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# HANG GLIDING PARAGLIDING

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## TEN (10) QUESTIONS WITH POD- MASTER LEE

*By J. C. Brown*

## WISCONSIN

**You've got to be kidding!**



*By Davis Straub*

# Welcome to: WISCONSIN

## Wisconsin? You've got to be kidding!

By Davis Straub

**L**et's get serious here. What kind of goof would think that they could put on a major US competition in Wisconsin? I mean maybe a flat-water canoe race on the Rock River, a mountain bicycle trek through the Kettle Moraine, perhaps a birders' gathering to check out the sandhill cranes, but a big time hang gliding competition? You must be kidding.

It wasn't that long ago that all the major hang gliding meets took place in the hot dry west, where you could be sure that almost every day you would fly in rough and tumble conditions. Everyone felt that you needed the high mountain launches, the strong lift, and the big winds to carry you far.

Okay, so now we've got major competitions in Florida, but at least there they've got warm air, major flight

parks, and reasonably consistent flying conditions. Would it really be possible to get satisfactory flying conditions in the land of non-irrigated row crops and milk cows?

Even if someone put on a competition, would anyone come to Wisconsin? Brad Kushner, president of Raven Sky Sports, tried to do this last year and couldn't get anyone interested. Most people must have thought he was some kind of "kook."

This year Brad approached the prospect of putting on a competition, which he hoped would attract some of the top US pilots, with some trepidation. How could he talk the prospective pilots into coming, when it sounded somewhat suspect? What was this Raven Sky Sports anyway? Who was this Brad Kushner guy? What does he know? He's got a flight park in Wisconsin for god's sake. No one on the circuit knows anything about him.

Sure we'd heard that Raven, at the Twin Oaks grass airstrip, was the first hang gliding flight park but I, at least, wondered whether he could have chosen a place that was less conducive to business success. I had visited his flight park a couple of years previously in an attempt to get away from the summer heat of Florida and had a nice little flight. At the time it was hard to believe that Raven was a financially viable operation. The flying on that day seemed very iffy.

Situated in the "suitcase" college town of Whitewater, halfway between Milwaukee and Madison (the state capital and a big university town), Raven seemed unlikely to have enough good flying days to make a viable business. ("Suitcase" means that the students go home on the weekend – weird.)

But Brad, with strong support from America's premier meet director, David Glover, decided to give it another try this year. This time he



*Dale Guldán, a photographer for the Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel, takes his first tandem flight in a hang glider with Mark Furst during the 2003 Midwest Regional Competition at Raven Sky Sports.*

*Photo: Dale Guldán*



persisted, no matter the likely paucity of initial turnout, using word of mouth to build from there. David agreed to reduce his meet director fee to help keep the meet within reasonable cost bounds.

Word could spread out that this was a meet worth going to because your friends and worthy competitors would also be there. A core group from Florida (including Campbell Bowen, Russell Brown, Paris Williams, Bo Hagewood, Ron Gleason, and me) committed to the event, as did other dedicated pilots from around the country.

As we gathered for the event, we all heard about the big flights that the locals here and in northern Illinois had been having over the last two weeks. Chris Grzyb had gone 185 miles from a flight park near Leland. Had the good conditions already happened? Were we too late? We'd soon find out.

The next day, two days before the meet, got us to over 8,000 feet. The winds were moderate out of the northwest and the lift was almost too strong to be comfortable. This was not at all what I had expected. I was getting worried. Would we use up all the good weather before the meet? Well not to worry: the next day it rained. This was more like it. The meet was scheduled to last eight, maybe nine days, so I figured we'd get four or five days of flying, maybe less. We'd just have to put up with the boredom when the rains came.

The first day of the meet began with a bang. The cu's were cracking and there was 400 fpm lift over the airstrip. The lift was weaker elsewhere, but Bo, Paris and I got up to cloudbase at 3,200 feet AGL, upwind of the course line at the

three-mile start circle circumference for a great start.

Well, well, this was pretty cool. The lift was good, but not great. We'd have to stop and work weak stuff and make some low saves on the second leg of our first day's triangular task. No one had gotten much past the second turnpoint when even thicker clouds came in, completely shading the ground, and we were unable to work our way back to Whitewater against the wind under the dark clouds with low (3,200 feet AGL) cloudbases. Still, we'd had an exciting and thoroughly pleasant race for 40 miles.

The rain that we had assumed would be part of our competition came in thick and furious on the second day, making sure that all the surrounding farm lands were well and truly irrigated. Southeastern Wisconsin is quite beautiful from the air, with farm fields, marshes, rivers, woods, and plenty of open areas near country roads if you need to put it down.

