

RAT RACE

Inside, Outside & Sideways



SPRINT RACE TO GOAL

Distance 33 Turn Direction R

Task # 4 L R

Launch Open Launch Close Goal Close

Start Time SQUIR 1K Report Time _____

Type of Start 1K ENTER

Turn Points:

1. SQUIR	1K ENTER
2. SQUIR	400
3. LW RAB	2K
4. BURNT	1K
5. SQUIR	400
6. RAB PK	400
7. WOODLN	400
ESS LONGSWORD	1K
GOAC LONGSWORD	400

by Julie Spiegler



Rat Race, a paragliding competition organized and run by Mike and Gail Haley at Woodrat Mountain in Oregon, is geared towards training and education. First held in 2003, the format has been changed over the past 10 years, either by altering the competition's length, time of year, or level of competition and task calling. More recently, it evolved into two separate meets: the Rat Race, designated as the US Nationals in 2012, and the Rat Race Sprint, a smaller-task race resembling the original Rat Race. This resulted in a great event both for the nation's top competitors and those newer to competition, with tailored task calling and pilot safety being taken into account.

You can participate at Rat Race in many different ways: You can compete (and wait in the hot sun in long lines to fly in giant gaggles), volunteer (and help out at HQ and on launch), or you can wind tech plus volunteer (and, after helping, get rides to launch, along with lots of other benefits). I've been at Rat Race in all three capacities and want to encourage anyone interested in improving his/her flying, learning about competitions,

or getting immersed in paragliding experiences to come check out Rat Race. And if you're not already a hardcore competitor or ready to try your hand at the strange new world of competition paragliding, then you should seriously consider coming to Rat Race as a volunteer.

I first went to Rat Race in 2007 as a competitor; my husband, Gever, and I competed tandem. However, we weren't serious competitors. We wanted to experience a competition, but actually were just flying to have fun and learn what we could. We confirmed our suspicions that we weren't cut out for competition, but appreciated the mentoring and other educational opportunities available at Rat Race.

Consequently, I decided to go back in 2008 as a full-time volunteer. I was able to help out Gail (although due to an injury, I was pretty much grounded that year), learned a lot about Rat Race from an "insider's" perspective, and took advantage of the mentoring and other learning opportunities provided. I kept going back: In 2009 and 2010, I volunteered and flew as a wind tech each day. In 2011, I volunteered, then chased after the Sprint pilots each day. At the end of the week that year I made goal—my first time out of the Applegate Valley. After 22 years of flying, I discovered I liked going cross-country and thought I'd be able to go farther if I flew alongside the Sprint pilots, instead of chasing after them. So in 2012, I flew Rat Sprint as a competitor. (Of course, plenty of people have shown that you can fly as a wind

OPPOSITE Michele McCullough writes up the Sprint task for the day | photo by Gever Tulley. **LEFT** Competitors clearly mark the one thermal out front while waiting for the start | photo by Julie Spiegler.



tech and still make goal. Dave and Jug launch early and just stay up—through the wind-tech window, through the launch window, and then blend in along the course. However, it helps that they’ve flown competitions before.)

Perspective of a Competitor

Going to a competition means flying with support; basically, you show up and fly. Everything else is taken care of: weather reports, rides to launch, food (daily lunches and organized dinners), launch assistance (wing setup and safety checks) and retrieves (and rescue when needed). There is also task calling (telling you where to fly) and scorekeeping. Every day is highly structured and follows the same routine: Pilot meeting in the morning, bus to launch, unpack and prepare gear, wait for the task, learn task, make preparations for flight, launch, fly, return to HQ, get scored. And do it all again the next day.

However, competitions offer challenges as well as support. In addition to the highly structured days and daily flying, you’re told exactly where to fly (via the way-points and goal) and when to start flying (during a specific launch window); you’re subject to a lot of pressure on launch (everyone is trying to launch into the same perfect window); you’re told which way to turn when you’re in the vicinity of the start, and you’re up in the air with a lot of pilots. It can be crowded, especially at the start. The first day of my 2007 Rat Race competition experience, there was a minor mid-air collision at the top of the gaggle, causing one of the pilots to throw his reserve and come down through the entire gaggle, landing unharmed in the trees. This incident didn’t inspire us to rush out and join a gaggle with 100 other pilots.

