



Rat Race
SUPER CLINIC
THE Grad School of Paragliding

BY INSTRUCTORS **KARI CASTLE**
KAY TAUSCHER
AND **KEN HUDONJORGENSEN**



The Mission of the Rat Race Super Clinic is to provide an enjoyable, rich, learning environment for paragliding pilots to advance their skills and understanding of how to fly thermals, compete and fly cross-country, with instruction from some of the best mentors in the sport.

When Mike Haley approached us about running the Super Clinic, we LOVED the idea, opportunity and vision. Mike and his wife Gail are renowned for starting one of the best and biggest paragliding competitions in the world, especially for pilots who want to learn to compete or improve their competition skills—The RAT RACE (RR) and SPRINT. These competitions are held in June of each year at Woodrat Mountain in Jacksonville,

Oregon. Mike's passion for the sport results in his continually developing ideas and improvements primarily geared toward teaching and making our sport safer.

As he described his latest vision to us, Mike's eyes twinkled. We could tell this was a topic near and dear to his heart, and ours. He focused on the fact that once paragliding instructors sign off pilots with their Novice (P-2) licenses, a huge gap in education occurs. As a result, many pilots get discouraged by not being able to make longer flights, or get injured and decide to leave the sport. Mike proposed to alleviate these problems by developing a weeklong SUPER CLINIC to be taught by a few of the best instructors in the country. He then invited the three

ABOVE The class talking on luunch.



of us to join his endeavor. Each of us has shared a similar passion, so Mike's program felt like a quantum leap for us and for our sport.

Thus, the RR SUPER CLINIC was hatched—a virtual graduate school of paragliding extending over an eight-day period, occurring concurrently with the Rat Race and Sprint competitions. We have held two successful clinics in 2013 and 2014, with between 30 and 40 pilots attending each clinic. On June 14th through the 20th of 2015, we will once again conduct the Super Clinic. We instructors are challenged to create a meaningful educational environment in the field, while tag-team teaching, and give the pilots plenty of opportunities to practice what they are learning as well as the opportunity to watch some of the competitions. This is a big order for us to deliver.

But there are many benefits of combining these events simultaneously.

The amount of information shared among three instructors and the give-and-take of students is more than we can cover in this article. But below we provide a flavor of the

topics we attempt to cover during the seven-day course.

The night before the course officially begins, we hold a "meet and greet" social gathering to become better acquainted with each other. The first day the instructors begin to get a feel for the pilots' experience levels and learn their goals for the week. This year we will be providing handouts in digital format prior to the course, so students can begin to read and print them before they begin if they so choose. The instructors review logistics and schedule for the week, the *where, when, what and how*. We visit the landing zones and review important site details, including where NOT to land, what to do when you land out or how to report an emergency. We explain the staggered launch times for the separate groups (Super Clinic, Sprint and Rat Race) and how this alleviates crowding at and near launch.

A sequence in skill development fosters safety and longevity in the sport: Launching in lighter conditions for newer pilots is one of these factors. Therefore, we start the day early and get to launch in time for early-morning flights in light conditions. As the morning progresses and condi-



tions pick up, more experienced pilots launch. We typically launch, land, and have time to return to launch before the races begin, in order to watch the race events. Those comfortable in bigger conditions usually get an opportunity to launch midday and/or later in the afternoon as the conditions mellow. Transportation can be tricky for such a large event; each year we do our best to improve the availability of retrieves and opportunities to re-launch. We generally fly most of the days that weather allows. Non-flying days are usually filled with classes.

Days 2–8 we conduct early morning class sessions, typically between 7 and 8 a.m., then head to launch (if flyable), while continuing our discussions, watching conditions, and, finally, launching. Most of the pilots return to launch in time to watch the competitions begin. Then many

launch and fly again. We provide lunches for the participants, including vegetarian and gluten-free when requested. The days are FULL and long, and the week is jam-packed with learning and activities. Sometimes you have an option to listen to a mentor speak or attend a class. You will likely not be able to do everything on the agenda. We advise accepting your role as a student and honoring your own personal energy level throughout the week and in your decision-making to fly.

The focus of the week's learning is on skill development in the areas of increasing your comfort in the air, thermal flying, cross-country flight and competition flying.

