

Powered Harness Committee

17 October, 2002

Present:

Alan Chuculate
Jayne Depanfilis
GW Meadows
Tim Meehan
Dennis Pagen
Bruce Weaver
Liz Sharp

Bill Bolosky
Jeff Goin – USPPA
Steve Kroop
Dan Nelson
RR Rodriguez
John Harris
Dixon White

Bill Bryden
Steve Mayer
Russ Locke
Steve Onstaad
Matt Taber
Chris Santacroce

This committee meet to debate (and how!) the various issues surrounding powered harnesses for both hang gliders and paragliders with the goal to provide recommendations for the BOD regarding these. After some discussion we determined to focus on three fundamental questions.

1. Do we embrace these devices in some fashion or eschew them completely?
2. If we do embrace them, then how in a generic structural sense do we do that?
3. Given a method of embracing these, what implementation issues do we have?

There were various positions passionately argued but one undeniable fact was that more and more of our members are pursuing these devices with the goal of increasing their airtime, something not being adequately satisfied with current flying options.

There was legitimate concern expressed about the consequences for our insurance retention and procurement if operations with powered harnesses were covered. Again many perspectives were expressed arguing these presented greater insurance risks, lower insurance risks, and risks comparable to present hang gliding and paragliding activities. The insurance broker and a representative of the underwriter were present and discussed the insurance ramifications from their perspective. They do not perceive the powered harnesses as being any greater risk than we presently have with gliders. In fact, they suspect the risks are lower if anything. The USPPA has compiled some statistical data and their impression based upon a very modest population size is that risk issues are actually less. Both the USPPA and insurance representatives believe the ability to use power when approaching a landing provides the pilot a degree of freedom to avoid problems not available to a glider landing.

It was also believed by many, that pilots with paramotors can more easily get airborne, fly higher and farther and consequently are more likely to get into trouble, encroach into prohibited airspace or wander into other problems. However after listening to several of our own instructors discuss the ease of taking up this form of flying (including Chris Santacroce's lamentation of personal pain and frustration learning to fly a PPG) we started coming to the understanding that the impression that these are more easy to get into the air and consequently into trouble may not be a valid assumption.

We also discussed the fact that this activity is going to happen with or without us. If we get involved, maybe the culture will evolve as it has done with hang gliding and paragliding, to strongly recommend people get instruction and then the opportunity to educate them on airspace issues and the like can be presented. If we do not get involved, then we can't influence the situation yet we will still suffer the consequences of governmental or public response to problem PPG pilots.

With respect to powered harnesses for hang gliders, again we concluded these are certainly no more easy to learn to fly than hang gliders alone.

We discussed the philosophy of "pure" soaring flight. We discussed the previous history 20+ years ago with the ultralight vote and the relevance of that to today. There are various factors different now than before and one of the more significant is that the USUA and other organizations servicing ultralights now exist. Where before our embracing motors meant incorporating most all motorized craft including trikes and three axis machines, we can draw a line, such as must be foot launch and landable, and refer craft outside a very narrow scope to those other organizations.

It was also noted that with respect to cruiser type PPG pilots, there are some now wanting to investigate soaring. Point of the Mountain has been having some PPG pilots showing up wanting to soar. To the extent they don't know enough to soar when simply removing the motor but think they can, they present a risk to sites and airspace. To the extent that some of them will love it, as did Jeff Goin, they represent an opportunity for new soaring pilots.

There was much discussion about the moral merits of getting more involved with powered harnesses. Many of our members are purchasing these and if we are able to help create an instructional environment that improves their safety and saves lives, do we not owe it to those members to provide this assistance? It was noted maybe that comes from us helping the USPPA jump start their PPG programs, mentor them, and assist. However, this doesn't help the HG pilots getting powered harnesses, so what about them?

We discussed our speculations of future governmental regulation and the implications. Generally, we perceive little downside from this dimension that isn't already there or isn't actually greater without our involvement.

