

CIAM'S NEW RULES SPARK EXPLOSIVE REACTIONS

Can F3J survive the treatment meant to save it

What are the new rules?

Two weeks ago the RC Soaring Technical Meeting in Lausanne took the bull by the horns and introduced new rules aimed at saving F3J glider contests from sliding off the world and continental championship schedules - the death of what for many soaring pilots is the most popular of silent flight competitions.

Joe Wurts, the first F3J World Champion in 1998 at Upton-upon-Severn, UK.

Twenty years later with the latest F3J WC about to take place in Romania, many soarers are fearing that this could be the last.



THE NEW RULES

From next year pilots can use electric winches - either/or hand held winches - for launching their models. The models must have a maximum surface area of 150 dm² and a minimum loading of at least 20 gm/dm². There will be no dropped round in fly-offs, and no reflights for mid-air collisions after 60 seconds into the slot.

CIAM, the world ruling body for this class is hoping that its new rules will halt the massive fall in numbers of F3J pilots wishing to compete, sixty per cent over the past five years and still falling, and restore its popularity.

But among many F3J pilots, the bull is still shaking its horns. There has been an extraordinary shock reaction: hundreds of pilots from all over the world have reacted on social media, protesting, angry and forecasting the end of this class. Many pilots are concerned, ranging from previous finalists and champions to your typical enthusiast who enjoys travelling across country and continental boundaries to participate in their friendly sport. Only a few can see the logic and reasoning and are prepared to wait and see how the changes work in practice. More than a few want CIAM to think again!

In all fairness, while not condoning some of the rude remarks, I still have severe doubts that F3J will survive. What I hope to write here is a sober report on F3J problems and why I believe that rules revision is vital. I

remain hopeful that CIAM's approved changes prove to be a step in the right direction.

WHY CHANGE MUST HAPPEN

How many pilots and helpers do you need to run an F3J competition?

Last summer I was shocked when speaking to Arijan Hucaljuk, world and European F3J champion in 2016 and 2017, to find that he had flown only one new F3J model that year. In Croatia there had been so few pilots wanting to qualify for Slovakia. He now has more F5J models and flew in this class more often than not.

In Britain, a survey was made of committed and earlier regular F3J pilots, asking their intentions for 2017. With great regret BARCS came to the conclusion that the F3J league to determine the national team could not be run. In previous years half a dozen or so qualifying rounds were contested. So GBR team 2017 was scrubbed and for the first time ever we had no team entered. Same applies this year for the Romanian world championship.

The BARCS committee reckoned that to run a typical one day low-key friendly contest you need to attract at least 16 pilots, and that would only give you four pilots per slot. Any last minute absentees would render the day scarcely possible. The days have gone when winning a place in the national team was the pride and joy of keen F3J pilots.

The numbers problem is not limited at national level. Despite the high entry fees payable to FAI championships for pilots, helpers and team managers, reduced entries increase the financial risk of running a

championship. Until recently, opening and award ceremonies found the whole host town gathering in the main squares, sharing and enjoying the sight and excitement of pilots from so many countries. But they cost money.

The vital point is that to survive F3J must attract more pilots.

Why are numbers falling around the world? Main reasons are that as pilots grow older they cannot find the energy, ability and will to tow, and feel uneasy about not sharing the effort. The cost of models - competitive ones - has reached a level that deters all but the richest and keenest of youngsters and dads. When you do find a “youngster” - somebody no older than say 30 - he finds that he is trying to make friends with people 20 and sometimes 50 years older. The chance of an immediate meeting of minds and enjoyment are slim.

To survive as a class, F3J needs to go back to square one, the era in the 1980s when pilots from Holland, France, Germany and England found that they could meet to compete two or three times each summer, the birth of Eurotouring. The gliders they flew were often rudder/elevator. Single man tows were in order and the two-man variety was still 10 years away. Why was it popular? The participants were keen to see and watch F3B pilots, but that was a difficult sport taking greater skills, distance, speed and duration, three separate tasks.

Why can't we compete with something much simpler they would ask: simple duration with a 10 minute slot time, plenty of time to natter and

swap experiences, and most pilots did not even launch on the buzzer - you waited until somebody bold enough found what looked like good lift.

OK, that is oozing nostalgia and we are never to see such times again. But the lesson is that we need to find something much simpler and cheaper if we want to attract new people join the fun.

F3J was born to be a simple thermal soaring contest, easy for anyone to join.

A look at the new rules

In March the CIAM 2018 agenda was published and Uncle Sydney's Gossip column was revived to comment, and I made a mistake in concentrating on the proposal to allow winches for F3J launching. The main emphasis should have been given to the changes in the model's specification, size weight and wing loading.

The Slovakian proposal for the meeting was that the weight of the model should be at maximum 1.7 kg, a very strange idea aimed at reducing costs. But as most delegates agreed, this did not address the issues.

