

NEW STANDARDS

New World Champion Mark Parker reflects on the Standard Class team's win

NO SINGLE factor, decision, person, fluke or situation led us to win the worlds this year, and to explain exactly how and why we did would take forever. Rather, I think the overall effort was best described by Brian Spreckley way back in November 2004, when we met as a team for the first time at Booker to discuss planning: "Think of this as a very long journey, that begins here and ends with one or all of you on the podium at Hus Bos". With time to reflect, it certainly was a long journey that involved a lot of people, and it all came together in the two weeks of competition itself. However, for me, a number of moments in particular from those two weeks of flying stand out in my mind as important.

After a solid first day in tricky conditions, day 2 was proving to be every bit as good as the forecast, but at around a quarter of the way into the 370km flight we became separated. On crossing a gap I caught pretty bad air and entered the next climb some 400ft lower than Jon and Andy. As they climbed away in 5kts I struggled in 2 and gradually fell further away. It was clear I was now in different air: we could not stay together any longer and I had to make my own flight to try and catch up.

It is difficult to express the overwhelming sense of disappointment and failure you feel as you watch your team-mates pull away. It is something we had experienced in training but when it happens for real in a world it feels pretty crushing (it happened to all of us at same point in the comp). I turned off the radio, launched a few teddies out of the dv panel and tried to regain some composure.

The next time I spoke to the guys, things had actually got worse for me - they were 15km from the last tum... I was 45! The radio went back off pretty quickly again after I heard that! Things then seemed to go okay for me from then on - I forced myself to relax a little, got height with a good climb, and started to notice I was overtaking people, so much so I thought it was worth finding out where the guys were. They were now only about 10km ahead, and I was really inspired by the obvious relief in their voices when they realised I had pulled back so much. I was sure I could almost see them ahead and their encouragement and help in calling their climbs really dragged me forward. I was particularly taken aback by a call from Mark Holden in the Club Class: "R3, 424 climbing ahead of you..." Our final leg was converging with the Club Class boys, and as well as flying their own race, they'd cottoned on to the fact I was playing catch-up and were making a dedicated effort to help.

I finished only a few minutes after Jon and Andy, feeling pretty dejected that I had flown so badly, but the first people to greet me as I climbed out of R3 were Jon and Andy, grinning like idiots. "Mate, you've done it - pulled it out of the bag. We're first and second, and it looks like you've come third!" My mood changed in an instant: what I thought had been a terrible flight turned out to be a pretty good one, because of a bit of determination and five fantastic team-mates.

A few days later, the tables were turned. In some difficult conditions early on a 350km task, we became separated. I got the bubble, finding a good climb, which allowed me to push out into the better weather earlier than Jon and Andy. I found myself 10km ahead of Jon, and Andy was a similar distance behind Jon. Andy decided to go off radio and make his own flight, while I fed as much information back to Jon as I could - position of climbs/strength and conditions ahead. Jon was gradually catching me for the rest of the flight, and right at the end, as I took a very weak climb to get me on to a marginal glide home, I saw Jon pull in about 600ft below me in the Discus 2. I scraped home, but sadly

Jon didn't climb and landed 10km out. Andy did very well and managed to reach Jon's field. I had real sense of failure, guilt almost, that I had got home and my team-mates hadn't. I knew I had achieved a reasonably good day result but the guys were sure to lose at least 200 points to the winner. I was a little worried what their mood would be like. I needn't have been: I got a call from Jon in the field - our closest competitor at that time, the Dutch pilot Jelmar Wassenaar, was in the same field so we would still hold the top three places, albeit in a different order. The guys were a little disappointed to have missed an opportunity to build an even bigger lead, but all Jon said to me was: "Nicely done, Mark and cheers for pulling me back so much".

