

▼ Clowning around after parading through the streets of Chamoux-sur-Gelon during the Opening Ceremony. Photo by Emily Mistick.



## Paragliding Worlds 2023

by Pam Kinnaird

■ Every two years, the FAI World Championships of Paragliding (aka the Worlds) gives nations a chance to compete in racing paragliders—one of the coolest games on earth! From May 20 to June 3, 2023, the 18th Worlds, an FAI Cat 1 event, was held in one of the classic racing arenas in paragliding—the Coeur de Savoie, French Alps, headquartered in Chamoux-sur-Gelon.

### What is a Cat 1 event?

Before we get into the details of this particular

event, I asked Bill Hughes, current president of both USHPA and CIVL, to describe the main differences between Cat 1 and Cat 2 paragliding competitions.

Hughes says the differences come down to selection method, competition focus, and oversight.

Cat 1 competitions are continental and world championships. Countries are allocated a fixed number of slots to fill with their best pilots. There are also qualifications related to a pilot's ranking in WPRS (World Pilot Ranking System)

to get the best pilots from each country; for 2023, pilots had to rank in the top 700. Cat 2 competitions, directors have more flexibility in who is selected to attend. You can think of Cat 2 competitions as qualifiers for Cat 1 competitions. Pilots receive WPRS points from Cat 2 competitions based on their results, which can eventually qualify them to represent their country in a Cat 1 comp.

The focus in Cat 1 competitions is on the national teams as well as the individual pilots. There are individual rankings, but the team podium is another objective that many national teams are shooting for. Particularly in cross-country, this results in interesting team tactics that you don't typically see in competitions focused solely on individual results.

Finally, Cat 1 competitions are overseen directly by CIVL officials. CIVL sends a steward and jury, or judges in the case of Accuracy, to ensure that the high standards for Continental and World Championships are met, and that the competition is conducted according to the FAI Section 7 rulebook governing competitions. For Cat 2 competitions, organizers are encouraged to follow the Section 7 rulebook as closely as possible, but it isn't mandatory, and there are no CIVL officials present to intervene in the competition if necessary.

### **Team members**

This year, the U.S. sent a strong team comprised of experienced veterans and two pilots making their debut on the U.S. National team. Veterans Josh Cohn and Andy Macrae have been competing nationally and internationally for over 40 years combined. Evan Bouchier, who is currently ranked in the top 100 in the world, made his debut at the Worlds this year. And we're excited to announce that this was the first year any

nation has included more than one female on the scoring team! Violeta Jimenez (debut) and Galen Kirkpatrick (veteran) have been racing hard at almost every high-level competition for the past couple of years, including the PWC Superfinal, earning their spots on the U.S. National team. I served as team leader. Ahead of the event, I drove many of the fundraising efforts and helped organize weekly Zoom meetings to discuss logistics and team strategy. During the competition, I was responsible for the team van, communications with FAI and CIVL officials, ground support, team meetings/debriefs, and delicious croissant breakfasts.

### **U.S. team training with Maxime Bellemin**

Ahead of the event, Jimenez organized for the team to work with Maxime Bellemin. In addition to being the author of *Performance Paragliding*, Bellemin is a long-time competitor and winner of several national and international paraglid-



▲ *Discussing task-specific strategies during our daily team briefing. Photo by Emily Mistick.*



▲ Galen is ready for take-off during one of our training days with Maxime. Photo by Pam Kinnaird.

ing competitions. Bellemin took the team on a comprehensive tour of the flying arena, both virtually via a four-hour-long video call, and then in person in the days prior to the competition.

One of the interesting things about the 2023 event was that there were multiple launch possibilities (12 listed on the event website), with the task committee picking the best location each day based on the weather. It was crucial to have Bellemin's expert local knowledge to bring the team up to speed on some of the complexities of this expansive flying environment, including where to look for unexpected convergences, when to push at full speed along a ridge versus when to stop and thermal, and where to find entry and exit points for major valley crossings as well as places to avoid.

In the end, the event used four different launch-

es: Montlambert, Montmin La Forclaz, Saint Hilaire du Touvet, and Le Semnoz—a proper tour of the area!

### ***Team pilot impressions***

After Worlds concluded, I asked a few of the team pilots to share their perspectives about the event.

#### ***Can you describe the flying conditions?***

**Josh Cohn:** “Moderately strong. It was tricky to get up from the main launch, Montlambert, requiring going into a sort of lee area and hugging the ridge. There was lots of running ridges very low with large gaggles.”

**Galen Kirkpatrick:** “The conditions were great. During tasks we experienced really varied conditions which is an important reminder about racing in mountain environments. We would

▼ *Happy pilots in goal! (L to R) Josh Cohn, Evan Bouchier, and Andy Macrae. Photos by Pam Kinnaird.*



often have really great conditions in some valleys followed by tricky sections of ridge soaring further along course line. To fly these tasks efficiently, you only climb in certain areas.”

