

History of the Women's International, European and now World Championships

The goal of this presentation is to show how women-only contests evolved and led to the now 3rd Women's World Championships.

The soaring movement was started by a flight-starved group of young people in Germany which after WWI was not allowed to fly airplanes. Gliders weren't mentioned in the Versailles Treaty. In these early years women, mostly sisters and girlfriends of the death defying, daredevil pilots - played mainly a decorative and adoration roll. But in the late twenties women started to play a more pivotal roll.

Here in the United States 5 women can claim to be the first serious women glider pilots. They were **Anne Lindbergh**, the first woman receiving a class C glider license, **Maxime Dunlap**, **Peach Wallace**, **Gunivere Potter** and **Ruth Alexander**. These women created so much enthusiasm that an all women glider club was formed in 1929 in San Diego, the Anne Lindbergh Women Glider Club. The same happened in Germany at about the same time.

During the 30ies women started to appear on contest rosters. Here in the US **Allaire Du Pont** set a women endurance record during the 1935 contest at Harris Hill of 5h 31' in a Du Pont utility glider. Allaire recently past away at age 93. **Dorothy Holderman** also was listed as a pilot in that contest. In Germany Hanna Reitsch, the famous German aviatrix flew her first contests.

In the late 40ies several women in the US flew in national contests amongst them **Virginia Bennis** (now Schweizer), **Alberta Brown**, **Naomi Allen**, **Betsy Woodward**, **Betty Boles**, **Margaret McDougall** and **Ruth Petry**

During the 50ies, when the total SSA membership hovered around 1000 the US saw its greatest participation by women in soaring contests.

In the years after WWII, although several women won National Championships in gender neutral contests, only a handful participated in FAI sponsored World Championships. **Hanna Reitsch / Germany** flew to a third place in 1952 in Spain and two years later to 6th place in France. **Adele Orsi /Italy** participated in the World Championships in Waikerie /Australia in 1974. **Janet Hider Smith/ Australia** competed in New Zealand in 1995, **Liz Schwenkler / USA** flew in the Junior Worlds in Holland 1999 which were won by **Mette Pedersen**, Denmark. **Sarah Steinberg / Great Britain** almost made it to the top in the World Class at the 2001 World Air Games in Spain only to lose the position after an off-field landing and thus finishing in 5th place. **Karin Woetzel / Germany** flew to an 11th place at the 2nd World Class World Championships in Poland in 1999 and now in 2006 **Mette Pedersen from Denmark**, who came in 6th in last year's pre-worlds and won the 15m Class in the Women's Worlds last summer, flew as the only woman in the just recently flown Grand Prix Sailplane Race in New Zealand.

The women movement for women-only contests actually began in Poland in 1949 where in the first contest of the so called Peoples Democratic Republics (from our view the countries behind the Iron Curtain) a Polish woman won. This came to nobody's surprise

since Poland after the war had more women glider pilots than the rest of the world together.

Again in Poland, in the 1954 contest it was a Polish woman taking the crown ahead of later World Champion Edward Makula.

A separate Women Class competed the first time in **1966** at the third contest, now the so called "Soaring Contest of the Socialist Countries" which took place in **Oriol / Soviet Union**.

From 1949 until 1989, when communism collapsed 22 of these contests were held. Outstanding women pilots of these years were **Monika Warstat** and **Irmgard Morgner** from the German Democratic Republic. **Pelagra Majewska**, **Adela Dankowska** from Poland, **Maria Bolla** from Hungary and **Valentina Toporova** /Soviet Union. No Western pilots flew in these contests. From 1974 onwards the number of women flying in these international meets averaged about 16.

Sue Martin /Australia, Geogeo Litt / Belgium, Rika Harwood and Ann Burns / Great Britain were amongst the women who won national championships in gender-neutral contests but were never included in their National Team.

In 1969 **Monika Warstat / East Germany** and others petitioned the CIVV (International Gliding Commission) and its president Pirat Gehringer to put the establishment of a Women World Championships or Women Class for the 1970 World Championships on the agenda. Despite Pirat Gehringer's resistance a small victory was achieved. Thanks to Fred Weinholtz (who is also the creator of the Club Class) women were permitted to hold International Contests as long as they did not call them **Championships**.

The first International Contest for Women was held in 1973 in Leszno/ Poland.

