

How To Win Your First Contest: A Rookies Experience at the 2019 1-26 Championships

How does one win a soaring contest, especially one that is national in scope, one that brings together the best glider guiders in their class from all points in North America?

It has been said that a couple of days of contest flying will teach a guy more about cross country flying than years of striking out solo. As a multi decade low performance cross country flier, but first-time competitor, I can attest to the truth of that axiom! I had the joy of competing and learning in my first soaring contest. In this case, it was the 2019 1-26 Championships held this year at Moriarty NM, the only true One-Class sailplane racing available in the United States.

Even as a novice and a newbie to the race scene, I had high personal goals. Knowing that the 1-26 competitors are a fun-loving group, I knew I was going to have a ball, but I also knew that their competitive spirit is legendary. These guys and gals are super talented and highly experienced. They race in a class of sailplane which is of very modest performance but which provides one-on-one true racing, where the cleanest most well equipped 1-26 has very little performance difference with the dirtiest, dingiest club 1-26. Its man against man, not machine. These folks are completely generous in helping anyone new to 1-26 racing and freely share their "trade secrets". But once in the air, they are fearless gladiators, fighting for every advantage possible from the start to the final glide. They are pussy cats on the ground but Bengal tigers of the air! Some of these folks have been racing the same 1-26 for more than 30 years and they do things with these birds that are truly astounding!

How was I, a little "kitten", going to compete with this Pride? I realized that it had taken me 30 years to finally be able to set my talents against the best in the world at 1-26 racing. But, while slightly overwhelmed at the list of highly talented pilots present, and me being the rookie of the bunch, I didn't want to waste my opportunity. I was determined to make a good showing!

With this in mind, as I mentally prepared for this competition, I formulated 5 basic principles, principles I felt that, if applied, would serve me well. At worst case, they should prevent me from becoming "tail end Charlie", and at best, they should help me to hang with the middle of the pack. Little did I know, they turned out to be just the ticket needed for this inexperienced "pup" to run with the big dogs.

In hind sight, I feel these principles, while most likely intuitively known and practiced by all the top racers, also have application to anyone competing for the first time or in achieving personal cross-country goals. While I tried to apply these 5 principles on every day of the meet, it was on the last day where all 5 principles proved their vital worth. Entering that last day of competition, I was sitting in third place overall, but there were less than 40 points separating the top 5 positions! Here are those 5 principles that served me so well!

Principle #1: Prepare in order to Eliminate All Distractions - Don't just fly to fly, Have a goal in mind on every pre-contest flight

In the months leading up to the Moriarty contest, I tried to get as many flights as possible in my 1-26, contest number 225, Two Bits. I worked at efficient thermal entry/exit, I would find a thermal and then purposely leave it to practice re-acquiring it. I flew on marginal days just to practice working very weak broken barely existent lift. In addition, I worked at really fine tuning my instrument systems. I had just installed a new-used vario flight computer, and also an Oudie logger. The vario had bugs, unfixable internal programming bugs, and in the end, there just wasn't time enough for repair. That was problematic, but just knowing that the glide computer was inoperative was critical for the upcoming championship. I could revert to flying the old-fashioned way with a Macready ring. But if I had gone into the contest "thinking" my flight computer was accurate, I would have set myself up for total distraction and disaster.

I worked at making every landing a challenge, all short field ones included real and imaginary approach obstacles. In addition, I worked with my son Daniel who was going to be my crew. We worked out an efficient communication system and a home designed tracking system that worked utilizing amateur radio repeaters.

The overall objective of all this preparation was to **MINIMIZE DISTRACTIONS**. I may be a “contest juvenile”, but I consider myself a “pre-geriatric” old codger. My brain computing power is limited (at least I have a semi-valid excuse now). I wanted all of the mechanics of xc flying to be automatic, thermal centering, entrance/exit, knowledge of what I could and could not handle regarding my off field landing capabilities etc. In addition, I wanted no interior distractions in working with my Oudie or my varicos or my O2 system. I also wanted to be totally confident in my crew’s ability to track, communicate, and locate me if need be.

