

# Turning My World



# Upside Down

by RyanVoight



Going through old hang gliding movies, I'm mesmerized when I come across "old school" aerobatics. I'm awestruck by the guys who are capable of doing so much with so little. They're flying gliders that would struggle to out-perform today's entry level wings. These guys dive HARD... they climb, roll... Dan Racanelli's getting WAY upside down in 1982.

Then I scrounge through our old family home videos... I find footage of my dad, doing the same thing in the late 80's. I find a tape of Mitch McAleer visiting Ellenville... must be 1986... I'm two in the video. Mitch is doing beautiful straight-over-the-top loops right in front of launch. A familiar voice is yelling "Ryan, look! Mitch is doing loops!" I pause the video. Was that my MOM?! Rewind. Yes, it's mom! "Look, Ryan!" she yells again, "LOOPS!"

My entire life obsession suddenly makes perfect sense. I grab another VHS. This one is labeled Ryan's First Flight. Press play. Ok, little me, four years old. Putting on my harness. Running around with a harness on. Fast forward. Ok, now my dad is hooking me in to the glider and I lay down in the harness. I reach and put my hands on the basetube and smile like a kid on Christmas. Then I pull the bar in as far as my little arms can manage and ball up—just like Dan Racs, just like Mitch. Clearly I'm already obsessed.

Amused by what I've discovered, I move forward in the video collection to 2001. I'm 16, doing 120 degree wingovers, practicing entry and exit headings. Holy crap, I say to myself. I dig into my own footage

[opposite] John Heiney over the top. [above] John Heiney throwing down above BayFair. Photos by John Heiney.



**[clockwise from upper left]** John Heiney at the Miami Airshow | photo by John Heiney. Reserve deployment | photo by Mitch McAleer. Low loop over the LZ at Elsinore | photo by Mitch McAleer. Zac Majors throwing down over Telluride, Colorado. **[opposite]** Mitch McAleer looping over Elsinore.

archive from the 2008 Wings Over Wasatch Aerobatics Clinic with Mitch McAleer and watch my routines. Looks like I'm not doing much steeper maneuvers than in 2001! What gives?! But I remember my dad's advice. "Take as long as it takes; don't rush it. You'll know when you're ready," he said.

I'm ready, I tell myself. Every time I go flying, I say, "This is it!" I do a mild stall, pull in, ball up. I'm diving HARD... 50, 60, 70, 80, 90+ miles per hour. I un-ball-up, the glider begins to pitch towards blue sky. As things slow down, I freak and roll hard. Another "perfect" 160-degree wingover with more upside down time than Shawn White in a half pipe. What is wrong with me?! I must not be ready. Keep practicing, I tell myself.

2009 I get an outstanding day with Dangerous Dave Gibson and the legendary John Heiney. We're all throwing down the best we've got. I still can't muster the brass to go straight over, although I'm getting about as close as you can get without actually doing it. In the LZ, John explains that it actually takes more energy to roll as late as I'm rolling, and it would be SAFER to go straight over. My mind is blown again.



I'm speechless. I continue to pump myself up. I try to commit to doing it. "THIS IS IT!" I say. I dive... I roll out. What's my problem?!

Aerobatics Clinic 2009 with Mitch. Been hard at work, concentrating on everything Mitch had proscribed the year before. Thinking about everything John said. Thinking about my dad's advice: when you're ready, you'll know. In the clinic, Mitch tells me I'm ready. He says I'm practically looping already; they're just crooked to one side or the other. I feel great. I go out to straighten out my loops. I dive, I climb towards a beautiful blue sky. I roll. Wait... I roll?! Aw hell! Still can't quite make myself do it.

By this point, all my friends and fellow pilots know I'm obsessing. It's all I talk about. Every time we fly I say, "Today's the day." Every time we fly, I don't do it. They're sick of hearing about it. I'm sick of hearing... even thinking about it. I haven't had a full night's sleep in weeks. I'm actually losing sleep over this! 3 AM and I'm on Wikipedia looking up an entry titled OBSESSION. I'm one sick puppy, and I know it. But there's only one cure for what I have...

Tired, frustrated, and utterly at my wit's end, I go flying. I do something I haven't done before. I tell my girlfriend to leave work early, today is the day, and I want her there. She's been surprisingly supportive of this whole endeavor, even though it's been continuous throughout our 5+ years together. I'm in the air, with Dangerous Dave Gibson, and I see a familiar car pull in to the North Side parking lot. She's here... time to show the woman I love what I've got.

I check for traffic—all clear. I look for Dave. He's directly overhead. I think he knows I'm ready. I dive





[opposite top] John Heiney on tow. [left] John Heiney landing at the Miami Airshow. Photos by John Heiney.

for what feels like forever. I tell myself it's now or never, and never isn't an option at this point. I remember to follow Dave's advice...I don't hold my breath, exhale as I relax my arms and slowly, gradually, let the bar come back out to trim. I'm climbing like a rocket ship and see nothing but blue sky. I look out past my wingtip and can barely see the horizon because my wing is blocking my view. Yup, I'm definitely upside down. I grip the base tube and wait. Was I going fast enough? Was my pitch rate too fast, and I lost all my energy? Did I pitch too slowly, and not have enough energy? As I'm looking at the center of my base tube, I see Dave. He was above me, now he's below me... well, still higher than me... but my world is upside down.

As time seems to speed back up to something resembling normal speed, I see the ridge come into view. God, that felt good! I pull in; I'm now diving again. I relax, exhale, around I go again. This time I notice I'm not perfectly upside down. Third time's the charm. I dive, relax, exhale, over I go... I see blue sky past my nose cone; then the world I know comes back into view. This time I was straight as hell over. Mitch has never been straighter.

I'm getting wicked dry mouth, but I can't stop smiling. I guess I should land. I'm scaring people as I come weaving through traffic with an ear-to-ear grin on my face....they think I've finally lost it! I try to quell my excitement long enough to stick a landing. Desiree is there to greet me. Jackson the dog runs up to me as if he understands the burden that's been lifted. It's then that I realize I didn't just succeed in turning my world upside down. My obsession turned my world upside down a loooong time ago. I just successfully set things right again. That night I slept like a baby.

If anything, this article should demonstrate the desire, the passion, the irrational obsession required to pursue aerobatic flight... if you can live without aerobatics in your life, please do! Aerobatics aren't for everyone. To do them properly requires many, many years of hard work and practice. This article was written for entertainment purposes only and should by no means be regarded as an instructional resource. If you must partake in aerobatic flight, professional instruction is available and strongly encouraged. 🇺🇸