On day three we got a wind out of the west and needed to go to the northeast to stay away from Milwaukee. The lift was a bit sporadic and not particularly strong. So far no one had made goal. Perhaps the task committee (of which I was a member) didn't yet have a good feel for the conditions.

Day four was completely overcast with low clouds at about 1000 feet AGL.

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That wouldn't have been so bad, but the winds were quite strong, looking to be in the upper 20s or low 30s (mph) from the movement of the low clouds. The FSL chart also showed strong winds. We figured it would be unsafe to fly even if we could have stayed up.

On Wednesday, the fifth day of the meet thick low cumulus clouds streaming out of the east from Lake Michigan again greeted us.

The winds had died down considerably though—to 10 knots—so it didn't feel unsafe. It just appeared that there wouldn't be any lift, since the sky was so dark and so was the ground. Still, these were cumulus clouds, even if they filled up 100 percent of the sky.

We called a 1 p.m. launch opening, under the assumption that we could just move it back if things didn't seem to improve. They didn't, and we moved it back to 2 p.m., and then 3 p.m. Just before 3 p.m. Bo went out to the launch area, forcing us to make a decision. We saw no reason to postpone it even further, since the day would only get weaker. We might as well test out the air. Besides, the start window wouldn't open until 4 p.m., although it was quite permissible to go earlier.

Guess what? The air was buoyant. We slowly climbed out under dark skies and complete shade to 2000 feet AGL (ground level is 820 feet) and stayed at cloudbase without any chance of being sucked into the clouds. I hung around the start circle, repeatedly getting back up to cloud base and waiting for the later start window and perhaps some sunshine, which I saw little pieces of, and maybe some guys to fly with.

Bo and Ron Gleason drifted off right after launching early. I had already

decided to not try to catch them or come in under them, since the margin for error was so small given our altitude above the ground. I also let Jim Lamb go after I climbed up through him and then saw him relatively low a mile further down the course line.

Lots of things go through your mind at a time like this. The lift is weak, you are low, the chances of staying up on your own are less than with friends, no one else is visible yet, the one guy you can see is lower, you don't know if the conditions are going to improve with more sunlight or deteriorate with less lift as the day goes on. I had been finding lift in most places, so I finally headed off on my own downwind to the five mile start circle circumference, and got up again just as I arrived there.

Perhaps I should have gone with Jim instead of feeling superior to him, since he ended up going seventeen miles. I went ten miles, going on glide just outside the start circle and not finding any more lift. Perhaps in partnership with Jim I would have had more luck. As I packed up I spied five flex wings circling up from low just half a mile to my north. They were working together and staying up. Many of them were able to fly twice as far as I did. Moral: fly with your buddies on weak days.

Well, guess what? On the next day we again got light winds, light lift, and thick dark low cumulus clouds that completely covered the sky. Only this time, we knew that we had been able to stay up in almost the same conditions. Still, it would have been nice to have some sunlight.

The hope was that the thick clouds would dissipate later in the afternoon. We were all out in the west launch area with our gliders, watching the sky and postponing the launch window opening to 1:30 p.m., when the sky did open up a little and we finally got to see some sun.

Just as quickly it closed over again, and by the time we were launching it was completely overcast. The air, of course, was gentle as could be as we climbed out under the clouds. In fact, the air conditions so far in the meet had been unbelievably nice. I had plenty of opportunities to carefully feel out the air and center up without any qualms in any of the cores. It was completely delightful to be in the air, the closest thing to the experience of flying in your dreams.

I had gone from dark sun glasses to orange ones and it was still dark and somewhat gloomy. I was wishing for my yellow cloud glasses at this point.

The lift was of course very light, but plenty of pilots were launching, staying up and gagging together. The task was downwind so we could just circle and drift. The task committee hadn't felt it would be possible to go upwind at all, and was very thoughtful in their choice of tasks.

We all collectively knew now that our best chance was to fly with our buddies. I was with nine flex wings as we drifted low toward the start circle. Three gliders went down right near us as we hung on in zero or less 'lift' just to keep in the air. Paris kept thinking he could "race," but he had to come back and stay with his friends. It took us 25 minutes to climb 500 feet and drift three miles. A few pilots were slowly dropping out below us.

Flying with flex wings, I was able to stay on top given the slightly slower sink rate of the AIR ATOS-C. This gave me a great positional advantage as I could watch everyone and go to the best lift that anyone found. I could also venture out a little bit with less chance of losing track of my buddies.

