



STEVE HAM: SERIAL KILLER!

Steve Ham, lord of Piedrahita, ageing urban skate kid and winner of the serial class in the 2006 Pre-Worlds and British Championships, talks to Hugh Miller about his first year away from open class competition wings

Why did you decide to fly serial class last year?

I was waiting to see which way designs are going, the higher aspect ratio of the newer comp wings has made a significant step forward in performance. There are a number of lines of thought, but in simple terms it's those opting for the high arc, with lots of sailcloth; and those tending towards smaller, flatter, highly loaded wings. I thought I'd just sit back and observe which prototypes are shown to be the best. If you're part of the experiment, you can potentially back a losing trend and end up flying a problematic and over-demanding wing.

Have you had any 'moments' on open class wings in the past?

I had a horrible moment on an Airwave Rave Race in 1994. I was trying to B-line away from a cu nim, but ended up with a multitude of twists and a cravat. I deployed but got sucked back up towards the cloud. When I eventually hit the ground I got caught in the gust front and dragged through a few hectares of sunflowers. Last year I had two scares close to the ground with a most erratic form of recovery, which would never have happened with a serial class glider.

How was the 'serial experience' - could you keep up with open class gliders?

It was great fun. In longer XC tasks, without too many headwind components and plenty of route choices - often the case in the Manila Pre-Worlds, and the first two legs of the British Championships - it's not so difficult. However, in a shorter, faster task, with clustered gaggles, and much of the race

being made on a high-speed final glide, you have absolutely no chance on a serial wing.

I believe the new XC series proposed by Hans Bausenwein and the online XC comps will attract far more pilots who have tired of the physical risk-taking frequently required of current open race events. Of course, the current comp format with the ever-increasing need for high speed and testicular fortitude will continue. But, since serial wings can only really be competitive in the more XC-orientated tasks, we will probably find serial pilots moving completely away from the current race competitions, unless prizes such as XC magazine's £500 prize for a the UK serial class becomes more widespread.

With the current crop of competition gliders becoming increasingly removed from the gliders flown by the majority of pilots in the sport, it is possible that the flying public's interest in competition will wane. The introduction of serial wings in PWC events was a failure. Perhaps a change in the style of competition, with less emphasis on race and more on XC, would draw more pilots from a wider selection of categories; many of them currently regard top competition pilots as somewhat careless with their personal safety.

Did you enjoy your flying more this year than last?

For sure. Since flying is also my work - flying XC with clients who are generally on 1-2 or 2s - it was much less demanding both physically and mentally. Often I will be flying up to five hours a day in the

summer, a lot of it just hanging around waiting, or sometimes investigating potentially troublesome air. This is far more pleasant on a serial or lower grade wing than on a full-on comp wing. Likewise, in comp tasks when conditions became rowdy, especially in the Australian Open in Bright, I felt quite smug as some of the open class pilots battled to keep their wings under control.

The fun stopped a little at the last round of the British championships. I had been leading the championship series ahead of all the open class pilots. However, Ager in Spain was just perfect closed racing terrain for open class racing, unlike the previous legs in Britain and Portugal. Each day my lead was slowly eaten away. Equipped with 15km/h less top speed, and perhaps a point of glide less than the new hot ships, it all seemed a bit of a foregone conclusion. (*Ed - Steve eventually finished 2nd overall*)

What's your best trick in the half-pipe?

Old school frontside aerial pop out. Definitely the manoeuvre that gave me most airtime in the 70s.

What's next?

I'm excited about the new comp gliders and Bruce Goldsmith's enthusiasm and excitement over the new designs always gets me going, so I will be flying the new FR3 during the Worlds in Manila, but will probably drop to a DHV 2 for day to day flying. I have been playing around with hang gliders again after a 10 year absence. One year I'd like to use my rigid wing and mosquito to follow the storks that nest in Piedrahita [Steve's home in Spain] when they migrate to Africa in July... And it's about time I got that half pipe built in my garden! ☒

