

## History of Australian Hang Gliding Competitions

### Australian Open Hang Gliding Championships and the Australian team list for World Championships

Just as the sport as a whole has made rapid progress from its humble beginnings with the first modern hang glider invented and developed by John Dickenson in Grafton and then Sydney, and from there, behind the boats of the Water Ski and Kite Flyers Association, the objectives and style of our National Championships have also evolved. Technology has changed drastically throughout the years in terms of glider design, the instruments we fly with and the means by which competitions are scored.

Many things change and many things stay the same. Some things that have steadfastly remained are the feel of the wind on the pilots face and the camaraderie between all the people that partake in the experience of free flight.

Here is a quick history of the sport of Hang Gliding and the national level competitions and competitors.

The gliders being used in competition now have evolved directly from the original modern hang glider that started the sport.

The first wood and plastic hang glider was built by John Dickenson in Grafton in 1963. He developed it over the next six years to the point where it was made of aircraft grade tubing and bolts, stainless steel cables with tangs attached by swages and conventional sail cloth.

These gliders were used as stunt spectacles by the likes of Bill Moyes and Bill Bennett in Australia and the USA at shows and festivals. The Bills' antics soon caught on as a sport and gliders were being built and flown all over the world.

By the late 70's the design of the gliders was changing rapidly, they were able to glide greater distances, and were now able to climb quite easily in rising currents of air. All it took was for the pilots to learn how to recognise and use those elusive up-drafts. In the mid to late 70's, the world governing body of airsport, the FAI, took a good look at this emerging sport and created some definitions and regulations. They created classes for these foot launched gliders, with the flex-wing style gliders becoming Class 1 Hang Gliders, and the rigid wing, aeroplane style foot launched gliders becoming Class 2.

## 1976-1980

Steve Moyes, Rick Duncan, Equal Tim Travers & Steve Powter, Rick Duncan, Steve Moyes

Even with the rapid emergence of foot launch hang gliding in the mid seventies our competitors were still flying glides with figure eights around pylons or 360 degree turns to finish the flight with a spot landing as was required of the tow kite era. The first foot launched Nationals were held in 1976 at Mt York in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney and were won by Steve Moyes, who also dominated the tow comps of that era. The '77 Nationals at Mt Elephant in Victoria were won by another keen young tow graduate by the name of Rick Duncan. However this competition introduced many competitors to thermals. This was an accidental consequence of flying a volcanic plug in summer, with these unexpected blobs of lift tending to mess-up landing approaches or by comparison the sink would reduce a flight to a rapid plummet to the bottom. By 1978 pilots had learnt a little more about the vagaries of convective lift and headed to Burra in SA hoping to test these new found skills. The weather unfortunately failed to co-operate (still seems to be a problem) and the ultimate winners/survivors were Steve Powter and Tim Travers in a tied result. Even though we had learnt how to utilise thermals our competitions still revolved around pylon courses, with little or no allowances for pilots flying in dramatically varying conditions. In '79 and '80 the tow launch nationals seemed to regain dominance and it was not until 1981 at Mt Buffalo that the pilots started to demand greater organisation, and better tasks, that more realistically tested their free flying skills and objectives.

The first Hang Gliding World Championships were held in Kössen, Austria in 1976. They were won by Terry Delore of New Zealand, flying an Australian designed Ultralight Flight Systems hang glider, with Steve Moyes coming 3rd

flying an Australian Moyes glider. There was also a Class 2 Championship and a Standard class. K. Battle and Rick Duncan contested those classes respectively.

1979 saw the World Championships held in Grenoble, France. The Australian team was Steve Moyes and Peter Brown.

## 1981-1985

Phil Mathewson, Steve Blenkinsop, Alan Daniel, Danny Scott, Phil Flentje

This move to Mt Buffalo saw the change to true cross country tasks if only at a limited level. Phil Mathewson became National Champion. There were still pylon judges for short courses and duration tasks, but these were now interspersed with true X-C days where "open distance" was all the rage as pilots daily improved on personal bests. The summer of '82 saw Steve Blenkinsop hold things down just long enough to earn the National Champ Title. However, early in that season Rob DeGroot produced a flight of 250km which ensured that the National Championships were bound to return to the Mt Buffalo region. Drought conditions prevailed at Ben Nevis for the '83 Nationals where smoke haze and raised dust from the devastating Ash Wednesday fires created problems for the photo turn points that had been introduced in order to provide longer tasks. The comps were run using a heats system with scores allocated for placing within the heat. Alan Daniel was victorious in '83 with Danny Scott, and Phil Flentje being crowned National Champions in the '84 and '85 comps respectively. It was at Ben Nevis in 1984 that the 40 or so competition pilots that gathered in the Buangor Pub on a bad weather day, decided to form a Competitions Committee. The committee was elected from those gathered with the major objective of developing and designing a better competition format and scoring system. Glider design was undergoing a generational change. The Hang Glider wings were becoming more like aircraft wings with the "cross tubes" being enclosed inside the wing and the "deflexor wires" disappearing from the leading edges of the wings.