Some of the topics covered include adjusting equipment, understanding the input from your glider, and thermaling techniques and efficiency. We will also give an introduc-

LEFT Practicing thermalling in a gaggle on the ground is a safe alternative to learning to gaggle in a competition.. **ABOVE** The launch from above.



LEFT Thermaling over Ruch, Oregon.

NEXT PAGE Last year's class.

tion to XC flying, information about restricted landing fields, competition strategy, and maneuver review, as well as an overview of the rulebook, weather to fly, general safety topics, flight instruments (GPS/SPOT/varios), kiting, using speed bar, gaggle flying, and right-of-way rules.

With each year we find ways to improve the SUPER CLINIC, but we seem to have hit our stride by combining classes, field, and in-air teaching that help our pilots develop wherever they are in the learning process. With feedback from participants, our ability to work together effectively as a team of instructors has grown and changed for the better. 🇺🇸

***Kari Castle** is a three-time world hang gliding champion and a national champion in both hang gliding and paragliding. She lives and teaches primarily in the Owens Valley, renowned for massive XC flights, and travels the world as a guide.*

Kari may have more competition experience than any pilot in the US. She is a thoughtful and thorough instructor, but her strength lies in her vast competition experience and XC flying experience all over the world. She holds two Women's Hang Gliding World Records along with a long list of other titles.

***Kay Tauscher** owns Peak-to-Peak Paragliding in Boulder, Colorado. She is a Nova Team Pilot, specializing in high-alpine flight. Kay has a reputation for excellence in instruction and safety. Her hands-on approach to teaching adds to her focus on strong flying technique and form, kiting and maneuvers, gear, high-altitude flight and thermals. She guides trips abroad in the Alps, Alaska, Mexico, Ecuador and other international locations annually.*

***Ken Hudonjorgensen** is presently the senior paragliding instructor at The Point of the Mountain in Draper, Utah. Understanding, reading, and mapping thermals has been a prime focus for Ken, and incorporating this knowledge into XC flying adventures has resulted in a powerful mix of experience and knowledge. Currently, he has over 14,000 flights and 4000 hours. He was the first pilot to receive the highest safety award in the US and has been a Master-rated and Tandem and Instructor Administrator longer than any other paraglider pilot. He has hosted 14 paragliding competitions, four of which were US Nationals, and has been teaching people to fly since 1989. Ken is the owner of Two Can Fly Paragliding.*

FEEDBACK from participants

Chuck Moore These words describe my first Rat Race Super-clinic experience: safety first, impressive, friendly, caring, memorable, a place to return, organized, tiring, and great wine tasting. I originally planned to fly competition in the Sprint Class. But I soon realized after a practice day that the SUPER CLINIC was the place for me. Everyone enjoyed themselves, built great memories, and expanded their experience. If someone was not around, people were asking why and if they were OK. It was a nice feeling of community. I walked away with new friends, improved skills, new goals, and most importantly, an improved mental awareness. All those good feelings come pouring back when I browse the RRRPG Facebook site. Each photo and comment makes me stop and appreciate that week. I plan to do it again next year!

Brian Clark The Super Clinic is a great learning opportunity. It's hard not to learn a lot being immersed in paragliding for a week! With multiple instructors we pilots were able to pick and choose what we needed to work on the most. A typical day would start off with morning classes and continued with a provided lunch, flying, afternoon recaps of our flights with questions and answers. Each evening we were encouraged to attend optional talks on a number of different topics. Here is a short list of a few things learned at the Super Clinic: thermaling techniques, help with technology (radios, SPOT, varios, setting waypoints), weather, safety, keeping your wing open, launching, landing techniques, descent techniques, tree rescue, emergency procedures, local flying conditions including convergence flying, equipment adjustments, race strategy and more.

Bill Beninati In 2011 I had a great start to my thermal soaring career as a new P-2 but pushed too far too fast. While I was awaiting delivery of my dynamic C wing I took my B wing into savage spring lift in the mountains and was lucky to survive. Then I started feeling every ripple on my new wing, which set me way back. I eventually got comfortable in thermals again, but I still hadn't put it all together in the air. This Super Clinic I had a chance to get my equipment dialed in, learn about my vario, get my launch sequence efficient, and get physically comfortable while actively flying. Thermal soaring has gone from a negative emotional experience to an intellectual and spiritual experience.



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