

F2D News - October 2008

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When things are going your way, everyone wants to be your friend. When times are tough, however, that's when you find out who your friends are. I recently returned from what very well could be the best combat contest in the world, the Dnipro F2D World Cup in Novomoskovsk, Ukraine. The trip was anything but smooth for me, but owing to the generosity of great friends American, Mexican and Ukrainian, I still had an awesome time. More on the Dnipro Cup will follow below, but first a quick follow-up from last month.

After last month's column, I got some great feedback about statistics in combat from Dave Lovgren in Canada and Henning Forbech in Denmark. This led to some very interesting discussions with Dave about the state of combat, strategies, and several other topics. Additionally, he pointed out that at a US Team Trials many years ago, Paul Smith did keep win/loss stats and afterwards they had a good time comparing the relative "difficulty" of the draw for different pilots based on the records of their opponents. Henning has taken the work a bit further, and in fact done some analysis on the distribution of final score differences based on the results of the 2006 Nordic Championships. He found that the cumulative distribution of final point differences fits very well to an exponential with a decay constant of just a bit over 100 points.

There are various things one can take away from Henning's analysis, but basically what it says is that the probability of a "blow-out" match with a very large difference of final scores is quite small. The majority of matches are won by a margin of around 100 points (one cut) or less. Perhaps the reason for this is partly strategic; as discussed last month, in many cases going for a "blow-out" win means taking extra unnecessary risks. If pilots really do try to win with the minimal effort and risk, then maybe we should expect that once one pilot is 1 cut ahead of his opponent and his own streamer is gone, he will stop flying; if this situation happens often, as it seems to, then it makes sense that relatively few matches are observed with more than 100 points difference. It would also be interesting to see some analysis on total scores (not just differences), but so far the data have not been processed in this way. However, Henning sent me data for all matches in the 2006 F2D World Championships in Valladolid, Spain. I haven't had a chance to perform any analysis, but once I do I'll report my findings here.

Meanwhile, back in the Ukraine...

This year the US delegation at the Dnipro Cup consisted of Andy and Cary Minor, myself, and Mike Willcox. We were joined by the multi-time Mexican champion Leonardo Silva. Originally Lester Haury was scheduled to join us there, but unfortunately was forced to cancel at the 11th hour.

To reach the Dnipro Cup, I had to take the following route: Boston to New York, New York to Kyiv, Kyiv to Dnipropetrovsk. The flight from Boston to New York took off a bit late due to rain and traffic, but not terribly late. The flight to New York was relatively uneventful, but when I arrived in the terminal at JFK and looked at the monitor to find the gate of my connecting flight, it said the strangest thing: "Flight Time 4:30, Now 4:10. Now Boarding..." *What the...? What kind of flight leaves early?* Between the 30+ minutes on the ground in Boston and the negative 20 minutes for the connection, suddenly the leisurely layover became a mad dash to make it there on time. Once at the gate, I found that the boarding process was sufficiently chaotic and disorganized that I was never in any danger of getting left behind. *Phew.* Off we went.

The flight from New York to Kyiv was relatively uneventful. Across an empty seat from me sat Sylvia de Swaan, an art photographer from upstate New York. We talked about all kinds of interesting things to pass the time over the long flight. About half way through the flight, some guy about 7 or 8 rows ahead had a little accident, and according to the flight attendant "ruined the row of seats." This led to some commotion, a reshuffling of passengers, and an unpleasant smell that fortunately stayed relatively localized to that area.

Finally we landed. Woohoo! As usual for international travel, because Kyiv was my point of entry into the country, I had to pick up my bag for customs control and recheck it for the connection to Dnipropetrovsk. Uh oh, did I say recheck? You can't recheck what you aint got (but you can surely lose what you used to have!)... No sign of the bag.

I went into the lost and found/claims office and tried explaining in Russian that my bag didn't arrive (aside from talking during the flight, I was also studying Russian from a little Berlitz traveler's Russian book). *They understand, great!* And then the response... oops. Better switch to English. The girl who helped me was really nice and spoke good English which helped a lot. As much as she wanted to help, however, the baggage tracking system in the computer had no information on my bag whatsoever. It seems nobody had any idea where my bag was. Damn... She told me it would probably come on the next day's flight and then they would bring it to me at the contest. Let's hope so, because aside from models, that bag contained basically all of the F2D gear that I own. With nothing more to be done there, after a nice bowl of Ukrainian borscht I continued on to Dnipropetrovsk with fingers crossed.

