Paragliding accuracy target approaches

Part 1: General aspects

UK squad pilots William Lawrence, Katie Sykes, Simon Sykes and Andy Webster offer their thoughts on the stages of a target approach. Two articles have been created from their varied responses – he first is on the general aspects of an approach and the second (in June Skywings) will concentrate on the final approach to the target.

NB. These comments are applicable to both tow and hill launch methods, but please note that some relate to how experienced pilots fly to the target. New pilots should not attempt to fly with deep brake or near the stall point in early flights.

Do you have a pre-flight routine?

Katie Sykes. I watch other flights whilst listening to an audiobook, so I can switch off but still keep an eye on the conditions. I don't like to hear or look at the score other pilots get, just watch their set-up.

William Lawrence. Before my flight I like to relax and listen to music or an audiobook while observing the conditions. A couple of pilots before my flight I'll get into my equipment – then I'm ready and I'll watch the flights and the decisions the pilots make so I can build my flight plan.

Simon Sykes. Not really, but I like to have an understanding of what the weather has been doing recently, to understand what I might hit during finals.

Andy Webster. On arrival at launch I will take my kit out of the main bag to double check I have not forgotten anything, and pack the bag in the harness. While I am waiting for my turn to fly I like to watch flights and assess the conditions. Based on my observations I will prepare an outline flight plan. I do not like to be rushed and will always get ready in the harness in good time before my flight, watching more flights while I am waiting.

What information do you use to assess wind speed?

Katie Sykes. I don't fly as well when actively thinking about conditions, but I'm thinking about my ground speed and watching the glider in front.

William Lawrence. Windsocks and streamers are great for direction and wind strength on the ground. But before I make my final approach I apply brake until my glider no longer has any penetration, in order to calculate the wind speed and plan my landing.

Simon Sykes. My penetration and the glider in front. Windsocks can give a rough guide, but as they vary massively they are fairly useless.

Andy Webster. Observations of other pilots' flights will give an indication of wind speed and any gradient effects. On approach to the target, windsocks and streamers give an indication of wind speed along with your ground speed. A penetration check can also give good feedback; closer to the target the speed of the anemometer cups' rotation also give useful information.

How does your approach vary with wind speed?

Katie Sykes. In light winds I set up far back – I want to give myself a nice smooth glide in on the wind line so I can kill it at the end if I need to. In strong winds I tend to set up slightly behind and to the side of the target, playing with my brakes and waiting for the right time to slide onto my final approach.

William Lawrence. The stronger the wind the closer I aim for an almost vertical approach. In lighter winds I'll allow for much more of a glide-in approach, while still getting as steep an angle as possible over the target.

Simon Sykes. Due to using brakes a lot, I generally set up in the same location (height and distance back) and then use brakes to drop to the required level

Andy Webster. Strong winds require a lot steeper approach to the target. I'll be looking to turn into wind not far behind the target, whereas low winds allow me to pick a point a good distance downwind of the target to turn onto finals.

How do you recognise and deal with a wind gradient?

Katie Sykes. Normally just with brakes. If it's a strong gradient then I reassess the approach completely.

William Lawrence. Watching the windsocks on the ground and knowing my own ground speed allows me to judge the wind gradient. An ideal approach made with 50% brake allows for the adjustment of your speed depending on the conditions, as they may change.

Simon Sykes. In normal conditions this is dealt with on the brakes. However if a large gradient has been seen or is expected, change the initial set-up to take this into consideration.

Andy Webster. I am always prepared for some form of gradient. Generally the wind is stronger at altitude, but not always! Some sites are more prone to gradients in certain wind directions than others and local knowledge can come into play. Watching other flights is also useful – unless you are the first to fly! On a tow launch the rate of climb can be used to assess speed and any gradient effects.

How do you deal with thermic conditions?

Katie Sykes. Make sure you get to the target with plenty of height in case of sink, and then just ride through as smoothly as you can.

William Lawrence. Every situation in thermic conditions is different and your reactions must follow suit. For instance, increasing speed through the thermal to reduce the time it has to alter your flight angle works well. Or, when the thermal is over the target and you are low, increasing your brake to sink onto the pad.

