

To Turn Back Time.

We've all had a moment in our lives when we've wanted to undo what has already happened. It is not possible; we don't have a time machine to change the course of events. That's life; our every action has irreversible effects.

It is impossible to restore life to our friend Marcin, though I would give everything for it. Somehow I cannot pack and leave Previdz. My instinct to repair and improve things doesn't let me sleep at night. My friends went to collect the remains, and I want to do something, and the only thing that comes to my mind is to pour on paper all my rattling thoughts. I apologize to all whom I may hurt in this time of mourning and wistfulness, but I cannot do anything else except brutally state the truth. I'm crying as I write this, but I know I have to do something.

Haste In Aviation Is a Recipe For Disaster.

This tragic day started nervously; briefing had been rescheduled from 10:00 am to 9:00 am. Although this had been mentioned previously, it was still a surprise to many. There was rushing to fill gliders with water and confusion on the grid. Some of the pilots were ready but I was in a different mindset. Fortunately, something clicked, and I decided that a quiet breakfast was more important, so I finished eating and decided to skip the briefing and fill my ship instead. However, all the water spigots were still taken, so I did go to the meeting, picked up the task sheet, and went to fill my plane. The Cu were forming and the start was confirmed for 10:00 am. Too soon for me, but I could still make it.... I positioned myself behind the grid, knowing that they would let me start after all classes were launched.

I was ready few minutes before the start, I still had time to look at the sky, send a text and relax.

I also saw many pilots in first rows, running to their planes.

Flying Behind the Best Pilots.

For most of my flight I was following Sebastian. It was an unbelievable run along the slopes in difficult conditions. At any time I could reach the fields or return to the valley. We approached the Tatra Mountains and it got very difficult, with only a turbulent ridge lift, snow clouds covering the mountain tops, and gusty winds up to 30km/h. I wasn't surprised when suddenly Sebastian went up and I stayed 300m below. Instead of staying in this lift, I followed a different glider along the slope above 500m AGL. I was still full of water—why? We only did 100km and had 500 km to go. Pure stupidity. The weather on the Polish side was getting worse. I had serious doubts about finding landing fields in front of us and I told my colleague that there was no place to land ahead. He reminded me that he had an engine, and that was a sobering moment for me. I turned around, returned along a no longer working ridge and landed on beautiful even grass, with my heart rate exceeding 300 beats per minute. I got out of the glider. It was intact, so with a

smile of relief on my face I said aloud, "Life is beautiful!" I was so happy that this fight ended safely for me that I wanted to sing.

In the Field.

I was happy. I have achieved Zen and I was delighted that the weather had improved and that gliders were thermalling above me. I was thrilled they were still flying while the sun was out and new, and healthy Cu were forming. It was quiet, the birds were singing, the mountains around were beautiful. I went for a little hike and enjoyed the views. I called Marcin—he was supposed to retrieve me—but he didn't answer. I thought he was lucky; he most likely had stayed in the back, waited out the weather and was going back home...or maybe he had made the turnpoint and was on his way home...

Like a Herd of Sheep.

We fall into a trap by following someone else; we forget about ourselves. This someone may be much better than us, as is the case with Sebastian and me. He may see more, he may have a plan of his own, and we are counting on him for help. Wrong! In critical situations we are alone, without any help! We always have to have our own plan!

A pilot who is in front of us and higher than us has a different perspective, sees more, can fly farther, is less stressed and therefore makes less mistakes. Usually, the higher you are—the stronger the lift is, the ridge works better, and there is less turbulence. If we are lower and want to catch up, we actually might need to slow down, take a good lift to the top, and avoid their mistakes by optimizing our own flight path. On this ill-fated day I forgot all about that, I followed Sebastian, even though I was lower than him, in very difficult terrain.

I've heard quite often that you fly behind someone to learn. In my opinion, you can learn only by working together on the radio, where you can discuss and consider options, such as what to do when the ridge or cloud does not work. Passive following only makes you dumber. The only way to learn is to compare your and others' decisions. Sometimes you will pay for your decision with a landout but sometimes your idea is better. This brings the biggest satisfaction.

