



SAFETY is No Accident

by Ryan VOIGHT

CONFIDENT OR COCKY?

Confidence. As pilots, we tend to be a confident bunch. And who can blame us? Every time we fly we take our fate into our own hands. Every time we fly we're reliant on our skill, knowledge and judgment to get us down safely.

Confidence is defined as faith or belief that one will act in a right, proper, or effective way (Merriam-Webster.com). The real mind-twister is this: If we weren't exceedingly confident that we could get ourselves down safely, would we still launch? I've often been surrounded by hang glider

and paraglider pilots: some have a stronger sense of "self-preservation" than others, but none of them have a true "death wish." We all want safe landings.

Along with skill, knowledge, and judgment, we need confidence to be safe pilots. It would be highly dangerous to fly if you were afraid to make any inputs, second-guessing every decision.

But sometimes we can be over-confident, causing us to become cocky. Cocky is defined as boldly or brashly self-confident (Merriam-Webster.com). Confidence is good, but being cocky can get us into trouble. Being cocky can cause us to fly in risky conditions, to make less-than-safe decisions

[left] Looking back into the higher ranges.



“The longer we fly, and the longer we go without an accident, the more risk we are in, because we are in danger of becoming cocky.”



during our flight, or to fly equipment that does not match our own skill.

How do we go from being confident to cocky? Unfortunately, it's easy—almost a side effect of doing our job well (staying safe). Every time we fly without an error, mishap or calamity, our confidence is reinforced. The longer we fly, and the longer we go without an accident, the more risk we are in, because we are in danger of becoming cocky.

A real-life example that I've been dealing with lately: I'm a newish P2 pilot. I've also been flying hang gliders all my life. I've noticed that I'll fly my

hang glider in much worse conditions than my PG. Am I safer on a hang glider? Are the conditions less bad, depending on my choice of aircraft? Or is it that in one aircraft I'm new and I know it, and in the other I'm so experienced I feel “safe,” even when I may be at very high risk?

I've also noticed that the more PG flights I take, the more comfortable I feel. As a P2, I'm limiting my flying to light-wind sled rides and smooth ridge lift days. I'm getting pretty good: my launches and landings have all gone well, and I haven't had any of the scary C words happen.

I find myself feeling as if I've got the hang of it,

[above] Aerobatics require an unusually high level of confidence. Being confident in such high skill proficiency is a dangerous game! Here author Ryan Voight flies head-on, inverted, with paraglider pilot Kristjan Morgan. Don't try this at home! **[opposite]** Flying FAST and LOW can be a lot of fun, but are you SURE you have the skills to manage the risks? Photos by Ryan Voight.



[above] Confidence in one's ability to find and work lift isn't necessarily bad... but overconfidence can put you low over un-landable terrain, as author Ryan Voight finds himself here. **[below]** Here author Ryan Voight misreads the windsock, and now must land his topless glider downwind at high altitude | photo by John Glime.

and I'm ready for more. Higher launches, some thermic air. Maybe even an epic summit hike-and-fly from 11,000-ft Lone Peak. BUT—Do I really have the hang of this, or have I just been flying in easy conditions? Does having good launches and landings in light conditions mean I'm ready to fly in thermic air? I think not.

It's entirely natural—and necessary—to be confident in our skills and knowledge. But if we

don't keep that confidence in check, we can get cocky and find ourselves needing new underwear (at best), an ambulance (hope not), or worse.

So how do we remain confident, without becoming cocky? Finding an answer to this question can literally be the key to your survival in these sports. Personally, I'm still searching. What's worked well for me, as an instructor, is evaluating conditions as I would if I were going to launch





a student. If you had to explain weather conditions—what the air will FEEL like—to someone, what vocabulary would you use? When I find myself using words like sporty, rocking, strong, bumpy, turbulent, or windy, should I fly, even though I'd recommend that others don't?

The same standard works for equipment. Are you flying in (or considering) equipment that you wouldn't recommend to someone of similar ability? Maybe you think there's something that separates you from other students. But is that relevant? Does cockpit time in a Boeing 737 make you a more experienced hang glider pilot? Does my life in hang gliders make me a more experienced P2? If I think I could do great on a DHV 1-2 wing, but

I wouldn't recommend it to another P2, should I really be flying it?

What do you do to keep yourself confident but not get cocky? If you don't have an answer to that, it's time to do some reflecting! Remember: Safety is No Accident! 🇺🇸

Ryan is a second-generation hang gliding instructor and flight school owner. He has been flying since he was still wet behind the ears, and he's the youngest person to ever earn the Hang 5/Master rating. He currently resides near Point of the Mountain in Utah, and flies hang gliders and paragliders as much as he can.

[above] How confident are you conditions are safe? Here Karl Yates, and photographer Ryan Voight, were sure enough to fly. Poor choice? Probably...