



Are the days of the competition proto numbered? Photo: Martin Scheel

Déjà vu?

Bob Drury looks back at the long story behind Serial Class

The irony and inevitability of the PMA's decision to ask CIVL to go Serial Class only at FAI CAT 1 events will not have been lost on many. Rewind if you will to 1998 and Robbie Whittall's brave attempts to cap the then completely uncontrolled development and supply of uncertified competition wings. Robbie, world champion in both hang gliding and paragliding, stuck his head above the parapet and told the world that comp wings – of which he was both a master pilot and designer – were too dangerous to be flown in competitions. The majority of the world applauded and Serial Class, as it became known, was heralded by some countries' national competitions as the saviour of paraglider racing. Not only would competitions be safer there'd be a more level playing field too.

I was one of the group of pilots that pushed the UK into going Serial Class only, and for a couple of years we Brits raced around on DHV2-3s having a great time. The racing was still fast and exciting and the competition no less fierce. Even the PWC, under duress, formed a Serial Class, which Robbie's then colleague at Ozone and later to be world champion

Bruce Goldsmith won.

Dissent soon appeared though, particularly in the Alpine countries where most of factory pilots and a large percentage of the industry came from – some suspected that their access to the best uncertified prototypes meant they had the most to lose if everyone had standard, certified wings.

Arguments were made that Serial gliders were actually more dangerous to fly than uncertified, Open Class comp wings. Pilots allegedly felt safer so took more risks and more accidents were inevitable, in much the same way, we Serial Class fans said, that wearing helmets made motorcycling more dangerous.

Worse still, Serial Class 'could' make designers 'push' the limits of what they can do with a certified DHV2-3 wing. Which would be dangerous they said. Just as restricting engine sizes and enforcing safety parameters to the design of Formula 1 cars has made them less safe, we argued back, tongue firmly in cheek. Serial Class wings design could spiral out of the very control that it was trying to create.

Even with the PWC running a Serial Class and

several prominent nations supporting it, CIVL and the FAI didn't support it and didn't make the World and European Championships Serial Class only. Instead, team sizes were restricted, meet directors warned to be more sensible in their task setting and manufacturers told they had to load test their wings – something that recently turned out to be impossible and hence hadn't been getting done anyway. Without the support of the majority of the manufacturing base, soon destined to become the Paraglider Manufacturers Association, it wasn't long before the final nails were being hammered into Serial Class's coffin.

Serial Class may have been put to death at the highest levels, but something had changed in the world of paragliding. Regardless of CIVL's lack of support and the victory in the 'anti-Serial Class camp', Serial's heart never really stopped beating.

DHV3 became extinct, as it no longer had a place in the world – you either went full-blown Open Class or stayed at DHV2-3 or below – and many less-performance orientated comp pilots remained converts and never went back to the Open Class



The original serial racer, Ozone's Proton. Photo: flyozone.com

wings they had been flying XC on before. Serial-only events like the popular Ozone Chabre Open in France started to spring up around the world and little by little Serial Class started to dig its way out of its grave.

While Serial Class found its place in the flying public's heart, with the PWC and FAI CAT 1 competitions still Open Class it wasn't long before national comps like the British Nationals slowly demoted Serial to be a sub class of the main event and Open Class wings came back in.

Unsurprisingly, the accidents started again with none more prominent than the tragic death of the brilliant young Swiss star and Advance test pilot Stefan Schmoker at the 2009 FAI World Championships. Suddenly we were right back where we were 10 years ago, with a swell of public opinion calling for restrictions to make competitions safer. The focus naturally fell on wing design. Smoke signals from CIVL suggested that change needed to happen and happen fast, something many had criticised them for not doing 10 years earlier. At the 2010 CIVL plenary, CIVL asked its paragliding working group to come up with a concrete way to make competitions safer or it would strongly consider Serial Class, something the PMA were still against.

Now almost one year on and the PMA appear to have executed a U-turn and finally got behind Serial Class. The eyes of the paragliding world will now turn to CIVL at its plenary in February 2011 to see if this time they give Serial Class the breath of life it really needs by making the World and European Championships Serial Class only. Where that leaves the staunchly Open Class PWC is anyone's guess.

If CIVL do support Serial Class this time then the sceptics will have to stomach the extra danger racing them brings, whilst the rest of us can all look forward to seeing how good EN D wings get once designers have the inspiration to really push the limits of Serial Class. **XC**