

The Inter-Club League, a new concept for soaring growth

by Peter Deane & David Greenhill 1995

A shrinking movement?

Over the years there has been considerable lamentation in the soaring press about the woes that have beset our expensive, frivolous but inspirational past-time. The reasons for our declining membership ultimately boil down to a complex mix of demographics, economics and social issues, all of which could fill a book, and despite the wailing and gnashing of teeth there have been few ideas that seem to satisfy several inter-related problems at once. In the area we live and soar, (that is the Bay Area and northern California) there are several major dynamics that seem to stand out, ones which may prove to be typical throughout the country.

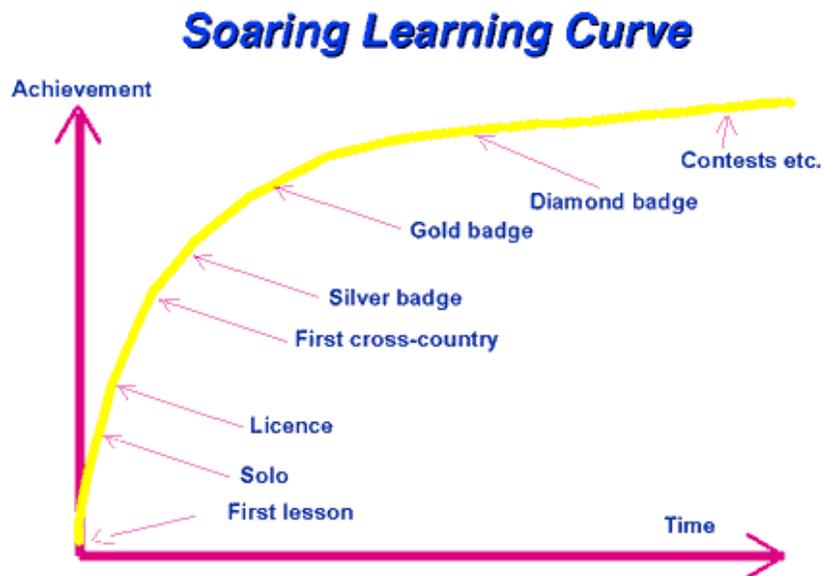
Keeping pilots in the sport and encouraging new members

Our sport is becoming increasingly difficult for the general public to participate in; soaring sites are being pushed further away from population centers by the cost of land, and landlords unwilling to accept the insurance risks of flying on their property. The cost of buying land close to these large urban areas is becoming prohibitive, and this makes it difficult for commercial operators and clubs alike to afford the luxury of a convenient, highly visible soaring operation close to a major population center. Soaring sites move further afield so not only is it more difficult to attract new members, but things are also getting tougher for the people already in the sport.

It is as important to keep current members involved in the sport as it is to recruit new members, since a declining movement must be losing existing members faster than it is gaining them. Most of the focus on new programs has been on new members and in particular youth programs, which are critical, but preserving our membership is also an important part of keeping the movement healthy. So it might be worth asking 'why do people leave the movement?'

The halcyon days of burgeoning club membership seem well and truly over. Less free time and rising costs have seen to that. Modern life makes higher time demands on most people, and soaring is simply not as convenient as some of the many other thrilling activities available for people to spend their leisure time on. The rewards are great, but it requires considerable commitment to maintain progress up the learning curve and become an established cross country pilot. In an environment where there are more and more leisure industries competing for peoples expendable income we need to be competitive in the kind of organization and learning frameworks we can offer. Some would say that those who really want to go soaring will always do it, but we propose that an approach like this limits soaring to an exclusive club of sanctimonious die-hards insisting there's only one way to learn, the hard way. We feel that this kind of attitude needs to be replaced by a 'learn the smart way' attitude where we put a workable infrastructure in place and use it firstly to keep people in the sport and secondly as a key leverage item to demonstrate long term viability of soaring as a hobby to prospective members.

So maybe we should accept the demographic issues that work against our past-time and concentrate on what we can do to improve our situation as it stands, work on improving our own show as well as trying to get people to come to it. A policy of working hard to attract new people into a movement that does not provide a viable framework for helping its members up the learning curve is ultimately self limiting since more will get fed up and leave than will feel inclined to stay. This quickly leads to low morale, a sense of hopelessness in the afflicted clubs and FBO's and does not foster a culture where members are likely to want to plough some effort back into the movement to help keep it healthy in the long run. We propose that our highest priority is to put our own house in good order before we start looking for other factors to blame for decline of the sport.