**Evan Bouchier:** “Flying conditions were super tricky and required constant gear shifting throughout the entire speed range. Almost every task involved long sections of running along ridges and cliffs, where it was best to keep it in fourth or fifth gear and keep moving close to the terrain. Often this was a game of scooping up height as you soared along the ridges, and the best pilots would be 200–400 m higher after soaring terrain at full speed for 10–15 km. Valley crossing connections between terrain sections slowed down to conserve height, and we often arrived low on the far side in broken lift and lee thermals. The arrival points of the big crossings were tricky, but as soon as the gaggle was sorted, it would turn back into a full-speed run along another section

of ridges and cliffs. There was almost always a strong distinction between the lower valley layers, which would be inverted with strong valley flow, and the upper layers with high instability and lots of overdevelopment. Sinking down into the strong valley flows was often un-recoverable, whereas the upper layer was producing extremely strong lift and overdevelopment that forced different gaggles to divert from the course line to avoid dropping cells. On at least two days, there were significant amounts of rain and hail on course, and many pilots reported getting quite wet.”

**Violeta Jimenez:** “While we were lucky to fly nine tasks—I say lucky because the weather is famously unpredictable in the Alps in the spring—conditions were very tricky, with inversions most mornings and risk of spectacular overdevelopment by the afternoon. Most days, our tasks managed to avoid the worst of the OD,



◀ *Galen being interviewed about her spectacular task 9 performance by Joanna DiGrigoli for Cross Country Magazine. Photo by Pam Kinnaird.*

but we did stop a couple of tasks because of wind and rain. There were some incredible convergences and areas where everything shut down in the shade. And lots of classic alpine ridge running an arm's length from the terrain with 150 of your friends."

*What surprised you the most?*

**Evan Bouchier:** "Despite an overall theme of flying full-speed along ridges and powering up tight cores under big clouds, the results were heavily influenced by major downshifts to first and second gear on a few key days. One example is the first task, where all but 20 pilots landed during a total shade-out, but the best pilots shifted to first gear and even flew backward along the course to park in the one small section of ridge still producing lift to wait for the sun. Another key example was climbing out of launch at

Montlambert, where we flew for a majority of the comp (five of nine tasks). This was an extremely difficult climb out in a high-pressure inversion, with bubbles that would occasionally squish through against the terrain. More than a third of the competitors failed to climb out before the start on three of the tasks (including me for one task), and it was soul-crushing to be stuck on the terrain 800 m below the main gaggle as the start opened. Digging out of this launch required tons of patience and grit, as well as diligent searching and, ideally, joining a competent group to make the move along the ridge behind launch in search of small bubbles of lift rising along the terrain. However, once you made it above the terrain, it was super buoyant and easy to stay up, and it became more of a matter of staying out of the clouds before start! Such a strange combo."

**Galen Kirkpatrick:** "The amount of time we spent not thermalling. So much can be accomplished by running ridges. Going straight but going up. Line choice is paramount. The French pilots, their professionalism, teamwork, and their unrelenting talent."

**Violeta Jimenez:** "I was surprised at how unique the place was regarding the style required to race fast there. You could gain (or lose) a huge advantage quickly if you understood where you didn't have to turn or where you needed to thermal to get ahead. It was eye-opening to see how well many people who knew the arena could take advantage of it."

*What are some of your key takeaways?*

**Josh Cohn:** "It's important to double-check the task; don't trust a provisional task. Don't try to outsmart the gaggle by taking risky lines alone or playing it safer than the gaggle on the final glide."

**Galen Kirkpatrick:** "I've been working on



▲ *The team is ready for one last task from Saint Hilaire. Photo by Pam Kinnaird.*

centering fun as a part of my task flying performance. Racing in the Alps and the requisite style it takes is challenging to learn, but I can honestly say that I had fun each day. Fun when I sunk out, fun when I decided to go land, and fun when I flew well.”

**Evan Bouchier:** “One of my key takeaways from the event is a subtlety about being able to convert lift while still flying fast. The best pilots, particularly the French team and many of the pilots from the Alps, would not only be the fastest along the ridge runs, but they would also gain more height along the way. This made it easier/faster to climb out at the end of a ridge run before making the valley crossing, such that it would often determine the separation of the gaggles. I’m still trying to unpack this subtlety, but in short, it’s a result of gliding smoothly through the chunky air via clean and well-timed inputs on the bar and gentle, minimal inputs on the B’s. At a technical level, my understanding is that you need to hold your speed when you first hit lift and pitch back, then come off bar only slightly as the glider pitches forward, catch with minimal

B’s, then re-engage speed immediately through whatever bubble of lift is remaining in order to minimize the resultant pitching.”