Simon Sykes. Brakes!

Andy Webster. It's an area that I haven't fully got to grips with, mainly because thermals can be different in nature and unpredictable. Generally you will fall out of lift onto a steeper glide angle, so I will S-turn in a hot position, listening to my vario, knowing to go straight for the target as soon as the lift disappears. But lift on finals can be followed by sink; maintaining the same brake position can be the best policy to get you to the target – but sometimes the sink does not appear and you float over the target! Very strong lift on finals can be followed by very strong sink and it can be best to release your brakes in such conditions.

Do you do a penetration check, and are there certain times you don't do one?

Katie Sykes. Yes, provided I've got plenty of height and time. It helps me switch on.

William Lawrence. I will always try to do a penetration check, normally off to one side of the target into wind.

Simon Sykes. I try to always do initial set-up in front of the target, then drift back behind the target to set up.

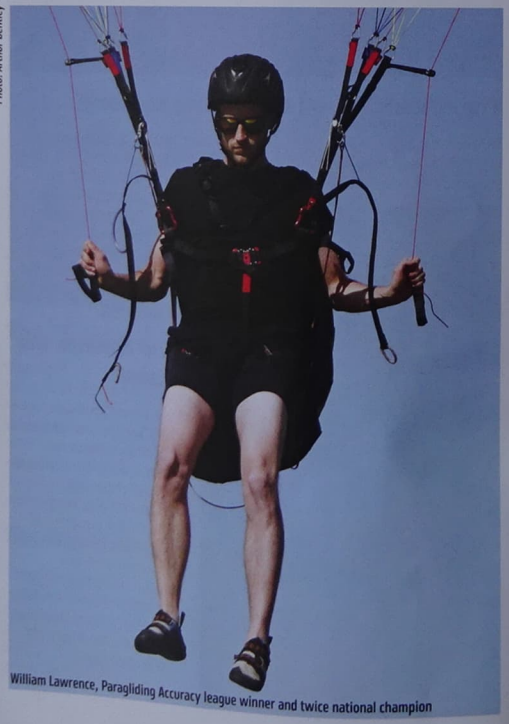
Andy Webster. I will always do a penetration check if I have the altitude, but you always have to factor in any wind-gradient effects. Penetration checks are useful if you are unsure of the wind conditions or your glide angle. If you have height to burn, a penetration check can be used to lose some altitude to avoid a long finals, which can be draining.

Compiled by Andy Webster

Photo: Arthur Bentley

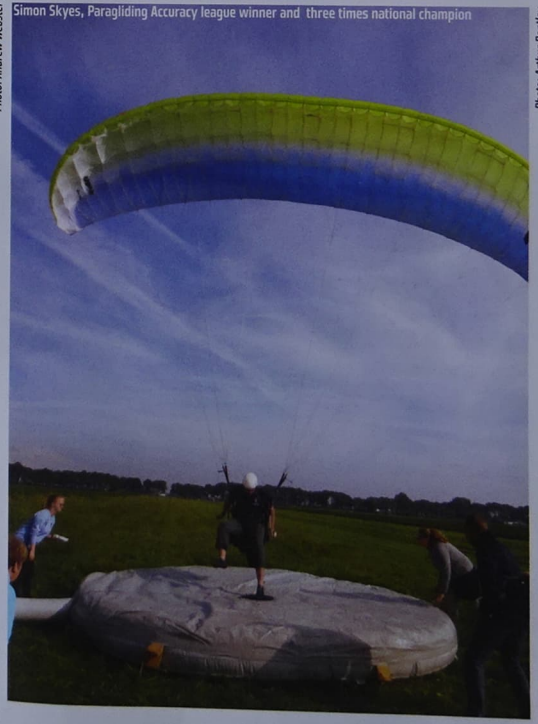
Katie Sykes, current Paragliding Accuracy league champion

Photo: Arthur Bentley



William Lawrence, Paragliding Accuracy league winner and twice national champion

Photo: Andrew Webster



Simon Skyes, Paragliding Accuracy league winner and three times national champion

Photo: Arthur Bentley

Andy Webster, former Paragliding Accuracy national champion and four times league winner