I used to fly with Janusz Centka; I remember one competition when we flew two Jantar 2B in weak weather. It started to rain; I was a bit lower and it looked like a landout was inevitable. Janusz was telling me about a certain field further down past the road. I couldn't see it, but there we were approaching another field, and I decided to land there. I turned and landed with the wind, of course forgetting about the landing gear. Janusz landed comfortably 2km further on a big field without any problems. Was my decision right? Of course! It's just a shame I made it too late.

Flying With an Engine.

I wish I had an engine, I thought at the foothills of the Tatra Mountains, *I would have been home by now*. It seems to me now that I would have taken the risk and flown further. Maybe I would have made the turnpoint but maybe it would have ended much worse. I cannot exclude the possibility that I would have pressed forward as much as Marcin did.

Flying with an engine requires mental and practical preparation. You need to assume that the engine will not start. You should find a good field, plan the landing, make a pattern, drop the landing gear, and with safe altitude—preferably on your downwind leg— start the engine. Starting an engine without the starter requires strange maneuvers low to the ground—we never practice them that low. I once saw my friend starting the engine over the airport; he almost crashed but landed with the tail wind in the field nearby. Twice, I have landed an engine-equipped glider in a field, knowing that I was too low to try to start it. A few years earlier my engine didn't start at 500m so I had to land in the field. A few too many cases like that.. Do you remember Henio Muszczyński? I don't think his engine ever started.

Always start your engine OVER THE FIELD. You need an option in case of an unsuccessful start!

In gliders with an engine without a starter, a raised propeller creates a significant drag. Acceleration with a windmilling propeller results in a big loss of altitude, so if you need to try again you can lose up to 300m. You have to remember that; you have to have an altitude limit below which you will not risk starting the engine—you just land in the field.

Outlanding Penalty.

It is difficult to make a decision to land out, especially when others are still flying; you know it is the end of the flight for you and that you will give away hard-earned points. I landed once in the field on the last day of the World Competition and dropped from first place. It was a great disappointment. But do you know what I think now? I don't give a damn. I don't remember what year it was; if I didn't have a video clip from the award ceremony I wouldn't even remember that I was there. So what if I didn't get the first place medal—I have another one and I don't even know where it is.

The most important thing is the satisfaction from flying. If you can't get satisfaction from the competition where you didn't finish first, stop competing. It's pointless and will only get you in trouble.

Landing in the field always is a setback. Sometimes it costs you a competition, sometimes just a late night return, with a hurried morning the next day, but we should allow ourselves to be rewarded for a good, safe outlanding. Buy yourself something, go out for a nice dinner. Let's reward others for the same. If you think that a landout or a lost competition is a failure, think about Marcin...

Before the competition.

I have often heard “Show them how it’s done,” or “Get them,” before a competition. This is the worst thing you can tell other pilots before they fly.

What should you say? “Fly for pleasure.” “Have fun.” “Enjoy your time out there.” “Make your own decisions.” “Gain some experience.” “It doesn’t matter if you win, it is important that you are happy.” “Fun first, then the result.” “If you are not sure that what you are doing is right, don’t do it.”

It doesn’t matter if it is the World Championship, FCC or maybe KZS; the name of the competition is meaningless if you don’t come back healthy.

I once wrote on a piece of paper, “Think ahead,” and attached it to the instruments panel so I could see it all the time; I had (and still have) an issue with that—quite often my quick and poorly thought-out decisions got me in trouble.

Responsibilities of Organizers and Task Committees.

It is often said that the organizer should do this or that... They should call a day, they should create an easier task, they should make sure there are landout fields along the task route, they should not launch so many gliders at the same time, etc. But the task is not an order, you do not have to fly it; the decision to fly is yours and yours only! Whether I go over an area with no fields and no option to return, or my final glide is below the glide path, or I fly in a peloton, or in the clouds—this decision is only MINE!

The last day of the FCC was so close to being successful—perhaps one more thermal or a moment of sunshine would have allowed Marcin and others to return to better conditions. There would have been many stories that evening of how some of the pilots had recovered. It’s worth keeping in mind how fine the line is between good fortune and tragic bad luck. Never, after a flight, tell yourself that you should have taken that risk, that chance. If you made a certain decision that resulted in a safe outcome, it means that it was the best decision, worthy of the title of World Champion.

You are a Champion if you made a professional decision to abort the task, landed in the field and landed safely! I assure you there are plenty of professional pilots who cannot do that.