All of this prep work was to make flying automatic, to concentrate on other more important inflight matters, such as analyzing the everchanging weather conditions. I wanted to create an environment which allowed my brain the power and the time to observe, observe, observe. No Distractions!

We arrived at Moriarty intentionally early in order to get a feel for the area and its conditions. Instead of just flying locally, I set a pre-contest flight goal of trying for diamond distance. This would be a long flight and accomplish multiple things. Hopefully it would give me a general feel for the progression of soaring conditions throughout the entire length of the day. It would also give me lots of time actively working with my Oudie so changing screens etc. would become automatic. It was to prove a good test for my crew Daniel and our system for communication, tracking, and retrieval, as this was going to be a straight line downwind-running flight. Vulgar, but effective, ask Tony Condon.

"I got a very late start. The day was one of roaring SW winds gusting over 35k. After multiple problems trying to get a tow (balky tow plane) I finally got launched and on course by 2pm. That is prohibitively late for a diamond distance try in a 23/1 L/D glider. What the heck, I've got a crew, that's a rare treat, let's go! 4 hours later I landed just west of Boise City OK."

I didn't make diamond distance but I did get 220 miles, good for my gold distance and a NM 13.5-meter record. But what turned out to be more important, this flight gave me a feel for the terrain, landout, and weather conditions N and NE of Moriarty, areas which we would end up flying over for much of the contest. All of the preparation work is essential, but sometimes during a contest things are out of your control. I was soon to find out.

Last Contest Day:

Task: Finish Bonus Distance Task

Moriarty-Zorro Ranch-Glorieta-Cedarvale-Moriarty

It was the last day of the championships. The contest had been fiercely competitive with strong and at times challenging conditions. The point standings of the first five places were neck and neck. Whichever pilot had the best flight on this last day would most likely be Champion.

"We had been getting launched each day by three tow planes. One of them turned out to be a not so super, Super Cub. With only 150hp, this bird had to work hard just to get a 1-26 up to the 2,000ft agl, contest tow height. Everyone on the flight line had learned to dread the site of that bird taxiing up to make a tow. Wouldn't you know it, she taxied in front of me!"

Normally It wouldn't be so bad. I had been towed by her on an earlier contest day, but that day was cooler, and I was at the front of the launch grid, so I had time to sort things out before having to head out on course. Or to get a relight. But today, wouldn't you know it, I was scheduled at the back of the grid, one of the last to launch. The task was designed as a long one and everyone was anxious to get out on course. Here I was, in the back, now

looking at a minimum of another 15 minutes on tow. We launched, then around and around we towed. She struggled and time passed. She got me up to 1500ft and that was it, it just wasn't gonna pull me any higher with the density altitude we had. Disgustingly, I released, with a built-in disadvantage. By the time I saved myself and finally made a start, almost everyone was gone."

Principle #2: Be Your Own Pilot Don't Be a Crowd Follower. Unless it's a very weak day try to make your own Decisions

It's easy to be a follower, in fact, most in the world are followers. But by very definition, the one who follows is always going to be at best, in second place. While new to competition, I knew that I needed to be the master of my own destiny. If I won, it would be by my own merits. If I lost, I wouldn't be able to blame it on the "other" guy or the pack's decision. I would learn from my own mistakes. In order to get really good at this business, the essential skill is not one single item, it's a combination. But at the heart of it all is the ability **to gather information and make a decision**. Which way to fly, how deep to go into a sector, when to slow down and in a low performance glider, when to pray.

"I chased after the pack. All the leaders were already long gone, even though the day was turning out to be much weaker than forecast. For me, getting away from Moriarty and toward the first assigned turnpoint at Zorro Ranch was proving to be very difficult. I was starting to think it would be my undoing. I soon found myself down to 1,200 ft agl. Only about 6 miles along course. I had landing possibilities and had alerted my crew who were standing by to make a fast retrieve if need be, but I thought;

"Boy, what a way to fail, on the last day. Nearly last to start, but first to land out! "

