

# The NASA Flyer

Newsletter of the Northeastern Air Sports Association - Chapter 221

February 2011

## *This issue features:*

- *Highlights of the recent Parachute Party and Clinic*
- *A profile of hang gliding superstar and sage, Dave Hopkins by fellow local celebrity Sarah Savage*
- *Spotlight on the Brooklyn connection*



*Eduardo Ponton and Tree-top Dave Lewis struggle with turbulence (Wayne and Tom) before aiming their toss*

## **Parachute Party!**

On January 22 Mountain Wings hosted the annual mid-winter Parachute Clinic (and party!). Mountain pilots of all levels came to get some background on the situations in which a chute is deployed – purposefully or accidentally – and the proper technique for throwing it effectively. Then one by one all climbed into the rig with their harness to be jostled by faux turbulence (Wayne or Tom taking care of that!) to set up the toss toward the target. Lines were reeled in until the chutes opened. Then Greg demo'd a repack before all the chutes – in a rainbow of colors! – were left to relax prior to the real repacking a day or two later. And then it was time to party! No dancing this time but certainly the simulator attracted a crowd – and it wasn't just the Generation X-ers tried their hand at thermalling over volcano island or over polar ice caps.



*Cathleen's chute is loaded "on the hoof" by Greg before her turn in the rig*

Be sure to enjoy the slide show/video of the event courtesy of Timo at the following You Tube link:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FFeZC5s1Y1s>

## **Spotlight On... DAVE HOPKINS** By Sarah Savage

We're all familiar with Dave Hopkins's floppy hat, unshaven face, and plain but practical clothes. We recognize his trailer behind the Mountain Wings training hill, and we know we can find him in Greg Black's shop when it's not flyable.

That's where I found him one Sunday afternoon in December. He was studying the weather patterns for the northeast on his laptop, so I asked him if he was going to try to break his 2010 distance record that day. He told me politely that the conditions weren't right, and I politely asked a follow up question about flyable weather in December. He explained about thermal heights and temperature differences in the winter versus other seasons, and although I didn't have a



*The simulator attracts a happy crowd: Galiya and Timo cheer on Konstantin as he gives it a try, while Dave Hopkins chats with Rich Bryant in the background*

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practical understanding of what he said, I got a sense of his expertise as a pilot.

Intrigued, I asked him how he finds the thermals he uses to fly cross country. I half expected him to tell me that he sees them or senses them the way birds do, but he gave me a very practical answer about cumulus clouds and terrain. He also talked, though, about how he has painstakingly built his knowledge of the east coast route over time.

"It's hard," he said. "It's constant multi-tasking. Think of all the information a new pilot has to process to fly from the mountain to the landing zone - thermals, wind, trees, the LZ, the glider. There's ten times as much when you go cross country."



*Flying Philosopher  
(photo by Fred McCarty)*

He talked about weather and wind, thermals and terrain, fine tuning and motivation, but it wasn't until he mentioned adjusting his harness so it doesn't pinch that I began to understand what is involved in flying long distances. I've heard other pilots talk about flying with an uncomfortable harness or a zipper that won't zip, so I know it can be done for a ten minute or even an hour flight. However, Dave has had to fine tune his body, his gear, and his glider as precisely as a rocket scientist makes his calculations. Dave can't afford to waste energy or attention on an uncomfortable harness. His entire focus needs to be on moving safely from thermal to thermal while staying within range of an LZ and out of restricted air space without losing track of changing weather

conditions and wind patterns or the cycle of thermal development and disintegration. At the same time he has to monitor the flow of his own energy and concentration so he can keep himself motivated to spend several more hours alone in the sky.

"If you think you're going to just go out there and become a sky god, you're probably not going to do it for very long," he told me more than once.

The way Dave made flying sound sometimes I had to remind myself that this was not something he had given up. He was studying flying-related weather maps when I started talking to him, and just the night before, he won the XC trophy for the third time. Last year, he won it by flying 201 miles to join a handful of pilots in the country who have broken the 200 mile barrier.

"It has to be fun. You have to make it fun. You have to be happy with going just five miles more," he said.

At the same time, he acknowledged that being an XC pilot is a lonely business. He spends hours alone in the air and when he lands, there are only few other pilots he can really talk to about his experiences. By the time I asked Dave why he flies cross country, I realized he was similar to long distance hikers, elite athletes, or artists in many ways. He has chosen to give up a regular job, a typical lifestyle, and the pursuit of the standard American Dream in order to focus exclusively on hang gliding. In return, though, he has an awareness of himself and an experience of the air that most people don't have and don't understand.

"I was flying with Jimmy D in his plane along the route I usually fly. As we were going over it at 130 miles per hour in an engine-powered plane, I realized that it's pretty amazing what I do. I can fly 200 miles on the power of my mind."

It's not that Dave thinks he can fly without his glider. It's that he knows he can fly his glider using only his physical skills and his ability to process information. As opposed to pilots who think they have to push the envelope and take risks to improve, Dave flies conservatively within his abilities. He has built a cocoon for himself out of his knowledge and experiences. He stays centered within that cocoon and draws on it to fly farther, take on new challenges, and become a better pilot.

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"I enjoy the learning involved with XC flying," he told me. "I enjoy learning the terrain and the weather, and I enjoy what I learn about myself in the process. Something happens when you decide to leave this area."

That "something" is nearly impossible to explain to those who haven't experienced it. It's a sense of himself as a human and as part of the air he flies through, of strength and fragility, of limitless power and utter vulnerability all at the same time. It's about being self-sufficient enough to fly without an engine and connected enough to successfully monitor the environment without gadgets. It's about seeing possibilities where others see impossibilities. Although it's what sets Dave apart from most other pilots, he shares their same love of flying, and he's willing to talk to those who can hear what he has to say. Next time you see him, look beyond the obvious and listen beyond the details to get to know Dave Hopkins, a pilot who has mastered his craft.

**Winter Flying** – Do you remember Tom's article from our last issue describing the pleasures of winter flying and advising us about the proper gear to get to ensure warmth and comfort? Well here is one mystery H2 who clearly took the information to heart! Can you guess who it is?



**Brooklyn Boyz** - So who has noticed the growing number of Brooklyn residents finding their way to Ellenville for hang gliding? It's not just the regulars like Josh McMillan (Texas native) or John Reeves (North Carolina) but the less frequently seen but always nice to see, like Elan Schultz (NY) and Lee Von Krause (Massachusetts). In fact, Josh's wife's Mini-Cooper has become a de facto Brooklyn-to-Ellenville shuttle, but with the coming season, who knows: perhaps we'll actually need to set up van service for the growing number of commuters!



*Boys from the 'hood: Elan, John, and Josh strike a pose*

**Thanks to the following contributors to this issue:**

- *Dave Hopkins*
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- *Timo Friedrich*
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- *Cathleen O'Connell*

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