21 women from 12 countries (this time western countries participated) competed in this contest. **Sue Martin/Australia** and the US pilots **Henriette Freese and Britt Floden** had the distinction coming from the farthest away. Gliders of the type Pirate were provided to all pilots at no cost. All tows were free of charge also. The two GDR pilots Monika Warstat and Irmgard Morgner arrived in Leszno also in Pirats in a 250 km double-tow. During the course of the contest several pilots got the chance of double-tows (free of charge) after they had landed out. There were 9 scoring days including two 500km tasks. Remember, the Pirate had a L/D of 31.

It was during this championship that the Babajaga Ceremony, the induction into the sisterhood of the flying witches, was created. (Pictures of last year's ceremony will be seen in the short slide show at the end of the program). Winners of this first International Gliding Contest were the famous Polish pilot **Pela Majewska**, the **Australian Sue Martin** and **Jindra Paluskova** from **Czechoslovakia**.

Again Leszno/Poland hosted the 2nd International Contest for Women in 1975.

Cobra 15 airplanes were provided to all pilots at no charge. Again Monika Warstat and Irmgard Morgner arrived from Germany in a double tow having some anxious moments

in 450 ft over a burning forest. From the farthest away again came the Australian Sue Martin. Britt Floden from the US participated again this time together with Erica Scurr. The weather god did not show any mercy. Therefore the tasks were short and ended indeed in many off-field landings. The Wilgas got a good workout towing many pilots out of fields in double and triple tows. This led to the comment of one pilot “How much do I have to pay to get a towship all to myself.

It was now the West’s turn to organize the 3rd International Women Contest in 1977.

The site chosen was Oerlinghausen, in then West Germany. 17 pilots from 8 countries participated. That year Fred Weinholtz as Chairman of the German Soaring Commission developed a program to foster women in the sport of soaring. This was not too well received by the all-men German National Team. Logically Fred was chosen as the contest director in Oerlinghausen. Again the weather did not cooperate and on several days the start gate crew did not need binoculars to read the contest numbers of the starting planes. Sadly the times of free sailplanes and free tows were over. Each participant had to bring or rent her own plane. The only 15m Class plane, a Mosquito, was penalized with a 5% handicap.

In this first western contest, East Germany, the UDSSR, Italy and Yugoslavia did not participate. First time participants were Switzerland and France. Again **Sue Martin** had made the long trip from Australia. The US was represented **by Judy Silverman and Alberta Sterling.**

Fred Weinholtz used the many non-flying days for discussions and encouraged the women to petition their national FAI/CIVV representatives to recognize the women’s contests with an officially sanctioned title. Sue Martin from Australia was a big proponent of this move. In her opinion naming the contest just a “WORLD CUP” was not enough since only for an official World Championship she could get some support from her soaring federation. Also the decision was made to hold these international contests alternately in the East and the West.

Winners of the soaring contest were: the outstanding **Pelaga Majewska and Adela Dankowska /Poland, and Marianne Koch-Deutschmann,** the first West German pilot to stand on the podium.

Pelaga died in 1988 during a transfer flight of an agricultural airplane to Africa. The FAI honored this outstanding pilot by establishing the **Pelaga Majewska Medal,** the highest honor for a women soaring pilot. Up to now 8 women have been awarded the medal amongst them **Bertha Ryan** from the US.

A funny incident involved Judy Silverman/USA. All foreign pilots –for the case of an off-field landing- carried a card with the following text in German: “I am participating in the International Women Championship. Please help me”. Judy must have made a very desolate impression on the farmer who came to her help after her landing in his field. He took his hat and went around collecting money from the bystanders. Despite the protests from Judy she had to accept the collection and that was enough that after her return to the airport she could treat everybody to a free beer.

Fred Weinholtz, who later reported to the CIVV about the meetings in Oerlinghausen still was met with resistance, especially from chairman Pirat Gehringer. But in the end Fred

walked away with a small victory: although **Women World Championships would never be agreed to**, the women could hold European Championships, where non-Europeans could fly as guests.

1979 1st European Women's Gliding Championship Hungary

24 pilots from 11 countries came to this first European Championships amongst them as only non-European Sue Martin/ Australia. No US pilot participated.

First European Champions were:

Monika Warstat/ East Germany; Eda Laan UDSSR (Lithuania); Jindra Paluskova/ CSSR

In 1981 France hosted the 2nd European Women's Championships

This was the first women's contest that was flown in two classes, Standard and 15m Class.

