



Are we all now racing towards Serial Class? Photo: Martin Scheel

'Go Serial Class' say PMA

Paraglider manufacturers have backed banning comp gliders in FAI Cat 1 competitions. Ed Ewing investigates

Paragliding competition at the highest level could be about to undergo a radical overhaul, with competition gliders banned, and the field limited to flying on Serial Class gliders.

A decision by the Paraglider Manufacturers Association (PMA) to back Serial Class – that is, certified gliders – in World and Continental Championships has re-opened the Serial Class debate, which has trundled on for over a decade.

At present, pilots can fly any paraglider they like in FAI Category 1 (Cat 1) competitions (World, European and Asian Championships). Called Open Class, these gliders are often highly tuned prototypes suitable only for the very best factory pilots.

Concerns over the safety of Open Class gliders have been ongoing since the late 1990s. Those who are pro-Open Class argue banning them will have no impact on accident rates, while those who are pro-Serial Class argue it will.

Now, things have come to a head. At the annual general meeting of the PMA at the Coupe Icare in St Hilaire, members voted 16:2 (with three abstentions from harness makers) to back a proposal that would restrict world and continental championships to

EN-D paragliders, a move that would effectively ban Open Class comp gliders from these competitions.

Announcing the decision, they said in a statement: "The PMA believe that ... a significant way to improve safety in FAI Cat 1 competitions is to restrict them to EN-D gliders. Open Class gliders have their place in competitions but FAI Cat 1 is not that place."

The proposal was put forward by Ozone, the company behind the highly successful R10.2, the Open Class two-line comp glider that has swept podiums all year.

Explaining their decision to back banning their own best-selling glider from FAI Cat 1 comps, Ozone boss Mike Cavanagh said, "We've always backed Serial Class. When we launched Ozone it was on the basis that it would be safer to have competitions on Serial Class." That position has not changed, he explained, despite the competition and commercial success of the R10.2.

The move to make the proposal was prompted by the workings of the Open Class Technical Working Group, which has been working to develop a way of testing and self-certifying Open Class paragliders. The OCTWG was set up in February

this year by the Commission Internationale de Vol Libre (CIVL), the body that oversees competition paragliding and hang gliding for the Fédération Aéronautique Internationale (FAI). Headed by Swiss paragliding team leader Martin Scheel, it is tasked with making competition paragliders – and comp paragliding – safer.

Ozone's Mike Cavanagh said he'd become frustrated at this process, which is why Ozone then proposed a straight switch to Serial Class. "The OCTWG was set up to look at ways of making Open Class safer. Our problem with that is really it's just papering over the cracks."

He added: "Martin Scheel has come up with various ideas, which include educating the pilot and plans for declaring how many hours they have on the wing." While agreeing they are "all good" he said they fail to address the main issue at FAI Cat 1 comps, which is the lower standard of pilot flying in them compared to competitions like the Paragliding World Cup.

"The Cat 1 comps are the flagship events. They are held in the Olympic tradition, so all countries can have someone go along. There are countries [competing] where the pilots shouldn't even be on

Serial Class wings if we're honest, let alone Open Class."

Pressure to keep up meant pilots felt "peer pressure" to fly Open Class, he said. "From our point of view that is the main reason, the safety issue. For sure it will not solve all the problems, it will not mean people won't crash, but it's a sensible path to take. It's one of a raft of things you can do to improve safety."

Hans Bausenwein, CEO of the PMA, said that while he found it "remarkable" that Ozone is pro-Serial Class given its industry lead in Open Class design, the PMA was "convinced" that the only real way to make FAI Cat 1 paragliding competition safer "is to go to EN-certified gliders".

He said: "FAI Cat 1 comps allow three pilots from each FAI member country to compete. These pilots are not necessarily top-level pilots [on a world scale]."

"Taking this into account it's more sporting to provide a level playing field by setting a certain safety standard for gliders, so all pilots have the same chance to win and factory pilots cannot get an advantage by being allowed to fly on last-minute prototypes."

Martin Scheel defended the process of his working group. "The PMA is a manufacturers' association and therefore profit-orientated," he said. "Of the PMA member companies, very few take part in high level competition."