The Australian team for the World Meet in Beppu, Japan in 1981 was Steve Moyes, Steve Gilmore, Dennis Cummings, Gregg Rogerson, Wes Hill and Robert French.

Tegelburg, Germany 1983 saw victory for Steve Moyes. Steve's team mates were Rick Duncan, Phil Mathewson, Ian Jarman, Allan Daniels and Steve Powter.

In Kossen again for 1985, Steve Moyes finished 3rd, with Rick Duncan, Steve Blenkinsop, Ian Jarman and Danny Scott.

## 1986-1990

Steve Moyes, Rick Duncan, Rick Duncan, Ian Jarman, Steve Moyes

With the HGFA considering a bid for the '88 World Championships the nationals made their inevitable return to the Bright/Buffalo area. The scoring system had changed, heats were still utilised but pilots were now also scored against the field and upon relative performance. The number of pilots had increased to over 60 and the process of trialing comp formats and scoring systems had begun in earnest, albeit to a fair amount of criticism. Steve Moyes had taken the title but once again with the increasing number of top overseas entrants, the actual first and second place getters were visitors. The Comps Committee returned to the Swan Masters the following year with a whole new concept, computer trialed and tested at lesser comps. As this was the lead up meet to the next World Championships 150 entrants put the system to the test. Rick Duncan could find no fault with the scoring system, nor with the flying. Twelve rounds with daily tasks averaging over 100km. But these were not open distance tasks. The equipment and competitor skill now allowed for more convenient yet more challenging out and return or triangular courses. The larger field required several launch sites to be utilised with elimination rounds followed by a cut to a finals. A win at the Australian Championships was now indeed a great achievement. History now records that Rick's victory was a precursor to his leading the Australian Team to Individual and Team Gold at the following World Championships in 1988. The hosting of the Worlds saw the '88 Nationals postponed until October and moved to Killarney in SE Queensland. Once again Rick Duncan took the Title of Australian Champ. With only fine tuning to our competition format the next two Nationals ran smoothly, but were as different as Killarney was to Ben Nevis. It was back to Buffalo in '89 for another arduous 11 day event of eliminations and finals. Ian Jarman, the National Team Coach for the '88 and '89 World Champs was a convincing winner, while at Corryong in '90 Steve Moyes' consistency saw him take yet another title.

Mt Buffalo, Victoria 1988 Rick Duncan wins and Steve Moyes third. The rest of the team consisted of Mark Newland, Drew Cooper, Carl Braden, Neil Mersham, Russell Duncan and Danny Scott.

1989 in Fiesch, Switzerland was Steve Blenkinsop, Drew Cooper, Mark Newland, Steve Moyes, Carl Braden and Rick Duncan.

## 1991-1995

Steve Moyes, Mark Newland, Drew Cooper, Mark Newland, Mark Newland

The 1991 Nationals returned to Mount Buffalo where Steve Moyes successfully defended his Title in some fairly inverted conditions. The Open then moved to the HGFA national office location of Tumut, with once again some inverted and fairly stable conditions heralding the start of a long drought. Mark Newland was the highest placed Australian at the 92 Open with Thomas Suchanek and the French beginning to show some real dominance. It had been quite a few years since the Open had been held in the Western Victorian area of Mt Cole-Ben Nevis where Drew Cooper finally took the title in 1993. Drew had been the No. 1 ranked pilot since 1991 and was to retain that ranking in 1994 where Mark Newland was to take the trophy back in an interesting battle at Mt Beauty. Mark maintained that good form to win in 1995 when the Open leapt back to the future as a tow meet in the drought stricken NSW western plains town of Hay. As usual the presence of a hang gliding event brought relieving rains to the farmers which created a nightmare for competition organisers.

As the nineties continue the emphasis is changing once more, as pilot skill levels continue to increase. The current style competitions continued to evolve in new directions to ensure that each pilot is challenged and that those new challenges encompassed all the pilot's skills, knowledge and advancing new technologies. Consideration of spectators and promotional aspects will also begin to have an effect on competition formats if the sport is to grow.

A new professionalism is emerging; competition pilots must not only have more airtime they must supplement this with strength and endurance conditioning. As flights extend in both time, length and accuracy of performance, greater meteorology and strategic skills are needed to be developed. Pilots with an ability to adapt to and use new technologies to their best advantage will gain a competitive edge. This adaptability will become increasingly more important as events are modified to attract greater media exposure and sponsorship.

