

How to climb 11,000ft in 50 minutes; The Gliding Varsity Match 2017

Last Trinity Term, the Oxford University Gliding Club (OUGC) welcomed arch-rivals CUGC from 'the other place', for the annual Gliding Varsity Match.

The Gliding Varsity involves, as the name implies, flying gliders. But not simply racing gliders around a set course, which is a standard competition format (next to aerobatics, but that is a different thing all together). No, in Varsity, we do things slightly different. The goal is to achieve the maximum cumulative height gain, by soaring in rising air, during a 50-minute-long flight. The competition is held over 3 days (weather permitting) and the team with the highest combined score wins.

CUGC brought 3 pilots over to Bicester, but due to mechanical issues weren't able to bring their own glider. In true gentlemanly fashion, we offered them use of our gliders. Our team consisted of 5 pilots: Anthony, Cecilia, Elliot, Mylynn and myself. We used a tried and tested 'matching' method so scores would be adjusted for the different number of attendees in a fair manner.

On the first day, it took a while to get everything up and running, and the Cambridge pilots had to receive their site briefing from one of our instructors. As a result, and it wasn't until later in the afternoon that the first soaring flights were made. Luckily, the weather was booming, and cloud-base had already gone up to 5000ft above the airfield.



I was first to launch, at the controls of our vintage K8 glider, and after the winch launch I swiftly connected with a strong thermal. After centring it, it was just a matter of keeping the stick back near the backstop to make use of the glider's low stall speed, which results in a smaller turning circle and allowed me to stay in the core of the thermal. This is where you

want to be, because this is where the strongest lift is. In a matter of minutes, I reached 5000ft and knew to abandon the climb to prevent going up further, but into controlled airspace.

I opened the airbrakes, and pointed the glider down to the ground to dive back to 2000ft at 90mph. I now saw our other glider FEF, with CUGC pilot Bonan, climbing as well. His thermal didn't seem to be as strong as mine, so I stuck to my original plan. Back at 2000ft, I transitioned from the dive into a nice pull-up to convert the speed back in some 'free' height, while keeping a light grip on the stick to sense where the next thermal was. Luckily, it wasn't hard to find, and I soon found myself going up again. Repeat this a couple times, until a glance at my watch showed me I had been up for 45 minutes. Time to descent, as you lose points when you go over the 50-minute limit. So one last dive to get back to circuit height (about 800ft), a nice circuit, a spot landing next to the launch point and then time for the next pilot. Total height gain: 11600 feet, good enough for 145 points. Not bad!

Cecilia, who joined OUGC only 8 months earlier, was next up. However, by now the conditions had started to weaken. After the winch launch she did not connect with a thermal, and was back on the ground after 7 minutes. Ouch! Experienced CUGC pilot Nat did manage to climb away from his flight. Bonan came in to land, but a quick look at the log-sheet showed he had stayed up 10 minutes too long. That meant 30 points deduction, for a total of 109 points. Nat landed after exactly 50 minutes, but struggled with the weaker climbs and only managed 111 points. However, after one day, this put CUGC in the lead by 147 – 220!

The second and third day both brought decent weather, and we were able close the gap again. But after the final flight, and an initially tally, it looked like CUGC had just about managed to hold on to their lead from the first day. Did we really lose, on home ground no less?



However, upon closer inspection of the GPS traces, it was found that one CUGC pilot had entered controlled airspace by continuing their climb too long. Also on a separate flight, the logs showed case of dangerous flying, taking the glider over the VNE (Velocity Never Exceed) speed. Discussion followed, and it was decided to penalise this pilot. The penalty meant that we final score became 570 for OUGC vs 555 for CUGC. And thus, the prestigious trophy was ours again!

Mylynn from Trinity College and Elliot from St. Johns were both nominated a Half-Blue for their outstanding performance during the competition. Next spring, we will be going to Gransden Lodge again, the home base of CUGC, and will have to do our utmost best to keep the trophy for Oxford.

-Dinant