The proposal was incomplete, he said, with little or no explanation of how gliders would be checked in competition. Pilots 'tweaking' and re-trimming Serial Class gliders would become a real issue.

"Italy uses a homologation [all of the same level] class in local competitions. Teamleader Alberto Castagna talks about a lot of complaints and protests, even in small local comps," he said. "What will happen in the most prestigious competition of the paragliding world? A nightmare."

He added, "Dozens of factors play a significant role in the overall safety of a competition. The experience gathered in the PWC and Great Britain shows that 'homologation-class' [Serial Class] in reality does not result in increased safety."

He said, "The most significant factors are the skills and mentality of the pilot himself, and it is here that the greatest potential for the improvement of safety lies."

The OCTWG proposal is based on banning last-minute prototypes (the glider must be finished 60 days before the comp); self-certification by the manufacturers; minimum line strength; load testing; and pilots 'signing to fly': "The pilot must show his skills and experience in general and with this specific glider (a form has to be filled out on the website of the organiser and signed during registration)."

Both proposals are expected to be put forward at the annual meeting of CIVL delegates in February 2011 where they will be voted on.

If the Serial Class proposal is adopted by CIVL, that doesn't however mean the end of Martin Scheel's proposals. They could be adopted for use in Category 2 comps, for example. There are over 300 Cat 2 comps around the world, and it is not possible for CIVL to regulate them all.

CIVL explained: "Organisers agree in general that Cat 2 events will follow, as far as practicable, the Cat 1 rules. But in practice, organisers can choose to restrict (or not) which classes of glider are eligible

to compete in their Cat 2 events. In theory it will be quite possible to have Open Class gliders in Cat 2 events."

It also doesn't mean the end of Open Class or top-end glider development. The Paragliding World Cup is a pilot-run competition circuit made up of the best comp pilots in the world and is unlikely ever to adopt Serial Class. They tried it before, but dropped it due to lack of interest among pilots.

Xavier Murillo, boss of the PWC, said he'd seen it all before. "It's déjà vu, it comes round every three years," he said. "If FAI/CIVL goes for Serial Class, I wish them good luck for 'safety' and glider control. It will be interesting to see."

Pilots can have an impact on the decision making at CIVL. Deadlines for proposals for the CIVL plenary are at the end of this year, and an agenda will be published by 12 January 2011. CIVL delegates then meet for four days in Lausanne, Switzerland, from 24-27 February 2011. Any proposal about Serial Class or Open Class will be made there.

"Find out who your national CIVL delegate is," explained CIVL, "and lobby them." Some delegates may not be aware of the issues, and others may not be attending (in which case a proxy vote can be arranged), so it's worth checking, CIVL said.

"Find out what your national association thinks about this issue," they added. Delegates should vote according to that – although it doesn't always happen that way. "If there is no stated policy, ensure your CIVL delegate knows your views."


CIVL also noted: "Online forums can be a good method of airing a topic, but may not be regarded as indicative of all pilots' views."

CIVL are under a lot of pressure to 'fix' safety in competitive paragliding. The high profile fatal accident of Stefan Schmoker at the World Championships in January 2009 led to an outpouring of pilot dismay, and demands for competitions to be made safer.

In March 2009 the European Hang and Paragliding Union, which represents all 17 national free flight associations and 80,000 pilots at bureaucratic level in Europe, wrote a stinging letter to CIVL to express their concern. They back Serial Class and didn't pull any punches.

The "problem" over safety needed a "major change in CIVL competition philosophy" they wrote. Stefan Schmoker's death and the "large number" of reserve deployments at the 2009 World Championships were cited as proof of "dangerous" glider design and the sport's "continuing safety problem".

"Death is a regular occurrence at top-level events," they wrote. "Our present situation just cannot continue in the simple hope that no more will die." The "bodybag count" in comps risked all our freedoms when it came to the beady-eye of legislators and governments, they said.

They said they wanted a "paradigm shift in thinking" including changes in equipment, task setting, and restrictions if necessary and concluded: "Whatever is done, we remain confident that the best pilots will still win, but without the expense of deaths and so many near misses." 

For more on this issue, read Bob Drury's historical take on page 14, and 2007 World Champion Bruce Goldsmith's explanation of why fixing gliders won't necessarily make pilots fly more safely on page 36