The best and most convenient method of reducing the flight performance of F3J, as spelled out by Philip Kolb two years ago, is to limit the span and insist on a minimum wing loading.

What CIAM has decided is to go for a minimum surface loading, 20gm/dm² and maximum surface area. I am told that other simpler options were debated, higher loading up to 23/25 gm/dm², or a far easier, simpler to process requiring weight to be divided by the wing span with a minimum weight of say 0.6 kg per metre span.

Don't be surprised if all these numbers in the rules are changed after trial runs in the years to come.

I don't see that the new rules will necessitate many pilots to buy new models. It will be easy if necessary to simply add ballast. It will be interesting if the manufacturers find it necessary to develop new approaches to optimise performance. I have not seen so far any computer simulations to estimate the increase in sinking speeds and consequent loss of flight time.

What I understand is that in straight flight the higher wing loading will hardly affect sinking speeds. But flight times will reduce markedly in circular flight when you fly into a patch of weak lift and you seek to centre the thermal. My own rough guess was to recognise that 150 dm² max. area at 20 gm/dm² equals 3 kg which I often ballast to in typical UK winds. Unballasted my two current Supras weigh in at 2.1 and 2.3 kg.

Most experienced F3J pilots appreciate the excellent development work over the last 20 years put in by the main designers, producers and their dealers, in aerodynamics and materials and building techniques. CIAM's new rules appear to protect producers from requiring to retool drastically, although some may not agree with that!

When the CIAM agenda was sent out before the meeting the proposal to allow winch launching gave little or no detail or rules to determine the specification of the winch and battery, and how winches would be used in the competition. It was indicated that the same specifications would be used as in F3B and that seems to have been followed in the issued minutes.

The minutes also say that for world and continental championships a maximum of six winches and six batteries may be used at any time on the winch line by each working team. Interchanging among winches and batteries...is totally the responsibility of the competitor.

This appears to hint at what the rule makers mean to happen. Critics have wanted to know if winches and batteries are to be allowed to stay in place in the safety corridor, and how would the launching spots be arranged along the corridor?

For any one round, the three man team will fly from one spot, with its six winches plus batteries. These are then cleared away to be laid out again in the next round at a different launching point along the line.

There has also been speculation that if the number of teams competing exceeds the number of flight lines available, then two teams could occupy each launch point and the matrix could ensure that only one pilot would need to fly in that slot. That means two lots of six winches and batteries on the spot.

FAI championships progress at a leisurely pace and swapping positions along the line will even out fairness.

It all sounds complicated but also feasible. What is not clear at present is what happens if hand towing is taking place also somewhere along the line, a potentially dangerous situation can easily occur. A few pilots I have spoken to feel that it won't take long for winches to dominate and hand towing to disappear.

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE MEDIA

The following section contains a selection of edited entries from Facebook, RC Groups and BARCS websites which give a flavour of what the world's pilots thinking.

Darius Mahmoudi: was among the earliest inviting comments on CIAM decisions made by people not wanting us to keep F3J and its quality, or simply don't understand what we do.

Jo Grini: F3K and F5J classes have rocketed sky high, possibly making F3B and F3J smaller. We should have come up with solutions that make it easier for new pilots and younger to enter.

Dominik Prestele: That rules are shit. We maybe gain 10 people and lose 100.

Massimo Verardi: The new rules are not enough to change something but enough to make a lot of confusion.

Thomas Schoenbacher: Better decision would be to allow bungee. The funny fact is, I have enough old planes in the basement.

Marco Generali: In many countries the national championships already use winches, a small disadvantage while travelling, but less trouble than bringing a full team of towers. The 20gm/dm² wing loading is a big

limitation given the 1500 gm planes seen in recent years, but only the small amount of dead condition flights will be affected.

Marco Juznic: Keep the rules like they are, people who like F3J will continue to fly and help each other. Sooner or later people from F5J will come back because F5J will be overcrowded.

Tuomo Kokkonen: In many countries winches are needed otherwise running a 10 pilot competition is not possible. But that does not mean that international F3J rules have to be changed. Eurotour flying as we know it will stop, and there is a danger F3J will die in Europe.

Joe Wurts: The conception of F3J was to bring back the “good old days” where stick and tissue open frame aircraft could have a world championship event. Prior to the first WCs I forecast that the event would evolve to very high technology carbon fibre airframes with even higher strength/weight ratios than the F3B planes. It took a while, but this outcome eventually happened.

Conny Ulvestaf: Not all pilots can get the super duper light models, now with the 20gm limit all will have the same equipment. F3J has had fantastic development in the last 5 years. Will this stop now? Probably. Is this good? Probably not.

Cederic Duss: We need to find a way to push people to come. A winch won't help.