Competition flying comes with additional risks. Some of the less serious ones are boredom from waiting on launch and sunburn (there is almost no shade on launch at Woodrat). Some of the less obvious risks are changing weather conditions and being pushed beyond your personal comfort levels. Competition paragliders fly fast, so acceptable wind speeds are high, relative to most recreational free flying. In order to complete big

ABOVE Competitors queue up to launch; top pilots can “push” to the front of the line | photo by Julie Spiegler. **OPPOSITE TOP** A rowdy leeside thermal resulted in a riser twist while low, followed by a clean reserve deployment and a safe touchdown next to a tree | photo by Henriette Howett. **BOTTOM** Pilots scribble down the details of the day’s task, so it can be transcribed to their GPS, backup GPS, flight deck or phone app | photo by Julie Spiegler.



tasks, you often need big conditions, so launch cycles can be strong. And since you're going cross-country, you may face challenging landings. Of course, flying close in gaggles or in strong conditions also increases the risk of throwing your reserve, and flying cross-country often increases your risk of landing in a tree, depending on the remote LZ options along a particular route.

Competition flying also has its rewards. They include making goal, learning from experienced pilots (Rat Race matches newer pilots with experienced mentors for flying strategies and task review), and awards. Rat Race gives daily recognition of personal bests and notable flights with plenty of giveaways, trophies for top finishers overall, and national rankings, since the Race is sanctioned.

Perspective of a Volunteer

Competition flying is fine and good, but I want to encourage people to volunteer. Competitions couldn't exist without volunteers, since it's they who provide essential support required for competitors. The chores that need to be done are seemingly endless: launching assistance, driving retrieve, making lunches, dealing with trash,

creating websites, cleaning the HQ, preparing snacks and meals, registering pilots, doing radio checks, filling water jugs and ice chests, collecting tickets at dinner, washing windshields, coordinating volunteers, providing live Internet coverage of the event, flipping burgers, and, ultimately, doing whatever the organizers/directors need. Whatever your skills and schedule, there is a job for you!





My biggest reward for volunteering was giving support to the Rat Race. It's an excellent educational event. After I attended that first year, I was inspired to do what I could to help make it happen for others. Some additional reasons to volunteer at Rat Race:

- Appreciation from the pilots
- Tandem flights for non-pilots
- Schwag
- Free food and drink (Gail treats her dedicated volun-

teers right!)

- An insider perspective of a competition
- Pool access (especially after cleaning and before the overheated competitors return :-)
- Time (and energy) for glass-off flights

Plus, as a volunteer you get access to all of the competition non-flying benefits—in particular, the nightly mentoring lectures, conversations with the top comp pilots, and access to social events.





Perspective of Wind Tech+ Volunteer

Pilots who aren't ready or interested in competing can get the best of both worlds by volunteering and flying as a wind tech. After my shoulder healed, I did this for three subsequent years, before I decided I was ready to try my hand at competing solo in 2012. When you are a wind tech volunteer, there is no registration fee, as long as you fulfill your agreed-upon commitment.

As a volunteer, you have access to all of the comp's

non-flying benefits, while supporting this great training event. As a wind tech, you also get access to many of the comp's flying benefits. You can load the waypoints on your GPS, practice creating daily tasks, and set goals for each day's flight. You get rides to launch, retrieves, and lunches. You have access to all the mentoring, pilot meetings, maps, GPS and first aid classes, etc.

But since you're not actually committed to the highly structured competitor schedule, you get free time. You don't have to fly every day or go to pilot meetings; you won't be waiting on launch, since you launch before all the competitors; you are free to pick your own goal (my favorite is always Longsword, with its free glass of wine); you'll have energy to fly glass-off, when the competitors are usually too tired to get there; you have time to watch and photograph the competition launch scene, even after a flight, if you get early enough.

TOP Left to Right : Meet director Mike Haley calls competitors to the pilot meeting. | photo by Gever Tulley. Volunteers have the pool to themselves mid-day | photo by Robyn Orr. Launch has virtually no shade, so some pilots bring their own | photo by Julie Spiegler. **BOTTOM LEFT** In order to keep launches flowing smoothly, an army of volunteers help get wings set up and lines cleared. **BOTTOM RIGHT** Cycles can be strong, resulting in challenging conditions for competitors on launch. Photos by Julie Spiegler.