By flying effectively together. we'd managed to hold the top three places since day 2. As we flew around before the start wingtip to wingtip, we were pretty conspicuous and some teams elected to play the tactical game with us: find us in the start sector, wait for us to start, cross the line a couple of minutes after and attempt to use us as lift markers and catch up. It should not have bothered us, but on day 7 it did. The weather turned blue, and it was imperative that, as the task was 370km, we should start early. A large gaggle seemed to engulf us in the start sector; we were annoyed that the already weak-climbs were being weakened further by the gaggle; and in our attempts to lose them and find better climbs to get us up to a sensible start height, time was being wasted. It was clear that the gaggle simply were not going to leave until we did, and we eventually left at 2pm: way too late.

We were lucky to get back, but had flown together well and actually beat the gaggle that started after us. What we had failed to notice was that the real challengers – the Germans, Swiss and the Dutch - had flown their own flight started at a sensible time, beaten us convincingly and taken a sizeable chunk out of our lead. This was a real wake up call for us. We had built a lead by doing our own thing, but allowing ourselves to be distracted by the tactical game meant we let some good pilots slip through. We made a firm decision there and then not to play the tactical game. As team captain Reb Rebeck reminded us: "you've shown you can win, so don't change the formula, keep doing what you've been doing all week."

The penultimate day did little to improve my already less-than-ecstatic enthusiasm for assigned area tasks. After what felt to us like a fairly good run, we were slightly bemused to find we had finished pretty much last in the field, dropping 200 points and bringing Stefan Leutenegger uncomfortably close to us in points. All to play for on the last day no one said it was going to be easy!

I will never forget that last day. 6kt climbs, cloudbases in excess of 6.000ft, cruising at more than 100kt. Jon was really on form, finishing at 112km/h to win the day. One point stands out: as Andy and I headed home about 70km out, the sky was looking a bit sketchy. Andy Davis called us to let us know that at the speed we were going, we were all winning the day. Shortly afterward, Andy and I pulled into an extraordinary 7kt climb, which put us on glide. As the last day of the comp was scrubbed this happened to be our last climb of the worlds. As we spiralled up, I remember thinking someone up there must have been smiling on us.

Flying the worlds was a strange, fantastic and utterly unforgettable experience for me, and we owe many people a great deal. First of all the BGA, who right from the beginning supported and trained us. The organisation at Hus Bos, which quite simply was excellent and did us proud. The support we received all week from members of the British gliding movement as a whole, whether phone calls, emails, messages on the worlds website, or simply turning up to wish us well, was overwhelming and inspirational. My personal thanks go to the RAFGSA and Bannerdown Gliding Club for the use of their LS8, R3.

Particular thanks goes to our coaches, led by Brian Spreckley and Andy Davis. All week, the team had on hand the likes of Andy himself, Robin May, Mike Young, Pete Masson, Jez and Rich Hood and Martyn Wells. Their dedicated support, and the wealth of experience, knowledge and advice we could draw from, was invaluable. Thanks to team captain Reb for keeping us on the straight and narrow, and working so hard for us. There are many more people who together, through sheer generosity and hard work, supported us and got the team to the worlds; it's with regret that I cannot possibly mention them all here.

The build up to, and competing in, the worlds shifted my outlook on gliding. I have always found gliding a fairly self-centred sport: me against the weather, the clock, the other competitors, or whatever. Flying as a team turned "me" into "us" and made the flying itself so much more rewarding, not least because I was so fortunate to have such fantastic team-mates in Johnny Roberts, Mark Holden and Ian Craigie in the Club Class, and Jon Meyer and Andy May flying with me in the Standard Class. We flew together well because we got on so well, we are of equal skill (albeit with slightly differing styles) and above all had implicit trust in each other's ability and motivation. I would rather have won bronze, and seen my team-mates first and second, than win a gold and be on the podium alone, and I know they felt the same. We knew we could not do it alone so any success is equally shared.

I don't recall being presented with a single opportunity at the worlds that, if seized, would win the comp. We were, however, presented on every flight with lots of chances to throw it away. The proof for me that I was in a good team was that when we were together, wingtip to wingtip, we never felt in any real danger of making those comp-losing mistakes. Together we stand, divided we fall. So we stuck together in the air, and stood together on the centre stage of the podium.