Tobias Laemmlein: Even worse than I was hoping. In a way we need to accept the new rules. I could live with the wing loading thing This will increase the level of competitive challenge and makes the pure thermal task more appealing. The leading edge in aeroplane development anyways has shifted towards F5J already. The winch will kill F3J, at least from the perspective that I, and let me guess many others too, the simplicity and the team.

Thomas Kiesling: For those that travel by air, winches are far cheaper than bring dedicated towmen. I'm not sure winches will save the class, but I also don't think they should be a reason to kill it. There still will be a team aspect. It will just be different. Not necessarily better or worse, just different.

Graham Wicks: I have a nice Hollenbeck winch for sale. The 20 gm wing loading is like trying to take a step backwards. In the modern world you don't reverse technology.

Joe Wurts: Lots of heartfelt comments. I remember making similar proclamations of doom when HLG transitioned to DLG nearly two decades ago. Then I flew some DLG and got on board with the concept and my negative thought went by the wayside.

One of the reasons why I'm not attending this year's F3J WC is that we could not sort out a full team with helpers.

Tuomo Kokkonen: What do you think will happen to F3J Eurotours. Is there a practical way to continue despite the rule change?

Darius Mahmoudi: I just can speak for my Contest in Riesa. If we continue next year, there will be local rules to mitigate this. But my concern is that there won't be a lot of pilots left to participate.

Erik Dahl Christensen: It will always be valuable for subcommittee members to receive as much information and perspective as possible from pilots with hands-on knowledge from all classes. I know that Ralf Decker has made and tested a system to detect the exact release point and height. It was tested 2/3 years ago and can be used to make F3J look even more like F5J with more than time gain from low launches. Is anybody interested?

Daryl Perkins: I for one am good with the winch rule. In this country (US) we had to fly off winches to keep F3J from dying. I do understand that many of you will be against winches. At some point you will have to face the fact that without new blood coming into soaring, the use of winches becomes a necessary evil. I am quite disappointed with the minimum loading rule. It accomplishes nothing but shifting optimum design for each given condition. What it has done is turn the clock back 10 years....I don't like to see technology going backwards.

Ryan Hollein: It would be a pity if we change the rules and start with winches. We were flying in a German/Cyprus mix team (in Lviv) and had

no problem getting our planes up. If we needed something there was always someone who offered us his help. This year I participated in 3 competitions flying with pilots from 7 different countries and we had lots of fun - and some problems understanding each other.

Philip Kolb: A minimum weight limit has little or no meaning as long as it does not come along with a maximum span limit. To emphasise thermal flying skills my proposal would be to implement a “sporty” definition of minimum weight and maximum span - say 2 kg and 3 metres??? - FUN!

Joe Wurts: 2kg and 3 metres kinda reminds me of the very first F3J planes!

I like the span limitation concept, maybe even more than a minimum weight limit. My only concern is visibility. My eyes aren't getting any younger!

Jim Soars: Holy crap, winches are approved. I can't wait to see the logistics of the flight line in a large competition.

isoaritfirst: I would be looking for the thrill of a nice thermal or the fun of hanging onto a small one. I'm less interested in sticking my nose in the dirt. Flying gliders is an attractive and competitive game. Perhaps F3J has concentrated too much on the comp at the expense of the grace, which attracted most of us into flying gliders in the first place.

Maria Freeman: If it is about “thermalling”, then reduce launch heights or increase slot times.

Bob Dickenson: I guess that we all ought to just get on with enjoying our flying as much as we can, while we can.

Austin: If they are serious about saving F3J, then this comes to mind...

1. Wing span max 3.1 m
2. Minimum weight 2100g
3. Maximum weight 2200g
4. Nose radius should be fat to reduce dart board landings
5. Single man tow with pulley and 130m line
6. Line thickness max 1.15mm
7. Pilots must use timer/launcher from opposing teams when not flying
8. Pilots must not receive any advice or spotting from their timer/launcher unless it is a safety matter
9. Bring back discard after six rounds flown

I am taking models back in time I know, but wasn't it great then?

Richard Swindells: Austin's ideas are great had they been implemented 10-15 years ago. However the bird has already flown the nest for F3J. Models we are flying today launch higher, travel further and sink slower compared to what we were flying 10 years ago. Although sink rates might not have halved, overall performance has at least doubled.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

There is still a long way to go to sort out a whole host of questions. It is fortunate that these new rules will not be required until 2019, but I hope that opportunities will be used to test any new systems. We do not want to see a real championship frustrated by having to stop and debate how to proceed.

I think it would also be sensible to clarify the best way to continue with Eurotour events. It would be simple to just carry on with present existing and tested rules. There is a strong and important link between FAI and Contest Eurotour, and most of the Eurotour events carry the FAI symbol and flag. No reason to run championships and Eurotour with the same rules.