Mastering Paragliding: Book Review by Josh Cohn

In Kelly Farina’s new book, Mastering Paragliding, he presents the methods one needs to employ to improve paragliding XC performance in a more attractive and well-structured manner than I’ve seen before.

The book itself resembles Bruce Goldsmith’s 50 Ways to Fly Better. Both books share Cross Country Magazine’s editorial polish, typeface, and even some of its content.

Mastering Paragliding follows the order of a good XC tour, starting with foundational skills like launching, how to hold the brakes, etc. Kelly has coined “catchy” terms for his ideas, some of which sound familiar, probably from having read his writing in XCMag over the years. I sometimes bridle a little at yet another neologism, but I remind myself that the target audience will probably find them memorable and useful.

Here’s a glossary of some terms used in the book that were semi-new to me:

- **CARVING:** turning smoothly, with no wasted energy
- **BRIDGE PRINCIPLE:** using a ridge-soarable spine connected to higher mountains above the valley wind to complete a transition after getting stuck in valley wind, instead of diving into a sunny lee
- **MAGNET EFFECT:** the tendency of air to be entrained toward a rising thermal
- **FLOW OF THE DAY:** planning an XC in the mountains to minimize flying against a valley wind and maximize time over sunny faces
- **FIZZY:** unstable conditions
- **STICKY:** stable conditions

There is also an extensive glossary in the back, containing a few wry entries such as “Fun: Keep it in mind” and “Confidence: important to have.”

The target audience for this book is likely similar to that for Alpine XC Tours: intermediate pilots getting started in XC and more experienced pilots new to the Alps.

Another book that has some overlap in subject matter, Thermal Flying, by Burkhard Martens, has a drier, more technical approach and less editorial and design polish. (I didn’t notice the rudimentary design of this book until I held it next to Farina’s. At that time it became clear that Mastering Paragliding is much easier on the eye. It avoids losing readers by not including any equations.)

However, the repetition that occurs over the course of this book will likely suit many pilots’ learning style.

Early on, we are introduced to the 4-for-90 rule, stating that each 90 degrees of a thermal turn should be completed in four seconds. This is genius and corrects the most common error seen in the flying of beginner/intermediate thermal pilots. 90% of the comments made in thermal and XC clinics seem to be “Turn tighter!”

The “Dynamics of Lee” section should be required reading for all pilots considering flying XC or transitioning from the flatlands to the mountains. It describes how leeside thermals

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WELCOME to Mastering Paragliding. This book is designed to help you build smooth and faster progress through your skills in every aspect of your flying, from planning your transitions in the wind to navigating the terrain. We’ve added the skills and techniques to help you achieve your goals.

The goal is the journey as a whole. We’ve included the principles that all paragliders need to know. These principles are simple and not complex. The rules are few, but they are critical to success. The principles are straightforward, but the understanding is deep. The goal is to help you improve your flying.

The more you fly, the better you get. The more you learn, the more you become. This book is designed to help you improve your skills and to help you think about your flying.

The next time you’re out flying, take a look at the sky. Look for the clouds, the wind, the trees, and the mountains. Look for the opportunity to improve. Look for the opportunity to learn.

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carry the turbulence of their source air with them, as well as addressing the
times when wind speed becomes an
issue.

The sidebar endorsements sprinkled throughout, from top competition
and XC pilots Russ Ogden, Thomas
Walder, Debu Choudhury and
Stephan Stiegler convey the impres-
sion that the book's advice has been
well vetted.

Case studies on dramatic cloud inci-
dents give a balanced view of the
danger of unstable conditions going
from good, to great, to "uh-oh." Pilots
shouldn't fly mid-day on days with si-
gnificant development, without absorb-
ing these lessons.

One short section of the book contains an idea I am unsure about. It's
called "the pressure drop effect" and
describes a situation during which
large clouds are seen over high peaks
25km away, suddenly followed by
stable, blue conditions in the foothills
giving way to liftly conditions with cu-
mulus clouds popping. The suggestion
is that the distant cu-nim is causing a
sudden drop in pressure locally. Even
after some very pleasant correspon-
dence with the author, I can't visualize
the causality working this way.

I don't doubt that the observations are accurate and have been seen mul-
tiple times, but just wonder about the
interpretation. Another possible expla-
nation is that both the distant cu-nims
and the local change in stability are
cased by the same thing: a synoptic-
scale change in pressure. The advice to
not panic is good, no matter what the
ultimate cause.

The last section contains case stud-
ies of Zillertal, Austria, and Val di
Fassa in the Dolomites. Pilots visiting
these sites have ample reason to pick
up the book, just for the in-depth
description of the local valley systems
and routes. The photo/diagrams show
clearly many places of interest, alphas-
etically from A through O for the
Zillertal, listing every rotor zone, soar-
able face, and protected lee.

I wish I'd had this book when I'd
started flying XC, especially when I
first flew in the Alps. I could have
avoided learning some of the lessons
the hard way, and probably would have
had better, safer flights sooner.  

BELOW Author Kelly Farina.