

Condor Competition Review

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In the book *Outliers*, author Malcolm Gladwell promotes the “10,000 hour rule” based on a study by Swedish psychologist K Anders Ericsson. The idea is that true mastery of any cognitively difficult endeavor (competitive soaring in our case) requires about 10,000 hours of practice. Gladwell notes in his book that this can be accomplished by practicing about 20 hours per week for 10 years. Of course, you and I know that there are very few of us who are able to fly 20 hours per week - every week – for 10 years! The typical U.S. soaring pilot might fly 50 hours per YEAR, which would mean that they will accomplish their 10,000 goal in only 200 years! ;-). I am one of the more driven pilots (in several different senses of that word), and I’m only able to get in 200-300 hours per year. At that rate, I’d be about 105 by the time I clock my 10,000th hour!

So, what’s a fellow to do? Are those of us who didn’t have the good luck to be born into a soaring family and have one’s diapers changed on the wing of a glider completely screwed forever? No – we can CHEAT!! (In the words of an anonymous fighter pilot – “If you find yourself in a fair fight, your tactics suck!”). A central tenet in my Condor ranting is that Condor flying is a superb way of transcending the time/space/weather restrictions imposed on our sport. As almost every other aviation-related activity on the planet – from Airlines to Air Forces to RC Helicopters has found, ‘Real-Life’ (RL) hours can be replaced on almost a one-to-one ratio with simulator time **and the simulator doesn’t have to be all that good to achieve this effect** (for example the WWII ‘Link Trainer – basically a wooden bathtub with a pilot seat, controls, and a fold-over opaque top – that saved untold lives through basic IFR training).

It has been almost nine years since the introduction of the Condor Soaring Simulator in early 2005. If I am right, the effects of Condor training should be starting to show up in RL races. For this article, I plan to explore the correlation between RL racing pilots and Condor racing pilots. I fly a lot of European races in Condor, and I get the impression that Condor is viewed much more seriously there as a legitimate XC racing trainer, so one would expect to see some sort of correlation between Condor pilots and RL competition pilots. Here in the U.S. Condor still seems to be regarded more as a toy than a real training opportunity, with very few current racing pilots showing up on Condor.

The well-known (at least in Europe) SoaringSpot website <http://www.soaringspot.com> has a pretty complete compendium of European competition results going back many years. This site is maintained by the SeeYou folks as a service to the community, and their staff was very helpful with the research for this article – thanks!

To start the process, I harvested Condor pilot names from two different online lists – an older one from the ‘Condor Competition Center’ containing almost 3000 distinct pilots, and the one from the current ‘SkyBattle Cup’ with ‘only’ 469 pilot entries, and combined them to come up with a list of 3312 unique pilot names. Just to start with, I’d like to point out that this is almost an order of magnitude larger than the entire U.S. population of competition pilots, (about 550 on a good day). The idea is to then

compare the names on this list with the results from recent European and U.S. contests to see if there are any matches, and how those pilots stacked up against their non-Condor fellow competitors.

In last year's Junior World Gliding Championship (JWGC) at Leszno Poland there were 84 competitors from 23 countries, competing in Standard and Club classes. Matching the pilot list from this contest up with the lists from the two biggest Condor competitions, I found that 10 of 48 pilots (about 21%) in the Club class were also Condor pilots, as well as 7 of 36 (about 19%) in the Standard class. Additionally, two of the top three finishers (1st and 3rd) in Standard were also well-known Condor pilots.

In the 2013 European Championship contest, 3 of 32 in Club class (two in the top 10), and 7 of 31 in Standard class (two in the top 4) are Condor pilots. Interestingly, in the 2013 Women's WGC there is only one pilot (Natasja van der Neut of the Netherlands) who also shows up on the Condor lists.

So, based on my quite informal (but not totally unscientific) analysis, somewhere between 10 and 20 percent of the European racing pilot competitor population has at least some Condor racing experience. If I'm right about the impact that Condor is having on glider racing, this penetration will only get higher as time goes on.