24 pilots from 8 countries came to these championships. 10 flew in the 15m Class, 14 in Standard Class. Two French pilots took top honors in the 15 meter class followed by **Teresa Toivonen/Sweden**, who later became Mrs. Ingo Renner.

For the Standard Class it was a non-contest.

The 3rd European Women's Championships in 1983 were supposed to be held in Oriol UDSSR. But the facilities weren't ready and therefore the contest was moved to **St. Hubert/ Belgium**.

This contest saw **Giesela Weinreich**/West Germany (15m Class) on top of the podium for the first time. By the time of her retirement from competitive soaring she had collected the honor of European Women's Champion 5 times in addition to 2 Silver and 1 Bronze Medal. Also on the Podium with a Bronze medal was **Geogeo Litt**/Belgium (mother of Baude Litt who presently is one of the top competitors in the US). Geogeo is the matriarch of a soaring dynasty. (4 of her 5 children are glider pilots, 2 are on the Belgium National Team)

In 1985 the Championships moved to Yugoslavia.

East Germany, Poland and the UDSSR did not send any pilots. It became the championships of the superlatives, 10 super flying days, 6 tasks over 300km and one over 500 km.

This contest was marred by organizational foul-ups and protests that led to the formation of an independent jury not comprised of team captains.

Bulgaria hosted the 5th European Women's Championships 1987.

Organizational Problems and excessive heat plagued these championships. Almost every morning the official translator abbreviated the weather forecast to "Today weather VERY HOT. Any questions?" Even the powerful Wilga tow planes had problems coping with the heat. For the first time pilots from **Finland** and **Turkey** participated.

The 1989 Championships finally returned to Oriol/ UDSSR.

18 pilots flew in the 15 m Class, 24 in the Standard Class amongst them **Janet Hider Smith from Australia and Carol Hines from the US** who flew as guests. Janet sadly passed away last year after a battle with cancer. For the first time a mother-daughter team competed, Geogeo Litt in a Discus and her daughter Bernadette in a Ventus. Both flew for Belgium. An off-field landing of mother and daughter in the same field and the adventurous retrieve has become soaring history.

Carol Hines celebrated the 4th of July in the UDSSR. Carol had brought a small US flag and displayed it at the breakfast table. It was a rainy day and instead of flying the contestants went on a boat excursion on the river Okra. Carol had asked permission to plant her flag on the front of the boat. No problem for the Russian hosts. But it was a big surprise for the Russian fishermen seeing a boat with a US flag passing by (little did they know that their world would turn upside down the same year). Geogeo Litt passed her hat around for a collection and presented the boat crew with a “present from the USA”.

Bernard Smith from the USA became one of the stewards after a previous steward was disqualified because he was the husband of one of the pilots.

The 7th Women’s European Championships were held in England at Husbands Bosworth in 1991.

In these championships countries from the former Soviet Union now flew under their own flags, Lithuania, Estonia and Russia did not have the funds to send pilots. Only Ukraine had two pilots in the Standard Class.

There was almost no 15m Class because the minimum of 5 countries could not be met. The Belgium pilot Geogeo Litt was at home awaiting a hip operation. After some arm twisting and consulting with her doctor the operation was postponed and Geogeo made the 15 Class contest possible.

Germany had become a real powerhouse uniting pilots from the former East and West Germany. The other super powers in women soaring were Poland and the Czech Republic

And it was there that in 1993 the 8th Women’s European Championships took place.

36 pilots participated. This time the former East Block countries were represented by Russia, Ukraine, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Poland, Bulgaria, Latvia and Hungary while the Western line-up consisted of Germany, Great Britain, Switzerland, Sweden, Belgium. Janet Hider-Smith from Australia who by now was married to the later World Champion from Austria Wolfgang Janovitch, flew as a guest

Winner in the 15m Class was **Hana Zejdova**, Czech Republic who up to this day has made soaring history by having flown 52 World Records, three more than the famous Hans Werner Grosse.

1995

In the tradition of alternating between East and West the 9th European Championship was held in Marpingen/ Germany, the home field of Helmut Reichmann and only a stone throw from my home town).

For the first time three classes flew in these championships: 15m, Standard and Club Class.