*Just to my left I spotted a cattle feed lot. I thought if there was any chance of lift around, it would be there over that darker ground. The added lift provided by little cattle flatulent wouldn't hurt that possibility either. I meandered over and found about 50 fpm lift. Around and around I ground. I was like an old mule pulling the mill stone round n round. As I worked and sweated in my little "cattle gas" thermal, barely holding altitude, I noticed another 1-26 to the east of me also circling. " Boy, there's my salvation! ", I thought. Normally one would rush over there and join in the "lift". But if I abandoned my little "gas bag", I was already so low, it would be a one-shot deal in making it over to that gliders spot with very little altitude with which to locate the supposed lift. I decided to hold on and watch. After watching that guy for a few turns I realized he was as low as me and didn't seem to be gaining at all.**make your own decisions...** I decided to stay in my little 50fpm bubble. After a few minutes it developed into a 500fpm boomer and away I went. I never saw that guy again.*

*After a while, I was approaching Zorro Ranch. While still a few miles south, I noticed that there were a bunch of other ships milling around the Zorro area. Zorro has an airstrip and the guys were all low, sticking close to the safety of that strip. In essence, they were stuck. While they were circling around, they had nothing. I could have joined them in the "mill", maybe our combined efforts would result in finding something. But that wasn't for me. I looked around, and saw there was an area of broken terrain to the east. I figured if there was any lift in the area it would be over that rougher, gully filled, broken ground. I meandered over there**make your own decisions.....** I turned east to take a sniff."*

Principle #3: If you want to Win and not just finish in the middle of the pack, When Conditions Warrant, Fly Just a Little Beyond Your Comfort Level.

In order to win and also grow in your soaring skill set, it is necessary to stick your neck out just a little. One needs to strive to continually learn and good ole actual experience is an essential teaching tool. How do you get experience? You have to stretch a little. Measured guts are needed.

"With the altitude I had at the time, the broken ground was just a little beyond the gliding distance necessary to get back to the Zorro ranch airstrip. But there were sections of relatively clear ground on the edges of that broken area. I felt, if needed, I could set down in one of them if I was careful"

In addition to knowing my own land out abilities, I knew I had a great crew and had total confidence in Daniel being able to locate me in that roadless area. That's why my crew truck was a 4x4 with a winch! The preparations we had made and the ability to focus without distraction actually made making the decision easy. With my present skill set and crew situation, the only real risk was one of embarrassment, the humiliation of possibly landing out on only the second leg. I wonder how many folks play it safe and eventually lose or never reach their goal due to this?**stretch your comfort level within reason....**

" I headed over there and wouldn't you know it, there was a little lift. I heard some of the Zorro guys talking, lamenting their situation. So, I made a call to my "crew", letting him (them) know that I had found lift and was climbing in that area to the east. I needed to keep Daniel abreast of my situation but I also knew those guys stuck at Zorro needed help and I wanted to see everyone have a good chance at making the task. I only know of one other guy who in response to my "crew call" meandered east of Zorro and found the same salvation as me."

There was another factor in my decision to head to the east, which was actually 90 degrees off of the course line to the next turn point, namely Glorieta. To the east was a wonderfully developing line of convergence generated lift. The cu's were magnificent and if a guy could reach them, he would have a heck of a run north into Glorieta."

Principle #4: Observe Observe Observe:

To get more points, to fly further, or even eventually faster, you need to Observe and maybe even Slow Down.

In my limited four days of contest flying and from lots of low performance xc flying, I had found that picking proper lines and gauging the weather becomes far more important than things such as macready settings. One has to become a full time observer. The keys are found in looking and listening to what is going on outside the cockpit.

"Making it to that convergence line was the key. It was oriented directly North right into Glorieta, the 2nd turn point. Then it ran south toward Clines Corners which was the 3rd turn point and beyond toward the final assigned turnpoint of Cedarvale.

After catching the gully thermal, I pushed directly east, Glorieta was directly north. The extra distance going off course didn't matter. What mattered was staying in the air and reaching that convergence line. I kept pressing east, trying to catch that beautiful N-S oriented line of cu's. They seemed to always be slightly out of reach. But I was gaining on them, and the pucker factor was diminishing as every little scrap of lift I found was slowly moving my thermalling band higher, stronger, and safer. I finally reached that glorious cloud street and boy what a magnificent ride it gave me!