The World Championships as a tow launch event scheduled for Forbes NSW in 1998 should prove to be a catalyst for major changes in technology and direction. The concept of a tow launched World Championship was new and also, the traditional ground based towing was being challenged by aero-towing; bringing gliders aloft by towing them up with trikes. The emergence of the Europeans as a major force in the early nineties looks like continuing at least until that event. Australian pilots will need to work very hard if they are to regain the dominance enjoyed a decade ago.

'95 saw the beginning of a generational change with Class 1 Hang Gliders. There were prototype gliders flying with the top rigging missing! Cantilevered beams inside the wing was allowing a new resurgence in glider design to begin and new realms of performance to be enjoyed.

Governador Valadarez, in Brazil in 1991 was contested by Drew Cooper, Steve Moyes, Mark Newland, Steve Blenkinsop and Carl Braden.

In the mighty Owens Valley 1993, saw Steve Moyes, Mark Newland, Drew Cooper, Dave Adams, Carl Braden and Russell Duncan do battle in the desert.

The 1995 World Championships were held in the mountains around Ager, Spain. The Australian team consisted of Drew Cooper, Steve Blenkinsop, Michael Zupanc, Geoff Tullock, Mark Newland, Steve Gilmore and Steve Moyes.

## 1996 – 1999

Geoff Tulloch, Rohan Holtkamp, Joel Rebbeschi, Grant Heaney

As the nineties draw to close the required pilot skill levels and the refinement of competition equipment continues to increase.

More professionalism is emerging; competition pilots must not only have more airtime they must supplement this with a sound technical understanding of the aviation sciences as well as often complex competition systems. Pilots with an ability to adapt to and use new technologies to best advantage continue to gain a competitive edge.

A new type of hang glider is produced in Europe. This new concept uses a "rigid wing" like the wing of a sailplane, but it is steered by spoilers that are activated by the pilot moving his weight. The makers try to get this high performance wing entered into the upcoming World Championships at Forbes as a Class 1 Hang Glider (weight shift control). Fortunately (unfortunately?) Michael Zupanc had seen these gliders in Europe and knew that they were not "real" Hang Gliders and were really Class 2 Gliders. Controversy erupted and after much haggling, Mike relented and said that they were free to enter their gliders in the event. They would simply have the spoilers wired shut, and they could then "weight shift" their aircraft as much as they like. Needless to say, they did not bother to enter!

The 1998 World Championships were held as a tow launch event at Forbes NSW. As expected the European teams continued their dominance and although the Australian team took a credible fourth place behind Austria, Germany and Italy, it is apparent that some serious rebuilding of our elite performer stocks is now overdue. It is no coincidence that winners of our National Championship since 1996 were all on the team at Forbes.

1998 saw the use of GPS flight verification systems that ran off the existing track log functions of standard GPS instruments used successfully in competitions for the first time. This concept had been used previously but worked by using special equipment which was expensive and impractical for use in Hang Gliders. Tim Cummings developed a software system that used common hand held GPS units, but was still "secure", that is pilots could not cheat! This Australian bred system is set to replace photographs as the means of verifying competition flights.

The Australian team at The Forbes World Championship was Rohan Holtkamp, Kraig Coomber, Drew Cooper, Steve Moyes, Geoff Tullock, Grant Heaney, Dave Adams and Michael Jackson. Monte Cucco, Italy in 1999, saw Steve Moyes, Joel Rebbechi, Phil Schroder, Len Paton and the husband and wife pairing of Grant and Tove Heaney contest the title.

## 2000 - 2001

Joel Rebbechi, Rohan Holtkamp

The new millennium has GPS flight verification firmly entrenched as the primary means of flight verification for competition. The system pioneered by Tim Cummings has been copied around the world, and the Australian Competition rules are the benchmark for the international rules.

The National competitions are tow events at Hay, with diminishing attendance by local pilots, but with generally good flying weather. The costs and pressures of high level competition diminishes our attendance at overseas competition, but there is a high level of European and American attendance at our events. The Australian pilots struggle on the international competition scene and are dealt a further blow when a promising new competition pilot, Joel Rebbechi, who has become a major international threat, tragically dies.

2001 saw a new event concept, the all aero-tow competition, held at Forbes. The weather was hot and the flying was good with many overseas pilots attending. Jon Durrand took the honours as the highest placed Australian whilst coming seventh in the comp.

The 2001 World Championships in Algodonales, Spain saw Rohan Holtkamp finish fourth with Steve Moyes, Jon Durrand, Phil Pritchard, Lloyd Pennicuick and Neva Bull contesting the meet.

