

BRAIN TRAINING GETS RESULTS

There is no reason why practising gliding skills has to end when you climb out of the glider. Bernard Eckey explains

IF WE ask men or women occupying the top rankings in their respective sports, they are usually adamant that winning happens almost exclusively in the head. Many of us wrongly interpret such comments as a reflection on the individual's intelligence and some of us immediately throw in the towel thinking that our intellect is not on par with these famous and highly celebrated athletes. In reality, however, intelligence plays only a minor roll. What really matters is that (parallel to the necessary practical skills) athletes have worked on their brain

or, more precisely, on the processing capabilities of it. This is precisely what the following section is all about.

The power of imagination

Mental rehearsals are exercises of the mind aimed at training the brain to adopt new or different patterns of behaviour. The theory behind it is simple. Regardless of whether we experience something, or whether we just imagine it, every occurrence leaves

significant imprints in our brain. It is almost like downloading a new software program into a computer. While playing as children we have "downloaded" countless such programs into our brain and they have governed our behaviour and dictated our movements ever since. Neuroscientists have long known that this has established neurological pathways in the brain, which are subsequently used whenever certain actions are required. From then on these reactions occur automatically and without any conscious input on our part.

Put simply, mental rehearsal is building successful repetitions of a performance segment by constructive use of our imagination. We don't have to actively think any longer when it comes to certain actions because the brain automatically implements appropriate responses as the result of

previously established neuro-muscular pathways. This knowledge can be applied to any activity and, in particular, when it comes to learning new skills or reducing the mental workload in gliding. For example, daily winners of gliding competitions usually report on a very harmonious and effortless flight that turned out, for them, to be surprisingly easy and straightforward. But why is it easy for some and very difficult for others? The reason lies in a thorough flight preparation, which includes a repeated visualisation of the flight. In other words, these pilots have mentally performed the task with all its possible challenges and opportunities well before they stepped into the glider.

What works well for competition pilots should be good enough for the rest of us. Practising gliding skills doesn't have to come to an end when we climb out of a glider. On the contrary, skills can (and should) be mentally refined and rehearsed between training flights. Such practice can be fitted into the busiest daily schedule and can be done more often than we think. If we are honest, we have numerous idle or waiting periods every day. They provide ideal opportunities for practising mental rehearsals.

That brings us to the question of how we best go about it. The first step is to select a quiet place and eliminate all possible distractions. Make yourself comfortable and concentrate on visualising a flight situation you have trouble with. Now think about the reasons for your difficulties and carefully work out a better way of doing things. This might be the hardest part of the exercise, but after it has been accomplished you have a blueprint for an improved course of action in future. You have also made a good start to successful mental training.

The next step is to close your eyes and imagine this particular scenario as seen through your eyes, as felt through your limbs, and as heard through your ears. Take your time and focus on nothing but this



Skills can (and should) be mentally refined and rehearsed between training flights (Bernard Eckey)



Bernard Eckey is a pilot, instructor, record holder and head coach for South Australia. He flies an ASH 25 and has 3,500 hours (including multiple 1,000km flights and one 1,116km FAI triangle)

flight segment. Now the time has come to mentally implement the new and improved course of action. Do it repeatedly and, for maximum benefit, use your hands and feet to simulate moving stick and rudder! During the first few attempts this requires a fair amount of concentration but, as with everything else, it gradually becomes easier. Of course, such exercises must be repeated many times and perhaps even over several days, or even weeks. However, there is no question that it will pay dividends in the medium to long term. When the new 'program' is fully absorbed you can immediately take advantage of it and it can never be erased again.

Mental rehearsals should not only be used for the elimination of weak points, but even more so for the acquisition of new skills. That appears logical, but can lead to problems when your particular training routine contains flaws. Therefore it is advisable to consult a coach or a recognised person in the field prior to such undertakings. If we have a faulty 'manual' we will be adopting the wrong procedures. Needless to say, this would be highly counter-productive.

We can already see that mental rehearsals have a number of significant advantages due to the fact that they synchronise and automate mental processes and actions. It's no wonder that a lot of top performers use these methods, because they have learned that the difference between a good and an even better pilot is their mental strength. Some of them even write their findings down, which helps to absorb the key points and it also reduces the workload in the air. Cross-country pilots in particular can benefit, because they don't need to use any mental capacity on navigation or flying tactics. More often than not, their flight progresses so smoothly that they report afterward that it was an effortless flight and everything went according to plan. Of course, their plan was established during mental rehearsals.

I first used mental rehearsals during my basic training days in order to come to grips with winch launching quickly. Ever since, I have used it for training other flight segments and one example that comes to mind is the quick location and centring of thermals. Other pilots use mental rehearsals to train for emergency situations, such as cable breaks during winch launching or aerotowing. Safety is greatly enhanced as a result of it.

Most of us have a tendency to refine skills that we are already good at and we

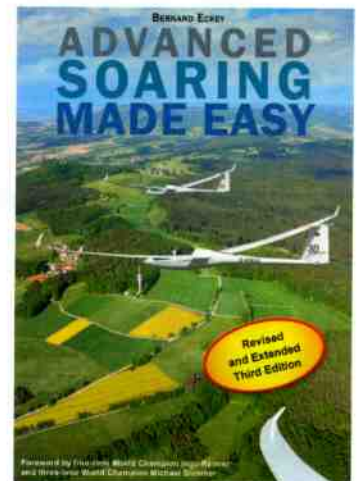


Cartoon by Matt Wright, Devon & Somerset Gliding Club

dislike practising things in which we are less proficient. However, we now know that bad habits need more work and that implementing a better course of action can be done quicker and more efficiently by employing mental rehearsal strategies. Don't give up and keep repeating the exercise at every opportunity. The more positive repetitions you have completed, the better you will cope with a situation when it next arises.

To sum it up, our gliding training doesn't have to come to an end the moment we step out of a glider. If we are honest, we have numerous idle periods or breaks each day that can be used to polish our skills with the constructive use of mental rehearsals techniques. Gliding is our passion, isn't it? If you are like me, you won't mind closing your eyes and spending a few minutes every day thinking about your favourite pastime. To me, it feels a bit like heaven on earth and, best of all, it also helps me to become a better pilot.

■ This article is an excerpt from Bernard Eckey's *Advanced Soaring Made Easy*. The revised and extended second version is available at £35 from www.bgashop.co.uk



A revised and extended third version of Bernard's best-seller is now available. At 432 pages, it has almost 100 additional pages compared with the second edition and costs €49.90 plus P&P. To purchase, contact eckey@internode.on.net