The small country of Luxemburg appeared for the first time in the line-up with its pilot flying in the Club Class. In the Standard Class a US pilot, **Sue Kussbach** was listed. Thanks to dual citizenship –Sue was born in the US to German parents- she was able to compete for the US. Since then she has climbed the ranks in the German team and is now successfully competing there.

During the opening ceremony the General Secretary of the FAI made a special medal presentation that was 10 years overdue since his predecessor Frantisek Kepka never acquired the medals. Gisela Weinreich, Geogeo Litt and Maria Kyzivatova were awarded their medals for the 1985 15m win.

This contest was also the first flown with data loggers, which caused some problems.

First European Champions in the **Club Class** were **Anna Michalak**, Poland, **Rieke Hastert**, Germany and **Halina Rynkiewicz**/Poland.

In 1997 Slovakia hosted the Championship, #10

The 11th European Championships took place in Leszno again in 1999

Almost equally spread amongst the three classes 43 pilots participated. Everybody had hoped that after 10 successful Women's European Championships the IGC (formerly CIVV) would agree to Women's World Championships. But the IGC still did not granted permission. Therefore this became the 11th European Championships. These championships were held in conjunction with the 2nd World Class World Championship. Leszno proved that it could handle over 100 sailplanes and such a complex dual operation.

On the women side of the contest two veterans were in the line-up: Maria Bolla from Hungary who had never missed a championship since 1973 and Adela Dankowska from Poland. In the 1973 contest Adela's husband Josef was the contest director. Now in 1999 her son Jacek was on the helm. He gave his mother a special birthday present on her 63rd birthday: a task of 504.1 km.

Finally in 2001 the FAI granted the international women's contests World Championship status. This decision came too late for any overseas pilot who would have liked to compete and therefore these championships were upgraded European Championships. The contest was held in **Pociunai/ Lithuania**. Again as so often the pilots couldn't show their full potential because of bad weather.

The first winners of the now World Championships were: in the 15m Class **Gillian Spreckley / Great Britain** (who has the distinction that she and her husband have won a World Championship each). **Angelika Machinek and Katrin Senne from Germany received Silver and Bronze.**

The Standard Class was won by **Sarah Steinberg-Harland / Great Britain** and with her on the podium were **Anna Michalak/ Poland** and **Halina Rynkiewicz** also from/Poland. **Tamara Sviridova/ Russia** won the Club Class. **Krystyna Marszalek/ Poland** and **Claire Luyat/ France** shared 2nd place.

The 2nd Women's World Championships were held in Czech Republic. In 2003
42 pilots from 13 countries, including Japan and Argentina competed in the three classes.

A protest concerning the Finish Circle Rules could not be resolved by the Stewards and Team Captains, and Tor Johannesen, Chairman and expert of the rules committee had to step in to resolve the issue. 6 days had to be re-scored. Only after 11 days were the official scores available.

Of the 9 winner positions 6 went to Germany and three to the Czech Republic.

2005

The 3rd Women World Championships were held in Germany in 2005.

I had the pleasure to be invited as the official interpreter of these Championships Contest Director was Hanno Obermeyer who is known to the US pilots who flew the Worlds in Uvalde and New Zealand as a German team member.. 47 pilots from 17 countries competed, amongst them South Africa, Australia, Japan and the far reaches of Siberia.

Again the weather god had no mercy. Only 6 of the 12 days were flyable and these only with greatly devaluated scores. The organizers had pulled all stops before and during the contest to make this an outstanding and memorable World Championship, but sadly they could not influence the weather.

A small glitch in the scoring, which was noticed by the British team captain was peacefully resolved and the days in question were re-scored with no change in the top positions.

At the end of the contest it was nice to see that a good mix of countries amongst them 2 very small countries (Denmark and Switzerland) were sharing the podium

The winners were

15m Class

Mette Schmelz Pedersen, Denmark, **Yvonne Schwarz**, Switzerland and **Anette Klossok**, Germany

Standard Class

Jana Veprekova, Czech Republic, **Gillian Spreckley**, Great Britain, **Sarah Kelman**, Great Britain

Club Class

Hana Vorinkova, Czech Republic, **Swaantje Geyer**, Germany and **Marina Kalaeva**, Russia

For detailed reports and pictures see www.wwgc2005.com.

The next women World Championship will be held in France in 2007

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