Obviously, the organizer ought to consider every aspect of the competition, but sometimes it isn’t so. We need to assume that the organizer could unknowingly send us into trouble and may unintentionally endanger our safety. In 1999, just before the start, I had a technical problem. I ran to the grid manager, who was overseeing the launch, and said I could not take off. “Get out of here!” he shouted, pointing at my glider, so I pulled my 2B (which was full of water) by the tail to the side. Sometimes we meet people who do not wish us well. They are frantic, have their own goals and don’t pay attention to others and their problems. We, the pilots, have to be immune to this, we need to stop the course of events—and say **STOP** to ourselves.

My request to the organizers and managers: take into consideration the weaker pilots—don't look only at Sebastian, who flies at the speed of sound.

My request to competitors and pilots: don't criticize the CD for setting a task short, not following the streets, or on a blue day. If you see that he needs help—help him. Create a group that can help with task setting; maybe it is not very sportsmanlike, but soaring is not fair anyway.

My request to the teams and ground crews: if you see something is not right—address it! Do not ignore the voices of others; perhaps they are justified.

My request to everyone: if things do not go as they should, if you feel that something is out of control—stop the course of events, land out, and go back to the airport. Do everything to end the day well. In a month, or a year, when you want to compete again, you will take off to fly another task, you will fly another pattern, you will practice again.

Enormous energy.

We do not realize how much energy we have to manage when we fly a glider. It is so easy: we fill the wings with 150–200 liters of water, we hook it up to the car and pull it to the start; we get a plane tow to 600 meters. Then, with gentle movements of the stick we turn, accelerate, and release. We do not feel the energy used to bring us up to 600m and how much additional energy we got from the thermal. All this energy returns to zero after our 150m roll after landing. Think how tiring it is to walk up 10 flights of stairs. In a glider 10 times heavier, in order to lift it 10 times as high, we can do it with two fingers.

When gliders collide or when one crashes to the ground, we can compare it only with an explosion; if someone survives such a moment it should be considered a **miracle**.

Winning the competition.

I am writing that it is not worth it, that it's better to let go, that we shouldn't take risks, but if we are serious about soaring, we want to be successful. We cannot collect laurels without putting something at stake.

The win is just the opposite of the disaster. You begin with good preparation, you arrive for the competition early, fully rested and ready to start your first day. You have to be mentally prepared for success, but also failure. Winning consists of a series of good decisions without unnecessary risk (a necessary risk, for example, is landing out but never endangering your health). The guy with bigger balls wins sometimes, but those are isolated cases. **Flying this way, you can win a competition but you can also lose your life.**

A competition which you are going to win usually goes well; you feel like you're not forcing anything, it just "works". If you are trying hard to win and things do not go well—just let it go.

Instead, focus on why you fly at all and why you like it. Soaring is beautiful and you spend time with people you like. If you can reach the balance between the fun of flying and the fun of competing—I guarantee you are going to win. You may not necessarily win the race but you will gain the satisfaction from flying.

Life goes on.

Marcin is already gone. Why did it affect me so much? Maybe because he was a wonderful man. I didn't know him very well but I felt I was his friend—as simple as that. He was open, honest, and extremely humble. He was normal! One would want to be around people just like him.

It moved me so because I know how tough it was, where he ended up; because I know how hard it is to land out when others are still flying. I know I could have been in his shoes, I could have been in a situation where I would run out of luck, skill or common sense. I also know that when it is too late you need to save yourself, set full flaps, go upwind and control the glider. But would I be able to do this properly under unimaginable stress, with critically low altitude and the sight of approaching trees? I do not know and I hope that I never will.

We will continue to fly, continue to compete, but to our surprise, we will catch ourselves getting too low. Marcin would want us to draw conclusions from his tragic flight. He would certainly say: "I put myself in a situation with no way out; never do this."

Thank you, Marcin. I am grateful that I knew you, that I was a part of your circle. I regret that I couldn't tell you my thoughts, I regret that we had so little time together. You don't know how much I wish I had accidentally driven my car over your wingtip so that you couldn't fly that day, and how—I know—you wouldn't even have cared that much, you would have just smiled wryly and then said, "No problem, nothing happened." That is how Marcin was.

I wish for myself and for everyone who reads this, that we can, at the right moment, say: "Thanks guys, I am landing now."

Karol Staryszak

This article has been translated from Polish

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