Figure 1

New challenges and the learning curve

It seems a truism that people need new challenges. Like any hobby, skill or profession, there is a learning curve which we all follow when learning to fly gliders. This is basically a curve of progress against time, and shows how progress gets harder the more advanced you become. We feel that people tend to leave after the barriers to improvement become too great for them. Also, many pilots seem to become bored or frustrated with soaring after the initial flush of solo achievement is over and they've figured out how to stay up all day around the airport.

The logical next step for most is to begin cross country flying. Making the transition from local to cross country flying is a non-trivial exercise and this is just where our soaring infrastructure seems weakest. If we follow the soaring learning curve in fig 3, we can see that the training infrastructure peters out somewhere around initial cross country point, just when the learning starts to get pretty difficult.

Here, as in other sports, those lucky enough to have a mentor or training program seem to stay involved and interested. Those who don't, left to their own devices, either give up in frustration or boredom, or learn most of their lessons the hard way, sometimes the dangerous way. There are plenty of books, plenty of advice and plenty of tall stories about cross country flying, but there is little in the way of a standardized mentoring program in place to encourage pilots into regular disciplined cross country flying. What does exist is generally promoted locally by clubs or regional organizations, however there is not much consistency between programs nationally. We have good ab-initio training, good contests, and not much in between. The FAI badge program is supposed to handle this, but while it is a good program and provides many of the standards by which we measure ourselves, it does not provide a process or infrastructure for improvement.

Figure 2

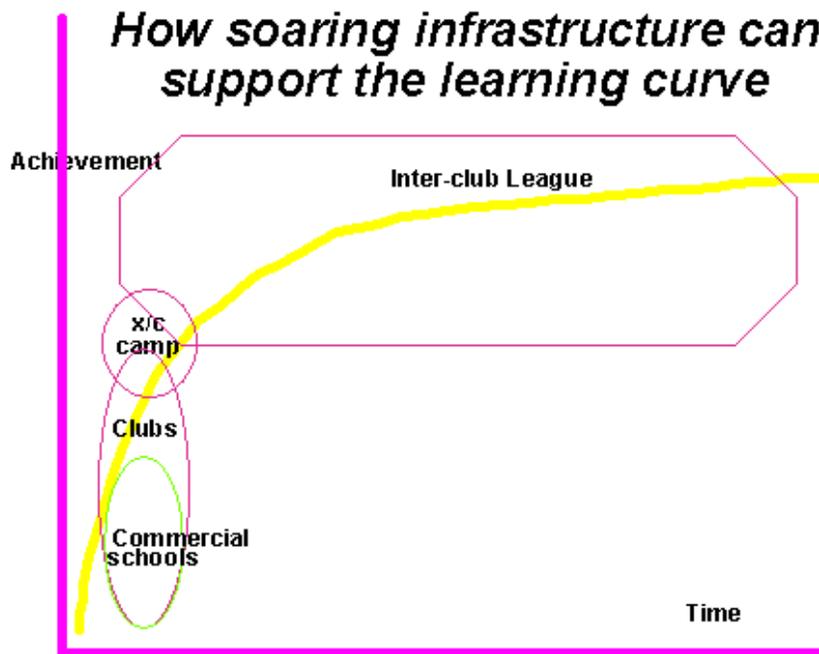


If an enjoyable, self sustaining support environment could be figured out for neophyte cross country pilots, it might make some real difference to member enthusiasm and enjoyment, and help prevent the negative spiral of reduced membership and participation in soaring. Not only would this help keep existing pilots in the sport, but would provide a visible continuation of organized club activities beyond solo and local soaring. The majority of new soaring pilots seem to aspire to cross country flying and so it is generally important for a new prospective member to know that there is more to gliding than staying round the airport, and a forward looking training infrastructure leaves a very positive impression of the professionalism and attitude of a club to any prospective member.