Flying together was a wonderful experience as we all searched around for the best part of the light lift and repeatedly came back together to work whatever anyone came up with to keep us going as a unit. It felt like we were weightless in a medium that wanted to support us, but just barely.

In the end there were four of us: Paris, Bubba, Terry, and me. Unfortunately

there was an area of sun ahead that was also perhaps a blue hole. We'd been staying alive at low altitudes in the dark for so long that any change was a worry. We would have no time to recover if we didn't find lift right away.

We missed a good climb just before we went on glide to the sunlit areas. Paris and I landed together to win the day twenty two miles out from Whitewater. We couldn't help but wonder what might have been if we'd just been a little more patient and found that last 500 feet under the clouds.

All the pilots were thoroughly enjoying the extremely pleasant flying experience, but still hoping for a day or two that we could at least make goal.

Finally on day seven the sun came out to play with us. We were feeling pretty cocky, having stayed up and gone pretty darn far in conditions that shocked the locals, so we called a 50 mile triangle with the first leg into the light wind.

The average overall climb rates did improve from the 40 fpm of the previous two days to 140 fpm: still not super strong, but much better. Plus, we were getting a few thousand feet higher. While the task required one low save with six or eight of us all working together, overall the contest now became more of a race than a test to see how long you could survive. The air still felt great.

With a 10 mph wind out of the northeast on the eighth day we called a task downwind to the west-southwest. There were soft fuzzy cu's over the field as we got ready for a 12:30 p.m. launch. Jim Lamb thought it was drying up from the east, and that we needed to get going.

We found good lift to 3,600 feet AGL. The clouds were looking sharper and better formed, and were plentiful for now. We'd still have to work with our friends, so most of us headed out together long before the start window began.

Ten miles out we find ourselves confronted with a 15 mile long cu-nimb just a few miles to our south. Thankfully we could get up just on its northern edge, even though now the ground is completely shaded for the next fifteen miles. I spotted some lightening and lots of rain, but the storm was barely moving, and the winds would be pushing it away from us.

We were able to negotiate our way around the storm and find the sunshine and good lift on the other side and to goal. We thought the storm might come and get us at the airport, but it dissipated, only stopping the guys who started late behind us.

Now it was our last day at the Midwestern Regionals, and the sky looked like what the locals assume to be a classic midwestern flying day in June. Puffy cu's with bases at 4,000 feet AGL filled most parts of the sky. With

a brisk northeasterly wind we finally decided on a short task 45 miles to the south, hoping to get two thirds of the pilots to goal.

I managed to find a patch of weak lift after a six mile glide through the first blue hole and had to stay in zero or a bit above until I could move over to get under better clouds. Still, the climb rates had increased greatly over the previous days. We now averaged over 250 fpm during the task, with some climbs over 600 fpm to 5,000 feet AGL.

The air was still almost completely comfortable, even when my vario's twenty second averager was showing 900 fpm. Just bank it up and twirl around.

All the rigids make goal that last day, and a good number of flex wings also. We got to land at a farmer's beautiful airstrip which he has neglected to mow; apparently he didn't have an aircraft any more. Having virtual goals with quarter-mile cylinders around them sure made it easy to pick spots we've never been to (usually grass airstrips taken from the maps) for goals.

In all it was a phenomenal meet and the most fun I've had so far this year competing—mostly because of the great conditions in the air. We flew seven days out of nine and in conditions that were very enjoyable but also challenging.

Everyone really enjoyed the area, the flight park, and the people at Raven Sky Sports who were very professional and friendly. With four Dragonflies on the weekend they were able to get everyone in the air in twenty minutes. I'm sure that the flight park can handle a much bigger crowd.

Still it was nice to be with a small group and get all the benefits of the personal attention from such a dedicated crew. It may sound crazy to have a flight park in Wisconsin, but it turned out for us to be a wonderful experience. Raven Sky Sports has been hiding under our noses all this time.

We think Brad can be convinced to share southeastern Wisconsin next year with a bunch of outsiders sometime in June when the weather looks like it will be "typical." If all competitions were as much fun as this one, you'd want to go to every one. Don't miss it in 2004.

Results can be found at <http://www.flytec.com/mwregionals>. Be sure to check out the photos and the animated track logs of the top three pilots in each class. Thanks to Flytec for all the cool prizes, and to Brad for treating us all to Mongolian Stir Fry on the rain day. Thanks also to David Glover for again letting the pilots decide how to run the meet—and to all the folks at Raven Sky Sports for their warm welcome and gracious help.

For more detailed reports on the event, visit [www.ozreport.com](http://www.ozreport.com)

