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SAFETY is NO ACCIDENT

by Ryan Voight



THE ART OF SLED RIDES

I have had an epiphany: Sled rides save lives! Let me explain. When I try to determine when most accidents occur in flying, a lot of the statistics fall into two phases of the flight—launching and landing. No surprise, really, since that is when we are closest to the ground (and other assorted stuff to hit).

It doesn't take superhuman powers of observation to see that many among the free-flight community execute poor launches or landings—or both. I don't mean to be inflammatory, but

sadly, it's the truth. To continue in this vein of brutal honesty, I'll add that it's amazing there aren't MORE injuries during launching and landing. I guess guardian angels catch pretty well.

I have literally lost sleep over this issue. How can we grow a sport that many of the current participants make look difficult and dangerous? And why, why, WHY are people struggling? I don't mean to say launching and landing is EASY, but they are not *that* hard, either. Neither one requires a massive amount of athleticism. And modern

gliders are easier than ever to maneuver. So what gives?

I have found the answer: THE LOST ART OF THE SLED RIDE. Remember when you were new to flying? Remember those first days on the training hill? It didn't matter how high you got or how far you went. And it certainly didn't matter how long you stayed up. But during that period in our lives we all wore ear-to-ear grins like the Cheshire Cat.

However, at some point in our flying careers, we start to soar, and that

changes everything. Pretty soon we won't set up unless we think there's a chance to soar. Some people will pack up on launch rather than take a sled ride, even when they have a driver to pick them up in the LZ.

Sled rides don't give us enough time in the glider to learn many things, but they do give us exactly what we need—practice launching and practice landing. Look around at your local site and think about who consistently has the best launches and landings. I'll wager they've taken a lot more sled rides than anyone else there.

One of the beautiful things about flying hang gliders and paragliders is how easy it is to become good at it. A wealth of knowledge is out there, including professional instructors. And once you have the basic idea, all you have to do to go from good to great is fly, fly, and fly some more. But remember, it's not just airtime! Launches and landings are probably more important than the number of hours of airtime you accumulate, and those accident statistics prove it. Not many injuries occur at 8,000 feet.

So how do we bring back the art of the sled ride? We do it together! First, we take turns flying and driving for each other. Second, we challenge each other: Who can land with the fewest steps? (no steps, ideally) Who can land closest to the spot? Who can stay up the longest? (This is surprisingly fun on a sled ride.) If your site permits, launch two at a time and race to the LZ, seeing who can land first. Get creative. There are a million ways to make sled rides fun.

I GUARANTEE that if you bring back the lost art of sled rides, you AND YOUR FRIENDS will have better launches and landings and be safer pilots for it. You'll have some fun, too. Isn't that what it's all about?

Remember: Safety is No Accident. Now, let's sled! 

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