Regional Organizations

There are other organizations affiliated or otherwise with the SSA, that can play a critical role in improving the health of the soaring movement. These are the regional organizations, usually formed with the charter of promoting soaring within a broader region than individual clubs are capable of serving. However, these regional organizations typically cover large geographical areas that make a close knit regional soaring community difficult to achieve. Out here on the West coast, in Northern California, we have a regional organization called PASCO (Pacific Soaring Council) whose charter is to promote soaring in the Northern California and Nevada area. PASCO has sponsored numerous regional and National contests in the area at sites like Montague, Minden, AirSailing (North of Reno) and Crazy Creek. The PASCO area contains several clubs who hold group membership of PASCO, as well as many private owners not affiliated with clubs who use the local commercial sites in the area. PASCO has a long history of running wave camps and cross-country camps in the Sierras and Nevada, and has provided a priceless service to soaring pilots by developing and maintaining these programs. However finding a structured format for bringing on new cross country pilots is very rare beyond cross country training camps that occur for a week or 2 in the spring. These camps are excellent and essential, but do not provide a season long environment for building confidence and making repeated cross country flights after the few tentative steps made during a cross country camp.

Figure 3



The Inter club league idea

A format that goes a long way to addressing the inter-related issues of infrastructure, learning process, support environment and member satisfaction is the inter club league. It is a team oriented weekend contest series bringing pilots of various levels of cross country expertise together to fly in a semi-competitive environment. It is intended to provide a supportive program for bringing pilots into cross country flying and also for developing the skills of pilots of all levels. It does this by having the competitive format of a set daily course with start and finish gate. What this means is that now every participant has a way of measuring his/her performance on a given day, and a way of comparing notes and learning from pilots who flew the same course in a different way. This dramatically increases a pilots rate of learning and this is reinforced by a strong social element in the league. People from different clubs in a region now have a regular opportunity to fly together at different sites around the region, and the communication and support role of the regional organization is increased. Club teams consist of 3 pilots each in a separate class; Novice, intermediate and Pundit (pundit means self appointed expert!) The pundit is in general the experienced 'mentor' pilot in the team, and there are maximum qualifications for each class except the pundit class, since everyone knows that anyone can be a self appointed expert! In the UK the program has a history of attracting high caliber mentors; for example, the 1993 Standard Class World Champion, Andrew Davis, has frequently flown in the inter club league with novice and intermediates in his clubs team with the specific purpose of encouraging neophyte pilots. A program that brings promising up and coming pilots in contact with pilots of this caliber makes the league a training ground for champions. Wouldn't you be inspired if you could fly with and learn from a world champion or international team member ?

The different classes fly different courses and are scored on the 1000 pt system with sports class handicapping. Tasks are assigned speed tasks with pundit, intermediate and novice tasks being as collinear as possible to maximize the opportunity for team flying between classes on a given club team. The competitors in each class are assigned League points at the end of each meet according to their placing in class, and league points are summed over the season for each club to determine the winning team for the season. League points are also multiplied by a handicapping factor to make the novice performances significantly more important to the overall team score than the pundit classes, again to encourage mentoring.

The social side of the league is strongly emphasized, to the degree that the requirement for the host club to organize a party on the Saturday night of the meet is written into the rules! In our west coast adaptation of the

league idea we added extra incentive by indicating that there would be a prize for the best party (by popular vote) at the end of each season. Participating pilots pay all their own costs, film & developing, party etc. and this generally came to less than \$20 on top of tows for the whole weekend.

In the UK, this is a national league, with regional sub-leagues which are used to select team entries into a national inter-club league final weekend at the end of the season. Because of the differences in geographic scale between the US and the UK, it occurred to us that instead of a national league, we could instigate a similar program involving as many of the clubs in the PASCO catchment area as possible; we had 5 or 6 potential clubs, who if they each fielded a team of three, would give a very healthy entry of 18 ships per meet! We worked out rules, and made a proposal to the PASCO board one evening to enlist their endorsement. The idea was well received, and we were able to publicize and promote the new program through the PASCO newsletter, WestWind.