*About the time I was getting established on this line of lift and cruising back up at altitude, I heard Jim Bob Slocum, the contest points leader, having problems around Glorieta **Observe observe observe..... Go slower to go faster(and further).....***

This observation influenced my decision to shift gears out of go go go mode into a more conservative mind set. If Jim Bob, a fantastically accomplished 1-26 racer, was having trouble getting into Glorieta, I had better re-evaluate my task strategy. I decided I had better do some critical thinking about flying deeply into the Glorieta sector and thought I should just barely touch the edge of the circle, then high tail it out of there. Jim Bob was having trouble in there and I ended up relaying instructions to his crew via our fancy communication setup. His eventual Glorieta area land out stole his first-place spot and the contest win."

Keep in mind, this decision to maybe become conservative was made while I was bombing along at 85 knots (that's mighty fast for 1-26 cruising!) under a wonderful street heading toward Glorieta, a street that looked fantastic but turned out to lead into very weak conditions the deeper one ventured into the sector.

"At this time, it looked like the front runners, with the exception of Jim Bob, had me beat by miles and mph. The great and magnificent racer, Ron Schwartz came bombing past me rocking his wings, southbound, already on his way to the last two turnpoints. Mercy sakes!!! There I was, Northbound, still trying to head into Glorieta!"

I started to second guess my decision to only just penetrate the Glorieta sector. If Ron had bombed deep into Glorieta and things "looked" good into there, shouldn't I follow Ron's and the other front runners leads? But Jim Bob's trouble call for a relay to his crew, tempered my second-guessing nature. I decided to be conservative and held to my decision to just nick the Glorieta circle. Something else was on my mind, things were changing fast!observe..... observe..... observe.....

"Every once in awhile as I raced northward toward Glorieta at a cruise speed much faster than one would think a 1-26 could accomplish, I would stop and take a turn or two in a piece of exceptional, greater than 10 knot lift. After spending so much time scrapping the sage brush, that booming lift was just too good to pass up and I wanted to stay right at cloud base. As I circled around, I would look to the south, I wanted to keep an eye on how things were developing along the course line that I would be taking after I finished with Glorieta. What I saw gave me reason for concern. Three things were changing observe.... observe.... observe.....".

My first observation was that the convergence line to the South was now trending pretty far east of the last turn point. This eventually handicapped Ron Schwartz who tried to push pretty deeply toward the last turn.

Secondly, the day was weakening. I saw the cu's along that line were losing their definition. Looking to the west, directly back toward Moriarty, that course line had become a big blue hole with only a few ragged widely spaced cu's. This blue hole and its associated sink is what eliminated Cathy Williams from championship contention. She landed short, trying to get back to Moriarty from Clines Corners. She was within 30 points of me going into the last day. If she had cut her flight a little shorter or had worked every scrap of lift to get max altitude as I would eventually do, she might have gotten home, she would then have become champion.

The final observation was that the wind was starting to shift. It was now starting to blow from the NW. This was a factor in eliminating another multi time competitor and master 1-26 pilot, Irn Jousma, who took the risk of going for a big flight deep into the last turn area. He ended up landing less than a mile short of Moriarty trying to get home. Had he gotten home, he would have won the day and had the 1,000 points and probably been the contest champ.

I observed these shifts and figured it would be pretty risky to push into the last optional turn area, and then have to beat back into the wind to get home. On this particular contest day, there was a 300-point bonus on the table just for getting home regardless of total mileage flown. It was paramount to GET HOME, even if it meant giving up distance points.

Principle #5: Know the Rules and Keep Track of What You Need and Need Not Do.

One cardinal rule of sailplane racing is **Consistency Beats Brilliance every time**. A competitor doesn't necessarily need to win any day, but they need to score consistently high most days. As the contest progresses, one needs to know how hard to push to maintain position or gain a few spots. They also need to know how things are scored for each type of task.