Dniproavia State Aviation Company transported me safely from Kyiv to Dnipropetrovsk in less than 1 hour. Bag or no bag, at least it was finally time to meet up with friends and get to the combat site. Well, maybe not so fast. Outside the terminal, there were no familiar faces in sight. I knew that Mike and company were on their way and wasn't too worried. After 20 minutes or so I tried to get in touch with them using an international mobile phone that I had with me (leftover from an academic trip to Europe last year). Unfortunately, it couldn't connect to the network in Ukraine. No problem, it was pretty nice and sunny out so I decided to just have a seat on the steps in front of the terminal and wait. and wait. Dnipropetrovsk is a reasonably large city, but the airport was fairly small. After another hour passed, I began to wonder if the airport was big enough to stay open at night, or if after the last flight things would shut down. I was still confident that my compatriots were coming, but just in case something had happened, I needed to think of a backup plan for getting to Novomoskovsk (the village about 90 km away where the contest was held). Taking a taxi seemed like the best option, and since I didn't want to risk missing the last taxi and getting stuck there I decided that once the time reached 2 hours past my arrival time I'd just try to grab one.

Sitting by myself in front of the mostly empty terminal, going through such mental deliberations, I probably started to look either a little nervous, a little vulnerable, or both. As much as I tried to not dress American, it must have been clear that I wasn't a local. Just at the moment when I was starting to think about going back into the terminal to check the time, I felt two guys walk up behind me. Something told me that it wasn't good for them to be where I couldn't see them, so I got up and turned to go back in to the terminal. "Blah blah Russian/Ukrainian something blah Documents blah blah blah" one of them said to me as I stood up. *Ah crap... I'll pretend I didn't hear that.* "Ha ha ha nyet, nyet" he laughed as I tried to walk away, apparently amused by the fact that I was trying to ignore him. *Double crap... he's following me now.* Something was about to happen, but I figured it was best if it could at least go down inside the terminal where some people are around to see it. Finally he cornered me in the waiting area, "blah blah blah documents blah blah blah." Obviously he wanted to see my documents (passport), and obviously I didn't want to give him any information. Time to play dumb (and not give away my nationality!). Shrug. Blank stare. "Nyet." It was buying some time, but the guy was neither amused nor discouraged. Finally I pulled out the contest invitation to show the purpose of my visit while still giving away as little information as possible. Unfortunately, he wasn't impressed by the world cup of toy airplanes. "Police! Understand? Police!" he said, and opened his wallet to reveal something that could have either been his badge or his driver's license. How should I know? And what should a plain-clothes officer want with little old me anyway? I guess he was catching on though, and it was doubtful that if I started speaking Chinese to him he would believe that I'm actually from China...

Extremely tired from 20 hours of traveling and running out of ideas, finally I showed him my passport. *The gig's up, time to speak English.* "Vui gorovitye po Anglisk?" "A little bit" he says. *Well at least maybe now we can communicate.* After staring at my passport for a while, he said something in Russian that had the ring of "okay, we're going down to the station," and started walking towards the door out of the terminal. "Nyet!" *No way I'm going anywhere with this dude.* I tried to grab my passport back and he held on tight. Exasperated, he then pulled out some Bulgarian guy's passport from his jacket and asked me "Is this your friend?" *Man, who is that?* "No, I have no idea who that is." After a sigh, he said "okay" and started motioning back towards the security area of the airport. That at least seemed like a safer direction to go, so I figured I would follow him back there. He went into some room, and I stood there waiting, thinking, wondering how to come out on the right end of this situation. *Oh sweet lord, hallelujah! There's F2D World Champion and former nightclub bouncer Mike Willcox coming into the terminal!* The force is strong in this one... No sooner did he set foot in the terminal than that guy came back out of the room, handed me back my passport and said "sorry" and walked off. What on Earth was all that about? I'm still not sure if I was just almost mugged, kidnapped, or arrested, but who cares... It was time to be with friends, get back to the sport I love, and to make the most of this weekend. After a journey like that, the only thing to do is to be sure to have enough fun to make it worthwhile!

In order that this story doesn't reflect poorly on my friends, let me assure everyone that they were making every

effort they could to get there to pick me up as quickly as possible. I know they were quite worried about me, and were very frustrated by the delays at the hotel and traffic on the road that kept them behind schedule!