Spirit of the league concept

The league idea is designed to combine good-natured rivalry with mutual support and a healthy social scene with a way for pilots to progress and actually measure their progress. It provides an opportunity for people to learn the delicate art of task setting, CD, film development, running a gate, and how to get up to 20 gliders launched safely and quickly, above and beyond the cross country skill development. It also provides an opportunity for various sites to show off their facilities and operation. Safety is the absolute priority, with fun and learning a close second. The social side is particularly beneficial. In the PASCO area most people have to drive between 1 and 2 hrs. to get to their nearest soaring site. The distances and time involved in going to other club sites to fly are usually prohibitive, so a formalized scheme where clubs take it in turn to host one weekend meet for the league each season really helps cement the social fabric of a regional organization. In our first year with the PASCO league, five weekend meets were hosted by sites at Chico, Montague, Truckee, AirSailing and Crazy Creek and many new friends were made.

Reasons behind competition format

The competitive format is a turn-off to some people, but we have found after one years experience, that this was largely because people perceived not winning as failure. We have gone to great lengths to discourage this kind of attitude; the main focus is to view ones progress as relative to where you were at the start of the season rather than focusing on how many people beat you at each meet. This is why the league is split into classes, so that similarly experienced pilots can fly with and against one another without having to 'compete' against pilots with much greater experience. The focus is on testing ones ability and measuring ones progress without stepping outside the bounds of good judgment and safety. By encouraging pilots to fly at a variety of sites in different weather conditions the league encourages novice pilots to expand their experience beyond the home site. Given the enormous range of conditions available in our region, from flatlands to high mountain, from flooded paddy fields to arid desert, at any given event participants are exposed to conditions very different to those at the home site. On several of the PASCO league weekends, pilots made enterprising flights on days their gliders may otherwise have never been put together.

Setting things up

When we first began publicizing this idea, we met with a wide range of reactions. Some were uninterested, some were openly cynical, but the majority were excited by the prospect of new places new challenges and new friends. With support from the PASCO board, we began an intensive program of communicating and promoting the idea throughout the whole PASCO region. There is no doubt about one thing, and that is that getting people together at all would have been very much more difficult without a regular, high quality regional newsletter (the PASCO newsletter WestWind) as a medium for publishing articles, rules and event dates in a timely manner. Without this our ability to contact and enlist the help of other like-minded individuals would have been virtually impossible. This included recruiting clubs, team captains and commercial soaring sites to support the idea, and following up with guidelines for course setting, rules, levels of help needed on the

ground, and even information about the various sites and how to get there, where to stay etc. Items that were critical in the startup year were follow-up with each team captain shortly before each met to confirm team participation, and fully briefing each host site regarding expectations, pilot safety briefings, airport checkouts, rope break options etc.

In the first year of running a proposed league, there are several issues to address. Firstly, it's new to everyone, so good organization is essential. Nothing creates enthusiasm like an excellent first impression. Secondly, you need to start out modestly and let the idea grow to provide an environment for encouraging novices to cross country soaring. Thirdly you need to ensure that each event is so much fun that people will really want to come back and do it again next year!

Team captains and the pundit team members play critical roles. For these individuals, the spirit should be one of mentorship; they need to be motivated by a desire to nurture and encourage their team members cross country performance, as well as their own.

For the inter club league to succeed, you need to have a pool of motivated individuals who are willing to take on the role of team captain and/or pundit, and be mentors to less experienced pilots in their team. In this way team performance is improved and the pool of potential team captains and pundits increased. There is no shortage of individuals who could fulfill this role. Not all will have the desire or the ability to provide good coaching skills, but we would encourage anyone qualified and interested to give it a go. We think this is the way to provide a fun, sociable, safe, low pressure way of building up the movement.

Teams, team names

Teams in general had humorous names, in the light-hearted spirit of the league; We had the 'Diablo Demons', the 'Silverado Slugs', the 'Byron Bunnies' amongst the six teams that decided to participate. This is supposed to be tongue-in-cheek; the spirit of the league is safety first, fun and learning second, and egotism definitely taboo. Obviously there are minimum experience and ability requirements needed before a new pilot can participate in a program like this; we settled on recommending sensible minimums above and beyond minimum legal requirements, and let the individual pilots and team captains/instructors decide if they were ready or not.

