

UPSIDE DOWN OVER LONDON

You don't have to own an Extra to fly aerobatic displays at Red Bull events

By Bob Grimstead

When I was younger I wanted to be an aerobatic ace, but a career with the airlines got in the way. It was only on retirement that I was able to buy an inexpensive aerobatic aeroplane.

I watched the Red Bull Air Races, 'The world's fastest motorsport' with some envy, knowing the aerobatics to be well beyond my capability.

So, imagine my awe, earlier this year, at finding myself a participant (of sorts), upside-down, just 300 feet over the Thames in London, looking down on those inflatable pylons!

Yes, I had been pushing my aerobatic display to airshow organisers nationwide, and yes, I had pestered Red Bull's consultants to include me as a 'side act', but I didn't honestly think they'd want me: an ageing, self-taught, comparative novice at this stuff. But they did.

My day started at Damyn's Hall airfield, just east of the metropolis, I was welcomed by Spanish aerobatic champion Sergio Pla. Later, Claus Schrodtt (multiple international aerobatic

champion and former Red Bull racer) gave me a lift into town. They were both kind, considerate and helpful to this neophyte.

Friday night's briefing beside London City Airport's temporary runway was the next revelation. Strolling up and down the flight line were dozens of familiar faces: those race heroes and their support teams, most of whom I recognised by sight and reputation, but few of whom I knew personally. To my amazement I was not treated as an outsider, but as if among equals. Everybody was friendly and encouraging, despite the enormous disparity in our abilities and experience. Steve Jones and Paul Bonhomme each stopped for a brief chat. Nigel Lamb enthusiastically showed me around his MXS, explaining all the work he'd done on his ailerons, to get them precisely as he wanted.

Normally, single-engined aeroplanes are absolutely banned over central London west of the Thames Barrier. But an exception was made for the Red Bull racers in their powerful Edges,

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Extras and MXSs, veteran German aerobatic champion Klaus Schrodtt in his Extra 330, a trio of helicopters and little old me, in my forty year-old wooden Fournier motor glider, powered by a similarly-ancient, 39-horsepower, Volkswagen Beetle car motor.

My engine lacks carburettor heat, dual ignition or electrics (and therefore a starter motor) nor has it any inverted fuel or oil system. Displaying over water, combined with the tendency of my propeller to stop whenever I bungle an upward manoeuvre, meant I had to give more careful consideration than usual to what I should do if the engine stopped.

Being clean and efficient, the Fournier boasts a 20:1 power-off glide angle. This means that,

from 300 feet, I should be able to float just over a mile. That was the distance to Red Bull's temporary runway at London City Airport and, since it was downwind, I stood a reasonable chance of making it.

The 6,600 metre-long Thames River race course was established by pairs of inflatable conical pylons on barges moored along Bugsby's Reach, between Blackwall and the Greenwich Marshes. These pylons formed twenty-metre high gates through which the racers twisted and turned at breathtaking speeds up to 200 knots, while 40,000 spectators (including my daughter) watched from grandstands.

My task was to fly four minutes of simple aerobatics over that course to keep the crowds





One of the competitors flying in the spectacular London setting

amused, starting at an appropriate height and finishing when I ran out of energy, precisely 240 seconds later, and not below 300 feet above the cold, grey and uninviting water. As race director Drew Searle explained, this is not a normal airshow, but rather a TV programme with aeroplanes, so our start, finish and display duration had to be millisecond-perfect.

Unfortunately, the weather wasn't kind. There was scudding low cloud, its base varying between 2,000 and 1,000 feet, plus sharp showers increasing in frequency and intensity as each day wore on. Worse, a strong wind blew from the southwest, directly across the Thames, so a moment's inattention

would result in my slow little aeroplane being blown over the crowd – a certain way to ensure I never flew aerobatics in public again.

With so little space between the river's banks, I amended my usual three-dimensional display to become a simple, mostly linear sequence up and down the A-axis. Also, I normally begin my routine by flying into wind, but we all had to enter this venue from the south-east, which meant a downwind start and a last-minute re-ordering of my manoeuvres.

In the event, with lots of mental rehearsal and a little determined practice, I was able to remember and complete my modified sequence without error. Nevertheless, I did have to adjust it a bit towards the end, as I found myself running

out of energy unexpectedly early. That was probably because, rather than concentrating on the accuracy of my flying, I have to admit to relaxing and enjoying the moment.

Soon afterwards, I got the chance to repeat my performance at the Red Bull Air Race World Series final in Perth, Western Australia. Here, the venue was much bigger, and the weather was perfect with a light breeze and clear blue skies. Accordingly, I further modified my sequence to start my show with a spectacular five-turn spin, and finished it by flying low past the crowd to wave my appreciation.

Finally, to round off 2008, in which the combined ages of my little aeroplane and myself exceeded one hundred years, we placed second in Western Australia's only annual aerobatic competition.

It just shows that sometimes you can achieve your dream, whatever your age and income.