

BRITS

Crank It Up

Empuria Airspeed Challenge

It wasn't long ago that British skydivers had to travel across the pond to participate in high level big-way events like the Arizona Challenge. This summer saw all of that change though when Europe laid out a red carpet for Airspeed's Craig Girard and Kirk Verner.

Europe on the Big-way Map

The season has seen Craig and Kirk build stunning formations at no less than three challenging big-way events across Europe, concluding most recently with one to top them all – the Empuriabrava Airspeed Challenge. Yes, you read that right – not Arizona! Not California! Or some far-flung tropical location that you need a small fortune to get to! Just a short flight away in sunny Spain at a drop zone that really does have it all!

The Empuriabrava Airspeed Challenge was derived from the success of its well known sister event in Arizona. This time though, Craig and Kirk joined forces with Ian 'Milko' Hodgkinson, (known to many for his challenging events in the UK and his organising across Europe) and Spieli, a well known organiser from Germany. Between them the team delivered four days of top quality coaching, intense skydiving challenges and some pretty cool beach jumps. The dive engineering itself was phenomenal – delivering the type of video that has you squinting sideways with the pause button close to hand – wondering in awe why anyone would ever even dream such skydives to be possible! But somehow the talented team made those dives work – raising each person's performance just that little bit higher and making this an event that will surely go down in history as the one that really put Europe on the big-way map!



Arizona Challenge Formula

The event adopted the tried and tested Arizona Challenge formula; two days focused on complex multi-point 20-ways, followed by a third day of equally demanding 32-ways. The organisers used the first three days to assess each participant in a range of slots and learn how best to fly parts of the formation that were planned for the fourth 'Challenge' day. All the information gathered was then used to assign each individual a slot on the final formation; in

this case a 60-way that had never been built before and one that challenged the skills of every jumper who was part of the magic.

Patience, Discipline, Precision

What you quickly notice about an Airspeed event is the emphasis placed on core skills: patience, discipline and precision. Many of us have been on formations where we are told to respect the base, reference to the centre, put our bodies in

Gustavo Cabana

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Bruno Brokken



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position, stop and then take grips. Such skydives are fantastic learning environments because they highlight points for improvement, show what happens when we forget the rules, and help us to improve our flying jump by jump. Generally though, such dives are designed to withstand trial and error. The *Airspeed* dives by comparison are a very different beast.

Decision-makers

The warm up days are a lot of fun and a time to get to know the people you are flying with. During this time it's not uncommon for the complexity of the dive flow to really play with your mind – but it wouldn't be a 'Challenge' if you didn't have to think! Critically though, the early days are designed not just to assess you for the Challenge dive, but to build up the significance of patience and precision to epic proportions. By the time you are part of the

Challenge, you are not just a skydiver – you are an active decision maker, aware of the impact of every split-second choice you make. Once you experience 60 people flying with that mentality you suddenly see what the organisers see: anything really is possible!

Wherever you are flying in the formation you decide when to dock. There is no urgency or necessity. Shape, pictures and levels take absolute priority. Is your slot inviting you in? If not, wait until it is.



Approaching the formation on a 45° angle gives maximum manoeuvrability

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Inside Flyers

As an inside flyer on a Challenge dive, you take responsibility for ensuring the correct early build of the formation. When you decide to dock, you are signalling to everyone behind you that it is ready to build the next wave. The base of the skydive is sacred – you are not just making sure it's built, you are watching it fly and letting it find its shape. You know that a bad decision from you will undermine the success of everyone docking behind and, ultimately, the whole formation. After you dock your job is to keep the shape of the base exactly as it was when you joined it. The team is reliant on your strength and focus.

Outside Flyers

As an outside flyer, you must have total respect for the work that has already been done. By the time it has built out to your slot the formation is about as delicate as it can get. A bad or poorly timed dock or a lack of precision can and will affect its core stability. You fly with a unique mindset, knowing that your job is not just to decide 'when' to dock, but 'whether' to dock. The fragility of the formation demands all your respect and that might even mean sacrificing your right to become part of it before break-off.

Crank Flyers

The Empuriabrava 60-way presented a unique challenge to the outside flyers. Imagine flying in two teams – a 60-way and a 4-way – both at the same time – both with equal importance. Each of you is flying a slot that is so delicate that getting it wrong could easily funnel the whole formation. Now imagine not really being able to see the 60-way and having to rely on someone else in the 4-way team to be your eyes (or being the eyes for someone else)...

The sidebody people are the eyes of the crank



Sixteen people (25% of the dive) were tasked with this dual challenge. The goal was to build four outfacing cranks onto an already outfacing connection point (which itself was part of an intricate formation build). When faced with a job like that, particularly when some people were flying virtually blind, you had to develop a sub-team plan.

The success of the crank depended on the quality of communication on the ground. It was critical that the whole sub-team understood how each person planned to fly their slot, what criteria was influencing each decision to dock, what language would be used to pass information through grips to each other and

what the recovery plan would be if the crank lost levels and risked funnelling.

For the outfacing people it was also about knowing how it felt to have it fly both correctly and wrongly, knowing what corrections were needed, if any, and using that information as a team to make the piece fly, jump after jump.

For the sidebodies (the eyes of the crank), there was a critical decision-making role on every jump. Sometimes the outfacing piece needed to be docked on quickly so that communication could be passed through the grips earlier. On other jumps it needed time to settle, and you could help most by sitting in your slot and

The completed challenge



Kate Burn out-facing as the formation nears completion
One third of the crank flyers were Brits!



We did it!
Smiles from Toni, Bailey and Kirk

waiting for the piece to be ready for you to strengthen it. The right decision for each scenario was critical. Once docked the sidebody's job was to be the eyes; watch the condition of the centre, predict level changes and communicate positively to ensure the whole piece continued to fly on level and remained symmetrical to the centre.

Faced with this kind of challenge, not one of the skills coached over the preceding days was wasted!

Teamwork

Ultimately though, from the first person to

dock on the Empuriabrava Airspeed Challenge to the very last, it was core skills, teamwork and positive attitude that secured the completion of complicated formations throughout the event. If the team stopped working together, you quickly appreciated just how delicate the design of the dive was, compared to the ones you find on a traditional boogie circuit.

Just Starting?

If you're just starting out though, or still developing your large formation skydiving skills, boogies, weekend load organising and big-way camps are the perfect place to

practice. The skills you build at events like these provide vital foundations for the future. These days, in the UK and Europe, you are definitely spoilt for choice.

Strong Skills Already?

If you are a proficient big-way jumper with strong skills already, or a very good team jumper seeking a challenge of awesome proportions, the Empuriabrava Airspeed Challenge is 100% where it's at!

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