Rules

1. Each team shall field a team of three Pilots Comprising one Novice. one Intermediate and one Pundit.
The team shall nominate a team captain who need not be a pilot.
2. The pilot classes are defined as follows:
Novice - Any pilot who by 1st April of the year:
 - has not flown in a rated competition, OR
 - has not flown a 300k qualifying for Gold DistanceIntermediate - Any pilot who by 1st April of the League year:
 - has not flown in a Nationals level competition. OR
 - has not flown a 500k qualifying for Diamond distance.Pundit - Anyone can be an pundit.
3. If desired a pilot may fly in a higher class, e.g. a pilot qualifying for Intermediate status may be entered as his team' s Pundit .
4. Pilots may fly any class glider. The CH Sports class handicap system will be used to equalize sailplanes. No water ballast is allowed.

5. Task setting will be done by the host team's Contest Director assisted by the Team Captain. It is recommended that the Intermediate and Pundit classes should be set the same task where appropriate.
6. A weekend Meet shall be declared a contest when pilots in either the Novice or Intermediate classes have a scoring task.
7. SCORING: Each class will be scored as a separate task group using the 1000 Point system for each day of a weekend Meet . These daily scores will be added for the weekend, and the weekend League points will be awarded in EACH CLASS as follows:

For 'n' teams competing, then:

1st team	gets 'n' points
2nd team	gets 'n-1' points
3rd team	gets 'n-2' points
4th team	gets 'n-3' points etc.

League points are 'weighted' according to class:

Pundit	factor of 0.8
Intermediate	factor of 1.0
Novice	factor of 1.2

e.g. with 4 teams competing, winning pundit earns 3.2 league points for his/her club. Winning novice earns 4.8. This is to encourage the mentoring process by emphasizing the importance of the novice performance. See appendix A for an example score sheet.

8. Negative points cannot be incurred.
9. Any team failing to take a contest launch scores zero.
10. The weekend League Points are added together to determine the Team scores for each Meet, and for the season.
11. In the event of a draw at the end of the season, the winner will be the team with the greater cumulative points on the daily 1000 point system.
12. Any No-Contest weekend (or scoring but disappointing weekend) may be re-run in all classes or in part if all team captains and host site or club agree. If this happens it is recommended that all scoring flights are counted towards the total season scores.
13. All matters of flying safety remain the prerogative of the host site or club standard operations. Team Captains should ensure that the standard of competence of their pilots is adequate, but the need for check-flights should be discussed with the host club or site. It is recommended that novices have a bronze badge & cross country camp training, and/or a silver badge as minimum experience requirements.
14. The Contest Director in committee with the Team Captains will act as Stewards, whose ruling on any matters in dispute will be final.
15. Non-competing gliders will be encouraged to fly the competition tasks wherever local operating conditions permit this. Competing gliders should have launch priority.
16. Each competing pilot may be asked to pay a nominal entry fee, which will go towards organizational expenses such as postage and trophies. This needs to be reasonable, and determined in advanced by the host team.
17. The host team's Team Captain is responsible for getting the scores out to all participating teams within 10 days.
18. These rules may be modified at any time by agreement between Team Captains.

19. Start and finish gates will be used. Suggested start height is 5000' AGL on the honor principle.
Minimum allowable finish altitude should be determined by the host club or site.
20. Turnpoint photos are recommended. All pilots should be prepared to take pictures at each event. If no pictures are required, turnpoints are rounded on the honor system. Use FAI badge or contest methods of rounding a turnpoint, to be determined by the contest director. The spirit of the league is such that cheating is not anticipated to be a problem.
21. Every contestant is responsible for his/her own safety.
22. Every contestant shall provide proof of insurance.
23. Tasks will be set appropriately for each class in the meet. Wherever possible, intermediate and pundit classes should be given the same task.

Prizes

In the mold of the UK league, we provided perpetual awards for the winning teams in two classes; first of all, the overall team champions for the season, and the team with the highest total of novice league points. These were keenly contested and produced worthy winners in both classes.

Results

The first year of the inter-club league in the PASCO area (the PASCO league) was a rousing success. We had 6 teams participate, 40 pilots flew in the league over the course of the season, and many more flew the courses just for fun. These were not regular contest oriented pilots, but club pilots eager to improve their cross country skills. Several pilots improved over the season to the level where they have been moved up a class for last season. The reason the league was successful was everyone's combined talent, commitment and effort, not just the efforts of a few. Indeed, what made the whole thing so special was everyone helping each other have a good time. It's a formula that's hard to beat: 'Soaring for the pilots, by the pilots'.