A new style of task was debuted at this year's contest. It is called the Finish Bonus Distance Task FBTD. It is a task where turnpoints are assigned with sectors giving a competitor the choice of how far to push into the sector, exactly like a TAT. In this new task, a pilot also has a choice of how much of the assigned task to attempt. One can try and hit all of the turnpoints in the stated order or just a few in the order given and then

return home. But with this new style task there is a wild card. Anyone who makes it home regardless of whether they hit one turn point or all of them, is granted a 300-point bonus. It is designed to give experienced pilots the option to fly aggressively (go deep into the circle and/or hit additional assigned turnpoint areas) but also allows the less experienced competitors the ability to fly conservatively and still score a good amount of points. The added 300-point bonus for landing back home however is more than just a strong encouragement to make it home, it makes getting home essential! When I first heard about this new task I was a strong objector to the concept for various reasons. But once the association adopted it, I used it to my advantage. With this task, making a spectacularly long flight by reaching all four of the turns but failing to get home, meant you lose out on the 300-point bonus and thus, in reality, unless you have a monstrous cumulative points lead, you end up losing the contest, period**know the rules**.....

"When I got to the 3rd turn point, Clines Corners, I had more decisions to make. I could press on deeper into the Clines Corners sector and/or press on southbound toward the last assigned turn point. Based on the observations I made of the soaring conditions and an understanding of the critical points-nature of getting home, I decided I had better not try for any more miles and better high tail it for home."

"Leaving the Clines Corners sector, I was at 11k (about 6k agl), but looking at that big blue hole and the strengthening head wind, I stopped and nursed ever foot I could get from one of the most westward convergence line thermals that was on the edge of the big blue hole. Time and speed didn't matter anymore, what mattered was to get home, by hook or by crook. I finally turned westward toward home with about 14k on the altimeter. It turned out, I needed dang near every foot of that altitude to get home and make a decent pattern approach, given the strengthening quartering headwind and the big blue hole with its associated horrendous NM sink!"

It was nail biting time for everyone on the ground waiting for the last folks to finish or to check in. The scores were so close that it was anyone's guess who would win the day and who would win the Championship. As I sat on the ground waiting. I was very content with myself regardless of the eventual outcome. It was my first ever contest and I learned so very much from flying with many of the masters of 1-26 racing, guys I had read about for decades. I was also thinking of my recently deceased brother Jim, who had raced glass birds back in the 70's when I was a teenager doing his crewing. He had drifted away from soaring but was being drawn back in when I purchased my 1-26. We had made tentative plans to race as a team at an upcoming 1-26 Championships. Cancer stole that dream, but I knew on this day he was watching.

I had prepared well. I had flown my own race. I had ventured a little out of my comfort zone, pressing into new personal challenges. I had made my own decisions, some good, some not so much. But on this last day, my decisions turned out to be winning ones. I had slowed down to fly further (stay airborne) and in this case, to get more points. I had taken the time and effort to continually make observations of the conditions and how those conditions were trending. Finally, I had understood the nuances of the rules to work them to my advantage. I was content.

A few hours later, everyone was accounted for, and my son Daniel and I returned from helping Irn Jousma on his short retrieve. The flight logs were analyzed and I was informed that I had won the day! Wow, I had earned 1,000 points. I thought It couldn't get any better than that!

But, additionally, on account of consistent flying and fairly high finishes throughout the meet, when the final points were calculated, I was privileged to be told that I was this year's 1-26 Champion!

Thanks go out to all the contestants with whom I was privileged to fly and learn a thing or two from. To Ridge Moreland who organized a wonderful contest. To Contest Director Daniel Sazhin who not only called wonderfully applicable tasks for the given weather, but also introduced this new and versatile type task we used on a few of the contest's days.

Finally, a big thank you goes out to the previous 1-26 Championship winner, Jim Bob Slocum, my official contest mentor (every newbie at the 1-26 Championships is assigned a mentor), who's radio call about getting

low at Glorieta helped formulate the second half of my winning days strategy. I bet I won't hear any radio calls from him next year!

His biggest contribution however, was the donation and instruction in the use of an external catheter. Come to think of it, this probably was a bigger factor in my win than all of the above-mentioned advice!