest of us are off to bed.

Sunday:

Bell ringing by fanatical invisible Spanish nuns from 7 to 9 am. At Headquarters the work starts, amending the scores in line with the checked films, printing new result lists. Pilots outside ready to ask questions regarding their scores, today's weather, astrology, complaints, general info, etc. 10:30 briefing in Piedrahita. For the next few hours it's nothing but scoring queries, amendments and re-printing for me and the magic elves!

We finally finish scoring around 12:00, re-print yesterday's results, pin them up and head for takeoff to help.

Task 2

Pena Negra - 90.5 km race to goal.

The rest of the day was quickly becoming the routine, retrieve, data entry, problem solving, scoring, etc.

However, the night session was different. The cut had to be made. There had been some discussion amongst the PWC delegate about extending the Preliminaries to 3 tasks, but this was not in the rules.

The films had to be checked ASAP fast and the cut announced for the next morning. Also, we had to prepare to run a B competition for

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the pilots who did not make the cut.

In the afternoon we had discovered that the scoring software, did not have the module to calculate the cut. Luckily the programmer was on hand and managed to recreate the Cut selection, i.e. the best 70 pilots and top 7 women over the last two tasks plus 5 wild cards at the discretion of the meet director. A total of 82 Pilots.

Monday :

The idea of the A and B competition was to have all the pilots do the same tasks, but delaying the B comp start window, by about half an hour. However, a large percentage of B pilots took off with the A comp, even though they knew they would be disqualified for doing this. At 14:00, the wind changed and came over the back. We were left with around 40 B pilots waiting, which they usually do, for the right conditions, in the hot sun.

Over the next couple of hours, a number of pilots managed to take off during lulls in the wind, whilst the rest watched. There were a lot of complaints about the other B pilots taking off early, etc. Around 16:40 the wind came back onto the hill and the rest of the field took off. (The start gate time and tasks windows had had to be extended by the amount of time during which it had been unsafe to take off - 2h40 min).

There was much discussion about the B pilots. Quite a few who had taken off early made it to goal. In the end the task was invalidated, to the disappointment of those who had followed the rules and even managed to fly some good distances. However, I think the message got across, that the B comp was being taken seriously.

So after the usual scoring, film development run, another excellent task, etc., we got to bed around 4 am after a wee party.

Tuesday:

Task 4 - 140.8 km from *Pena Negra*.

With most of the staff and pilots suffering from hangovers, Steve set the task which numerous pilots declared "impossible". It was the longest task ever set in competition. The hang gliders in Ager had, only had, a maximum 120 km task. The day was to prove them all wrong, 60 pilots made goal.

I had just left the headquarters and was



walking up to goal when I heard over the radio, that a pilot on a white and yellow Voodoo, had crashed and an ambulance was required. The only person I knew flying those colours an canopy, was my friend *Ben Linstead*, who had come for some flying. I immediately jogged up to goal (running in my unfit state in 40° of Spanish sun, might have required another ambulance). He had come down hard and fast, with a 50% asymmetric, onto bum. I went with him in the ambulance to Avila, to translate. Luckily, Steve had arranged for a Spanish computer student to help with the data entries, so I left the scoring in his hands.

Ben had been due to fly back to the UK that evening, but, it looked like he was going to have an extended holiday. He had a compressed vertebra and would not be able to move for at least 3 days. The doctors asked me to do some further translating for the Japanese pilot, who had broken his femur.

After arranging for the two English speakers to be in the same room I started to find a lift back, when I heard that the ambulance was on its way to Avila again. A New Zealander, *Mike Macanny* (designer of Tantrix), had had a full collapse while scratching low over a hill. But he was back in Piedrahita around midnight, wearing a neck brace, just in time to party....

Wednesday:

South launch; conditions had changed. Due to the strong winds and the fact that most of the staff were about to fall asleep on their feet (and pilots weren't in much better shape), the day was cancelled.

No scoring, no Film run, no complaints, no worries ... well, not until tomorrow, we still had 2 days of competition left.

Thursday :

Lastro del Cano takeoff. 170 km (!) task to Segovia.

This time there were no questions about the possibilities, eagerness abound, they were gone before we realised. The goal team was driving as fast as they legally could to get to goal. When they arrived there, there were already 30 pilots hanging above the goal field! Some of them had been flying at 90 kmh over the ground, with tail winds.

Xavier Rémond, who had I think got fed up with waiting, decided to carry on and managed an amazing 241 km.

Experienced pilots, who'd been flying for years, described the task as one of their best ever flights. Who knows how many records were broken.

Friday:

Final Day: 30 km race from Pena Negra.

Due to this being the last day, and not being able to do a film run, Steve called a short race across the valley, ground start, with only the pilots reaching goal getting points.

No-one made goal! I think *Bruce Goldsmith* was relieved, since the point gap was not big and if any of the top placed pilots had made goal, they might have beat him. So, after retrieves, final scoring occurred and all the competition results for every task, A and B comps, PWC ranking, constructors results, women's results, etc. were produced.

The prizes for both competitions, constructor award and women's awards were presented to the pilots at 23:00 in the main square of Piedrahita. After which the ritual of dunking in the fountain occurred, Steve of course being one of the first ones in. Unfortunately a few pilots decided I wasn't going to get away without a dunk, and I also ended up dunking some local fountain water.

The competition was over, all we had to now do was clear up. I believe, that after all the heartache, stress, fun, comradeship everyone had a good fun week - would you believe it? - and with some extraordinary flying.