## 2002 - 2003

Kraig Coomber, Kraig Coomber

The Nationals were again, tow competitions at Hay. The weather is not that good, with days being lost to strong winds in both competitions. Aero towing is now firmly entrenched with a significant portion of the competition field opting for aero tow launches. Australian participation at the Nationals is becoming quite small, but strong interest from overseas pilots means that these events are successful events. Towing is the main competition format for the AAA sanction events with Hay and Deniliquin hosting the premier competitions. Topless gliders are now essential for pilots wishing to get high ladder points, which has meant that pilots that are not able to purchase these new and significantly more expensive gliders are at a performance disadvantage. "Floater" gliders, slow flying, exposed crossbar gliders which traditionally have been used as learner gliders (although many years ago they were the high performance super ships) have gained a new clientele from the ranks of the experienced pilots wanting to be able to fly the way they in "the good old days", skimming sand dunes and just generally taking it easy.

At the opposite end of the performance scale, the cantilevered rigid wing gliders that were barred from the Forbes World Championships are also becoming popular and they are given their own FAI sub class, Class 5. CIVL, which is the Hang Gliding part of the FAI now has Class 1 gliders, the "traditional" Hang Gliders, Class 2, which consists of the rigid wing gliders, Class 3, the Paragliders, Class 4, which is any aircraft that is able to be foot launched (even if it is only just barely capable of being foot launched!) and Class 5 which is the "hybrid" weight shift/control surface gliders. As a result of the changes to glider design, and the profusion of different performance classes, the design classes have taken over from pilot grades when it comes to awarding prizes to pilots that are not necessarily towards the top of the National Ladder.

The 2002 Australian Open in Deniliquin is won by Jon Durrand, and the Bogong Cup which is another of our major competitions also had a strong contingent of international pilots and also some issues with fires in the area, and subsequently, extensive smoke cover in the mountains. This prompted the use of the "Pines" launch which is in the hills towards Wangarratta, and largely out of the smoke that is steadily enveloping the mountains. Kraig Coomber wins the meet and the fires build in intensity, and eventually burn out suburbs of Canberra.

Brasilia, Brazil hosted the 2003 World meet in dry tropical conditions with Kraig Coomber, Steve Moyes, Rohan Holtkamp, Phil Pritchard and the father and son team of Jon Durrand Snr and Jon Durrand Jnr!

## **2004 - 2005**

Jon Durrand Jnr, Jon Durrand Jnr

After the breaking of a long running drought, the area surrounding Deniliquin is covered with thick grass. This presents a significant fire hazard and the Nationals are cancelled. The title of the Nationals is subsequently moved to the mountains around Mt Beauty, the Bogong Cup, where most of the pilots are international competitors. Australian pilots are, however, making something of a comeback in respect to our performance on the international level and whilst the de-facto Australian Gerolf Heinrichs wins the competition, the Ozies do well at this competition and at other international events. The topless gliders are now becoming the "normal" high performance glider as more and more "weekend" pilots move to the new design. The town of Hay hosts the Pre-World competition and prepares for the World Championships in 2005.

The 2005 Deniliquin tow competition is on again, with Kraig Coomber taking the Australian honours. And the Australian team win the gold medal at the World Championships at Hay. The winning Oz team for the World Championships consists of Jon Durrand, Kraig Coomber, Len Paton, David Seib, Rohan Holtkamp and the ever present Steve Moyes.

## **2006 - 2007**

Steve Moyes, Jon Durrand Jnr

The Nationals were again in the mountains around bright. The main Australian competitions are now firmly entrenched on the world competition calendar and our competitions score highly for the World Pilot Ranking. Kraig wins the other AAA competition at an all aero-tow event at a new venue, Tocumwal. The Tocumwal competition is an experiment, whereby we leave the dusty paddocks behind and now operate out of an airport and the very civilized surrounds of a sport aviation base with a hangar, office, a pool and a bar. The weather was not cooperative and there were only four rounds held, but despite a variety of difficulties and dramas, the concept of holding major aero-tow competitions from an airport will certainly be revisited in the future.

The two main competitions in the 2006-07 season are an aerotow competition held at Forbes airport and the more traditional mountain based event held in the Bright/Mt Beauty area. The event in Forbes was a success and Jon wins the top honours, however, the Mt Beauty based event is plagued by nearby bush fires which produce a smoke haze over the flying area. Bad weather and smoke result in only one task being scored which is a major departure from the normally reliable weather that our southern summer competitions normally enjoy.

The GPS track log systems have completely replaced cameras in all competitions, the "topless" gliders are the normal gliders that are being flown by weekend pilots and the Australian pilots are once again enjoying competitive success on the world stage. The next World Championships, which will be a tow event, held in the USA will be a testing ground for our pilots who will see if our recent success can be extended into more gold medals at Big Spring, Texas!