#5 – The Capacity to Resist Fatigue

This may be the most important single factor in competitive soaring. Most of us are willing to admit gaps in our knowledge, like the ones featured over the past several months in this column. Few of us, however, are willing to admit the degree to which fatigue can influence our reasoning.

First, let's separate fatigue from pathology. We are not talking about dehydration or chronic illness. When the Brigliadoris cite resisting fatigue as a factor in competitive soaring, they are talking about the pilot's ability to endure prolonged physical and mental stress with minimal impact on rational decision making. This is an important consideration, especially since the majority of pilots are incapable of measuring their diminished capacity as the flight progresses.

The only way to minimize diminishing capacity over the course of a flight, a weekend, or a contest is to increase your endurance. Physical conditioning is certainly an important factor, but the key to resisting fatigue is mental conditioning. Call it an exercise in attitude. Call it self-hypnosis. The best way to combat fatigue in the cockpit is to embrace the type of flights you dread: long flights; flights over challenging terrain; low cloud bases; blue days; strong winds; impossible tasks that can only lead to landouts with long retrieves… By viewing these worst-case task scenarios as opportunities to explore every aspect of the sport, we remove a significant psychological impediment.

Over the years, more than once (and more recently than I'd like to admit) I've watched myself (in hindsight) make poor decisions that affected the outcomes of my flights, giving me very low speeds compared to the rest of the field, or leaving me waiting for a retrieve and no speed points at all. In almost all cases, the culprit was fatigue.

Over the years, I've recognized loss of patience as the first symptoms that I've exceeded my threshold. Sometimes this can work out to my advantage, assuming the conditions will support my increasingly aggressive posture. But impatience leads to even greater levels of nervous energy, which saps my remaining strength. Further fatigue leads to second guessing my decisions. During a MAT, in the later hours of a long flight, I am much more likely to wander (almost aimlessly), trying to decide which final turnpoint offers the least risk in the waning conditions of day's end. This loss of concentration costs speed points. It increases anxiety levels. It increases the risk of thinking myself right into a worst case scenario – a landout a few miles short of airport, and the sad task of reviewing my trace and realizing that I had ample opportunity to fly home with altitude to spare and at a respectable speed.

The choice most of us make is not to expose ourselves to this level of fatigue. But I'd argue that unless you've made a directed effort at increasing your endurance through mental and physical training, you may not be able to endure even the shortest competitive flights (at least not in a way that lets you make good strategic and tactical decisions). Anxiety can sap away your energy in mere minutes. Which is why I always remind myself that there's nothing I'd rather be doing on a Saturday afternoon than grinding my way up from 500 feet agl over Pretty Boy Reservoir, and looking forward to repeating the process over Hanover.

And maybe once more at Gettysburg before finally getting high enough for a 0-0 return to a rolling finish at Fairfield.

Or not…