***What advice do you have for the next U.S. Nationals team that will be competing in 2025 in Andradas, Brazil?***

**Galen Kirkpatrick:** “We all had a desire for a cohesive team, and we made that happen. We got along and learned about each other. This trust we developed was necessary for proper team flying. Proper team flying, coupled with excellent pilotage, is how these team-based races are won.”

**Josh Cohn:** “Find a house or place to stay (with A/C!) within walking distance of headquarters if possible. Clearly define the team leader’s job description and ensure all team members sign on to it. Use the very nice jerseys that Evan designed. Use direct appeals in addition to social media for fundraising since the reach of social media is limited. Bring a decent Bluetooth speaker and good playlists. Work on team communication in flight. Have fun!”

**Evan Bouchier:** “Advice for the next Worlds team is to continue to focus on team-building

and acting as a cohesive group. Despite tricky conditions and perhaps not flying to our full potential at this event, we had strong team dynamics and a very positive vibe through nearly three weeks spent together (in addition to several months of preparation and virtual meetings). I believe we would happily go through a similar experience together again. Over time I think this will continue to help the U.S. team and the broader U.S. racing community elevate our game and increase our cohesiveness.”

**Violeta Jimenez:** “Definitely keep practicing team flying. This is tricky, but the teams who did it well (notably the French and the British) gained an advantage. We have the opportunity to do this at other high-level comps (the PanAms or PWCs where we’ve had multiple Americans). It’s not a muscle you can flex when you get to a comp if you haven’t trained it, and you’re leaving something on the table if you go into a comp like the Worlds as if it’s a solo race.”

### ***CIVL jury impressions***

Having served on the CIVL jury at this year’s World Championships, I asked Bill Hughes to share his impression.

According to Hughes, “One of our takeaways from the World Championship this year is to improve the level of communication between team leaders and the organization (the local organization and the CIVL officials). Another is to clarify some of the rules in S7 that some pilots feel are unclear.”

### ***Team leader impressions***

This was my first time attending a Cat 1 event and my first time serving in a role like this. In the beginning, it was a little intimidating to be in the company of Jockey Sanderson (UK), Julien Garcia (FRA), and other professional coaches who’ve been to countless Cat 1 events. I learned, though,

that the team lead role can be played in various ways, and ultimately it is about supporting the team along with the individual pilots.

I enjoyed seeing our team dynamics evolve over the course of the event. We had regular team debriefs to share feedback, work through setbacks, and discuss individual and team goals for the next days. One seemingly small but impactful process we instituted was an expanded radio check where each pilot would announce the distance to goal and time to start before launching. This served the dual purpose of verifying comms and completing a final instruments check. In the age of using QR codes to import the task, it’s easy to miss minor changes to start time and turn-point radii.

It was fascinating to witness the team tactics employed by the French team this year. Having two non-scoring pilots, the French often had at least one pilot leading out ahead of the scoring pilots. I learned so much from other team leaders, organizers, and, most importantly, my team pilots.

### ***Results***

The springtime weather in the Alps made the event tricky, but over two weeks, there were nine tasks (two of which were stopped for unsafe flying conditions). The French team performed spectacularly, sweeping the individual open podium, claiming 1st and 2nd on the female podium, and taking first on the nations podium. Maxime Pinot (FRA) was crowned the new World Champion, followed by Honorin Hamard (FRA) and Pierre Remy (FRA). Meryl Delferriere (FRA) claimed top honors as the Female World Champion, followed by Constance Mettetal (FRA) and Nanda Walliser (SUI). The top three national teams spots went to France, the United Kingdom, and North Macedonia.

### Sponsors

We would like to send a huge thank you to Foundation for Free Flight for covering the U.S. paragliding team's entry fees this year and for their continued support for paragliding and hang gliding in the U.S. over the years.

Founded in 1987 as a 501(c)(3) public charitable corporation, the Foundation is charged with conserving the sport's flying opportunities for future generations. This includes site preservation, safety, and education and supporting PG and HG competition. The Foundation raises money through tax-deductible donations. For more information, please visit their website:

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We also want to thank Eagle Paragliding, SuperFly Paragliding, and Flying Camp Paragliding for their donations. We are also very grateful to XCSkies, FlyTec USA, and Bill Hughes for sponsoring gifts and raffle prizes for our fundraising participants. Last but not least, we appreciate the love and support from the flying community and our families! We couldn't have done it without you as is evidenced by all the support listed at ([www.gofundme.com/f/send-team-usa-to-the-2023-pg-world-championships](https://www.gofundme.com/f/send-team-usa-to-the-2023-pg-world-championships)). Thank you, and let's get excited about the next Worlds in Brazil! 🇧🇷

**Detailed results at [www.civilcomps.org/event/pgworlds-2023/results](https://www.civilcomps.org/event/pgworlds-2023/results)**



▲ Enjoying a well-earned fondue feast. Photo by Emily Mistick.