PASCO has made the League a perpetual series, with perpetual trophies for the team and Novice winners for the season. In this way, as pilots improve their skills and work their way up the ranks, and new pilots are introduced, we should have a steady stream of new talent to rotate through the various roles needed to keep the movement going. When the first few seasons are over and all the bugs are ironed out, the effort needed to maintain the regional inter club leagues will reduce dramatically, and clubs will have a long term mentoring program for their up and coming pilots to participate in. Because a program like this has an important place in the soaring infrastructure of our local area, PASCO will be increasing their support for the league incoming years.

The vision

Recently we found an interesting quote which we'd like to share with you. It eloquently states our original vision for the League concept in Northern California; it is by George Moffat and is an entry from his old 'Soaring to Win' column in Soaring magazine; It is entitled 'Needed: Weekend contest flying':

If contests are good, fun and educational, why do only about 350 out of 10,000 US pilots compete each year? The answer seems simple to me. Almost the only contests available are Regionals and Nationals, and both have grown large, complex, time consuming and expensive. Furthermore, the vast majority of contests are tightly packed between June 1 and Labor Day. This leaves nine months with nothing much going on.

With the cost of a competitive glass ship, instrumented, trailered and ready to aviate in the \$20-35,000 range (1978 figures), small wonder that contest flying as it exists today is getting to look more and more like a well to do man's sport.

What we need is many more informal contests at the club level. What keeps interest high in sailing racing is not the America's cup or the Bermuda race, it's the club level, Saturday and Sunday series held every weekend throughout the season. This sort of thing is what we need to develop in soaring.

This was written in 1978, 16 years ago. Now, we have declining membership and gliders are even more expensive. Since that time, the Sports class has developed, but this still exists only at the regional and National level.

The League concept and other new soaring programs

Some of the other major programs emerging in the Soaring movement at present are the World Class single class competition glider, the new US kit sailplanes of significant performance and the youth programs such as 'Young Eagles'. All these efforts are aimed at making soaring more affordable, more accessible and more healthy. However, as previously stated, without an improved foundation upon which to build these efforts, their effectiveness will be limited by many of the organizational and demographic issues already discussed. The league makes an ideal training ground for future cross country and competition pilots by focusing on learning and measurement rather than an obsessive desire to win. It provides a next step for the new recruits brought into the movement through Cprograms such as 'Young Eagles', and provides a ladder for progress ideally suited to World, Sports and FAI classes in a club environment. The league makes use of the sports class handicapping in an assigned speed task format and uses it in a weekend contest setting.

We suggest that this inter club league format satisfies not only these considerations but also addresses the inter-related issues of infra-structure, learning process, support environment and member satisfaction, and is well enough proven to be adopted throughout the country as an ideal way to foster interest and maintain a healthy movement.

Peter has have developed a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to calculate scoring for a two day meet; If any one in any of the regional organizations or clubs would like more information or has questions about the program they can get in touch with us on the internet.

Appendix A: Sample end of season score sheet to assist in interpreting scoring rules

TEAM STANDINGS		Cumulative					
	Position	League pts	Chico	Montague	Truckee	Airsailing	C.Creek
DIABLO DEMONS	1	52.2	10.2	10.8	10	13.4	7.8
SILVERADO SLUGS	2	48.4	12.4	7.8	9.4	12	6.8
CHICO	3	35.6	16	7.6	0	8.2	3.8
BYRON BUNNIES	4	27	3	3.8	6.6	6.8	6.8
BILLS	5	19.8	7.4	0	0	12.4	0
NSA FLOCK	6	14.2	7.2	0	4	3	0

NOVICE STANDINGS	Cumulative		
	Position	League pts	daily pts
SILVERADO SLUGS	1	19.2	4233
DIABLO DEMONS	2	19.2	4183
CHICO	3	14.4	
NSA FLOCK	4	6	1192
BYRON BUNNIES	5	6	678
BILLS	6	2.4	

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