This year was the 10th anniversary of the Dnipro Cup. In anticipation of a large turnout (I believe there were 92 entries), the contest was extended to 3 days (Friday, Saturday, Sunday). It was late Thursday afternoon by the time we rolled up to the Hotel Osokura. While Mike, Jeka, and Marina (our gracious hosts from the Aerolux model factory) went out to pick me up, Andy, Cary, and Leonardo stayed behind to assemble our shiny new Aerolux models. When we got there they showed me to four of my own that they had kindly set up for me. But by then I no longer had any engines (not to mention props, lines, handles, bladders, ...). This is where these guys really showed their colors as my true friends. They all offered to chip in equipment – a Fora from Leonardo, another from Cary, lines and handles from Andy, a Fora and some props from Mike. I don't like to borrow stuff, but there was no choice and I was extremely grateful for the generosity of these guys to put their equipment on the line for me.

Still there was one more problem... No clothes! The jeans I flew there in were a bit restrictive and really not suitable for sports. Fortunately, it turned out that Jeka was very close to my size, and he lent me the warmup bottoms from a Ukrainian team uniform and a long sleeve shirt to wear. My roommate in the hotel, Sasha, also lent me a sweater. The weather was pretty good all weekend, but the lows at night were in the 40s and those clothes were well needed and appreciated.

Even with 3 days, getting through a double elimination F2D contest with 92 entries requires diligence on the part of organizers and competitors to keep the pace flowing. One of the features of this contest that sticks out the most to me is how professionally it is run. Every detail is considered, and the matches go off like clockwork. About 4 or 5 matches before your own, it's your responsibility to pull-test your models. After passing the inspection, the pull-test guy gives you either a blue card or a red card with your name on it. This card is your ticket into the circle. They use two circles, which means that two matches before your own it's time to fill up the bladders; as soon as that match is done you need to start walking to the circle with your mechanics and equipment. When you reach the circle, you give your colored card (which is also the scorecard) to the judges, and they give you a streamer of the matching color. No room for mistakes there! One thing that can be challenging for an outsider in this whole arrangement is that when there are 92 pilots, and maybe you only know 25 of them well, it's not so easy to look out into the circle and determine which match is currently up. This means that it's important to keep checking to know how far along the round has progressed. If you're not in the circle when your match is called, they will *not* hesitate to start without you.

Over the course of the weekend, I witnessed some great combat and some so-so combat. The standout performance was by the recently crowned World Champion Stas Culachkin. He followed up an awesome performance at the World Championships with another one to claim the World Cup title in Dnipropetrovsk. That's some serious first class flying from a really first class guy. On top of it all, when he flies, there's no funny business. He's a really admirable pilot, and everyone is truly happy for him and his success. It looks as though he will claim the double crown of World Champion and World Cup Champion for 2008! Way to go Stas!

As for the North American delegation, overall we did okay for ourselves. Mike lasted 7 rounds, finishing in a tie for 9th place. On the way there, his pit crew of "Big" Andrei and Stas Culachkin managed an amazing 6 second pit stop when Mike landed his damaged primary model in front of them. My bag never did arrive, and I had to go all weekend on borrowed equipment. It was really great of these guys to lend me their equipment, and I was happy to still be able to compete. In the end I lasted 5 rounds for a tie in 19th place. Andy flew well, but went out in round 4. Cary and Leonardo went out in the 3rd round. While flying against Fetisov from Russia, Leonardo's watch got caught in Fetisov's vest. Somehow, this ended up with Leonardo getting yanked to the hard concrete pilot's circle, and his model getting jerked out of his hand. The safety thong broke, and his model flew off into a giant inflatable globe positioned off to the side of the circle. It was a direct hit on Chicago! Note to Chris Gay: you better watch out, I think Leonardo's coming for you!

Of course there are a lot more things I could say about this trip, but that's all the time I have now. It's a really great contest, and if you're considering going abroad for a competition I would definitely recommend this one. Last I want to send out one more giant thanks to Jeka, Marina, Mike, Andy, Cary, and Leonardo for everything they did for me that week. Furthermore, I want to personally thank contest organizer Vladimir Shatkov for putting on a great competition that never fails to outdo itself, and for generously arranging for my transportation to the airport early Monday morning. Thanks everyone!