If you're a new pilot, you can launch early (morning) and late (evening) and then learn a ton about paragliding all day in between. If you're a more experienced pilot, you can learn a lot by flying the same site day after day and observing how the changes in weather affect it, practice working the terrain, and practice thermaling in small gaggles with other wind techs before the competitors fill the sky. Just taking the challenge of trying to fly the first one or two waypoints of the task provides a huge amount of valuable information to the

RIGHT Mike and Gail recognize the work of the volunteers, sometimes with giant glass trophy vases | photo by Gever Tulley. **OPPOSITE** There are usually a few tandem pilots around who are willing to take volunteers for a flight | photo by Robyn Orr.

comp organizers and gives you practice in using your GPS to follow a task. (Then, if you're like me, you program in Longsword as goal!)

In exchange for access to the air and flying support benefits given to a wind tech, you have to accept additional responsibilities. You must be available to launch on request (possibly earlier

than you want to launch, although this is rare, and there are retrieves for the first wind techs who sink out). You might be asked by the task committee to provide an evaluation of conditions; you might even be asked to fly to a particular location to check it out. You're potentially highly visible: If conditions are questionable, all eyes will be on you. If some pilots are bored, and you do something "interesting," you might have a large audience. And all those pilots on launch will definitely have an opinion about your launch and how you're flying (if they happen to notice).

Mentoring is a vital component of the Rat Race. It's what sets this comp apart and makes it educational and supportive of new competitors. The pilot leading a particular session may change, but he/she is always a seasoned competitor, selected by the organizers for their expertise and willingness to share information. Past



mentoring sessions have been led by Len Szafaryn, Jeff Farrell, Bill Belcourt, Rob Sporrer, Bill Hughes, and Chris Galli, among others. Mentoring sessions cover topics such as gaggle flying and race start strategies, competition tips and tricks, using your speedbar (your most important tool), and optimizing cylinders and turn points.

If you choose to fly at Rat Race, you'll face the same risks as at any other time you fly. But the nature of competition requires that you challenge yourself, sometimes at levels set by others, which can increase risk. As a volunteer or wind tech, you will more likely be choosing your own flying adventure. But be mindful that

ALL OF THE GREAT BENEFITS OFFERED AT RAT RACE FOR VOLUNTEERS AS WELL AS COMPETITORS:

- First-aid class with CPR certification (only cost is for the certificate)
- GPS training class (with lots of people who have the same GPS as you)
- Nightly mentoring sessions
- Camaraderie with literally hundreds of paraglider pilots
- Daily weather information
- Analysis of the task, day, and flights
- Access to the top US paragliding pilots
- Social gatherings





competitions provide a different sort of flying context, sometimes increasing for anyone the chance of a reserve toss, tree landing or trip to the hospital.

I think of it as two sides of the comp flying coin. See the table below.

You need to weigh the pros and cons of flying in a comp. My first experience with competition flying confirmed that it wasn't for me, although I did learn that I love my GPS's happy "waypoint reached" noise! And after five years at Rat Race, I discovered that I actually

like flying cross-country. Participating in Rat Race—whether as a competitor, volunteer, or wind tech—is a great way to learn more about yourself.

I hope you will check out Rat Race and decide how you can participate. Regardless of what you choose to do, I recommend that you:

- Determine your personal goals ahead of time, before peer pressure sets them for you.
- Be aware of your comfort level and

personal limits and decide how far you want to push them.

- List your goals and limits.
- Have fun!

RIGHT When she's not bringing happy pilots back to HQ ("One hand on the wheel, one on the radio, one eye for the road and one for the map!"), Raven pitches in baking 500 servings of dessert! | photo by Gail Haley. **OPPOSITE** Without the hectic pace of competition, volunteers and wind techs can relax on launch | photo by Julie Spiegler.



Everyone's Rat Race experience is a little different. Volunteering is the first step that leads some individuals on a path towards competing. Others find satisfaction in participating as a volunteer. Rat Race has so much to offer. There really is something for everyone.

As we were driving home after the 2012 Rat Race, Gever couldn't stop talking about his ideas for better live coverage over the Internet for next year. And I was thinking that if I get better organized, I will be able to volunteer AND compete next year. I hope we'll see you there! 🇺🇸

PRO	CON
Supportive context for pushing your limits	Increased likelihood of incident on launch or in-air event
Race course provides challenges you might otherwise not encounter	Increased likelihood of tossing your reserve or landing in a tree
Air/course marked by other pilots	Conditions and launch window chosen by others
Happy waypoint feedback; structured challenges	Peer pressure to perform
Satisfaction of achieving goal(s)	Increased frustration if performance "falls short"

RAT RACE 2013

JUNE 23RD - 29TH

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