Here in the U.S., we have the long-running Monday Night Soaring Condor races, (started back in 2005 in order to have races at times U.S. pilots could attend) and the relatively recent but very popular U.S. Nightly Soaring races started by (at the time) teenagers Daniel Sazhin and J.P. Stewart. Both the MNS and USNS races are hosted from Wiktor Kozlik's 'Glider Racing' (www.gliderracing.com) website, and this site has a list of 367 unique names that have registered for these two competitions as 'United States' pilots. Comparing this list against the 2013 U.S. Pilot Ranking List, there are 42 matches, or a little more than 11%. This of course is the *maximum* penetration achieved in the last 8+ years by Condor into the U.S. racing scene, because most of the pilots that have a U.S. Pilot ranking don't fly at the national or international level.

Analyzing the 2013 U.S. National championships:

- 2013 Standard Class Nationals – Chilhowee: Out of the 11 competitors there were NO matches with the U.S. Condor pilot list, although winner Phil Gaisford has since appeared on at least on occasion on the MNS races.
- 2013 15m Nationals – Hobbs, NM: Out of the 30 competitors, only one (David Leonard – ZL) is a Condor regular, although I have since seen Tim Taylor (TT) show up on a few races.
- 2013 Open Class Nationals – Hobbs, NM: Of the 12 competitors, there were NO matches with the U.S. Condor pilot list.
- 2013 18m Nationals – Bermuda High, SC: Of the 26 competitors, there was one pilot (Sean Fidler, F2) on the U.S. Condor pilot list (Nick Bonniere, ST is also a Condor regular, but he flies for Canada).

So, for all the U.S. national championships there were a total of 79 competitors and only 2 matches, for a penetration rate of a little over 2%.

So, what does this all mean – assuming there *is* any meaning beyond my own fevered imagination? In my opinion, the facts stand for themselves; Condor was conceived and created in Europe, and it is perceived as being a fun and very valuable training tool for the current and next generation of racing pilots there. The first crop of Condor-trained racing pilots is already starting to show up at national and international competition levels, and I believe the correlation between top Condor racing pilots and top RL racing pilots will only continue to grow, until (at least in Europe) you won't be able to compete effectively **without** thousands of hours of Condor time. Here in the U.S., Condor is still viewed as a toy, or at the very best, something to be considered *after* having been selected for the U.S. team. In a way, this is actually a **good** thing for the U.S. racing scene, because the J.P. Stewarts and Daniel Sazhins of the world who are right now racking up hours in Condor will be able to sweep through the competition a lot faster than otherwise – look out! ;-). The bad news for the U.S. is that the Europeans are busy raising the bar even faster than before – so we are all going to have to run faster just to stay in place.

At the start of this article, I referred to Gladwell's '10,000 hour rule' – the average amount of intense practice required to master a cognitively difficult sport sufficiently to compete at the highest levels. In real life competitive soaring, this is an almost impossible goal to achieve for all but a few lucky individuals who happen to be born into soaring dynasties **and** have jobs/lifestyles that allow them continuous access to high quality soaring time. However, if you are reading this column and have been bitten by the XC racing bug – don't despair – **CHEAT!!** Get Condor and learn how to use it. Sign up for the USNS races (shorter and more beginner-friendly than MNS races) held at 9pm EST every day but Mondays. Then start flying MNS races (Monday nights at 7 and 10pm EST) and/or one of the many online 24/7 tasks available at www.condorsoaring.com. Watch your logbook – and your RL skills – grow at a rate that no RL pilot (with the possible exceptions of the dynasty kids noted above) can match. Then try your hand at RL racing, and watch your fellow competitors look at you with “who *is* that guy?” on their faces as you walk up to the winner's podium to accept your prize ;-). If you don't believe this is possible, please refer to my November 2012 Condor Corner article (“A Tale of Two Firsts”) describing two Condor-trained pilots who won their very first RL competitions.

If anyone is interested in the source material and analyses use for this article, they are available on my Google Drive site at

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0BwllkoZHUvTMOFBtNExobEItUUE/edit?usp=sharing> or you can contact me directly at 'paynterf@gmail.com'