

**A Wanna Be Pilot's Tale
or
What a Newbie Should Know about "Fly Above All"**

One of the many enjoyable parts about paragliding is the help and support paragliders give each other. Whether you are standing somewhere wondering about the wind or fumbling for your "Ds," every paragliders I've run across is happy to help you without making you feel like a complete dolt. So, in a similar sprit if you are thinking about learning how to paraglide I thought I might help by relating my experience with "Fly Above All" in Santa Barbara.

First, a little about me: I don't regard myself as particularly courageous; I'm no thrill-seeker, and Lord knows I am no extreme sports nut. More like portly, early fifties, wife and 3 kids, middle-class guy working at the local university who reads a lot. And "Fly Above All" is teaching me to fly. What I don't have in talent or natural ability I'm making-up in tenacity.

One day I was out walking and saw a paraglider slowly floating along 10-feet above the bluffs at More Mesa, and it seemed frankly magical. I could see him flying just above me and it looked so easy and quiet as he floated along suspended in the air. A couple of weeks later for no particular reason I drove to Elings Park and from the bottom of the hill saw some paragliders landing in front of me on the meadow. The next week I made a point to go back, drive up the hill and just watch students and other pilots practice. The more I watched, the more I thought I might be able to do what others were doing, and if I could do that, well, I could fly. Actually fly. Unbelievable!

So I went back, and back, then back again. For three or four weeks I just watched and listened, trying to stay out of the way but still get close enough to hear and see what was happening. It's a beautiful place to spend a few hours with my boy and dog, the view of the Pacific, the Channel Islands in the distance and by looking down you can see the break at Hendry's Beach, or look up and it's nearly 360-degrees of blue sky on a nice day. Besides the nice spot, I thought if I was going to put my life in someone else's hands then I better get the best teacher and school I could afford. Since I live a few miles from the Training Hill and enjoy just watching pilots kiting and launching, I could audition instructors. You might benefit from my experience.

Teaching is a personal thing, it's done by people. It isn't so much the subject matter, though that's important too, or a particular method that can be repeated for uniform results. Different people teach more or less well because students learn more or less differently. I wanted to get the best teacher for me: knowledgeable, experienced, patient, and deeply concerned about safety, my safety specifically. Oh, I wanted someone nice too, who wasn't all ego or had a big attitude. You don't have to be nice to be a good teacher, but I find it's easier to learn from someone who I like. And it's a lot easier to spend time with someone who you enjoy. Bruce and Chad of "Fly Above All" have all of those qualities, and more. I am proud to be one of their students.

Both Chad and Bruce know their stuff, down cold. The website goes through some of their background but doesn't do justice to their depth of knowledge. Their experience is so solid I bet my life and limb on it. They have seen and corrected every imaginable mistake you can make. I know because I think I made them (and I am working on others now). Bruce and Chad carefully explain how to recover from mistakes you can only imagine and the mistakes you hear about. Mostly, Bruce and Chad tell you what you should do, watch you do it, and then suggest the right way. When you put it all together, after a fashion, and get a flight in, they explain what they saw and the one or two things you should do better next time. Time after time, from pre-flight to landing, they are uncanny about mentioning just the one or two things you really need to know. Sometimes I know what I did wrong, other times after they mention it, a light goes off in my head: "Oh, yea, so that's what happened." But it didn't occur to me, and it probably never would have.

At "Fly Above All" it's not just about mistakes or corrections either. Chad and Bruce are good about telling you what was right, what they liked, and what you did well. It's honest praise, authentic, not just to motivate but basically because that's what they saw and how they think. For example, one of "Fly Above All's" notable techniques just after launch when you are almost in the midst of mental overload, they calmly remind you to: "Sit-back. Relax. Look up at your wing. Look around. Just let it fly."

While "Fly Above All" has a set number of things you need to learn, and they have a pre-determined way of explaining it, Chad and Bruce are adept at adjusting their teaching to your learning. Just as they are "active pilots" sensing the right response to the air, they sense your strengths and weaknesses and adjust what they can so you can get the most out of the experience. The combination of core competency and natural flexibility makes them master teachers, as well as pilots.

But mostly Bruce and Chad love what they do. And it shows. In Bruce's quiet words: "It's a great joy to teach others the gift of flight." Chad is so energetic and enthusiastic it is infectious. When Chad effortlessly demonstrates a technique, you know you are watching a master at play but making it seem easier, a little more possible, even if you know you'll never do it that well.

For me the price of lessons isn't cheap, so I kind-of consider it more of an investment rather than a cost. I want to get a fair risk-adjusted return for the long term. (I told you I'm no thrill seeker.) My money's with "Fly Above All" because they've been around a long time, in the same place, with rock solid experience, who seem to care about creating a strong relationship with their students and customers.

Sure, there are a number of fine instructors and good pilots out there, but when you are beginner it can be hard to tell the difference. "Fly Above All" is a great place to find your way into the sky.

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