We considered previous history with the USHGA and paragliders, the SSA and hang gliders, the USUA and powered parachutes. It was generally recognized that there is a growing need for an organization to embrace and assist people desiring powered harnesses. If we do not do it, will others do it, but as well? If we do not do it, how many potential members could we lose because A. we don't offer powered harness programs for those interested and B. because an entity that does, could also very simply provide a program competing directly with ours. Virtually everything we teach a pilot to reach the novice level is also necessary for pilots wanting to learn powered harnesses, both HG and PG. If an organization has a good powered harness program, then they have essentially the major pieces for a competing soaring program.

The question comes down to, if we do not do anything to embrace powered harnesses how likely are we to regret that decision and how much, 10 or 15 years from now? If we do embrace these in some manner, how likely are we to regret that decision and how much, 10 or 15 years from now?

After much angst, soul searching and excellent discussion, we pretty much formed a consensus with a 14 to 0 vote and two abstaining, to recommend that the USHGA should embrace powered harnesses for our members.

The question now becomes, how do we embrace these. There are generally three options with various shades of gray between them and variations within those options.

1. Somehow partner with an affiliate organization to create the programs and provide the services essentially through them but with us handling some pieces such as insurance which they very likely could not provide.
2. Form a separate division and keep the powered harness activity segregated in that division but still within the purview of the USHGA.
3. Just incorporated them into our existing program. There were various methods to do this. One extreme is an entire program similar in ratings and structure to the PG or HG program. The other extreme is keep it super simple, just create a special skill available to novice and above rated pilots, power assisted launch (PAL), negotiate the insurance to cover them during flight, petition the FAA for an exemption to permit tandem training (predominately with a PPG and we have good reason to believe the FAA would approve that, actually they have even suggested it!) and be done with it.

In weighing the merits of these options and considering implementations, we noted that insurance is something we could not extend to people not USHGA because of the provisions of the policies.

Approximately 4000 PPG units have been sold in the US and the USPPA estimates about 2000 of the owners are actively flying. The USPPA presently only has about 170+ members of which about 30% are USHGA members. The numbers for HG powered harnesses are substantially lower but sales have been climbing. For example a group of Midwest pilots from one area recently banded together and purchased 14 units at once. Even so, there is a catch 22 in the sense that an organization can't readily attract the members

without the significant benefit of liability insurance and they get secure that insurance without the members.

It was also speculated that people with powered harnesses, both HG and PG, can readily find a small field and start flying and that site insurance and liability insurance are not generally required to secure these. The experience of the USPPA and USHGA members actively flying PPGs tends to not support that assumption.

Indeed, 3rd party liability and more specifically site insurance ARE needs and issues presently confronting the folks with powered harnesses. Moreover, these needs cannot be met by any existing ultralight organization nor likely to be met, except by the USHGA. The only realistic method we could identify for providing insurance coverage for people (including many of our own members) using a powered harness units was under a program the USHGA offered. This effectively eliminates option number 1.

We discussed at length, especially from a psychological perception perspective for the members, the merits of establishing a new division or class of members. This would require a membership vote. As we hashed through this, it just seemed overly complicated with various issues with instructors, ratings, insurance, member acceptance, etc.

In the end, we noted that for pilots already having some degree of mastery with the basics of flying, that adding the skills required for powered harnesses weren't that big of a deal. Maybe more than just learning to tow but clearly far less than for a HG pilot to learn PG or visa versa.

It was the recommendation of the committee by a vote of 14 yes, 0 no, 1 abstain, that we simply create a new special skill for each hang gliding and paragliding and direct Safety and Training to create the program. There would also be some bylaws and SOP modifications, extensive communication work so people fully grasp the changes being recommended and modifications to our tandem training exemption. A subcommittee comprised of Bill Bolosky, RR Rodriguez, Jayne De Panfilis and Bill Bryden was task with addressing the details from a legal, documentation, FAA and communication perspective and handle those.

To summarize:

The committee spent much time with well challenged debate (good job Russ, RRR, JZ and a few other devils, thanks) weighing the merits of embracing the powered harnesses which more and more of our members are purchasing. We feel we have a duty to those members to assist them in doing this safely. While some other organizations could provide assistance in the safety and training realm, these members would still have some significant unmet needs with respect to insurance and consequentially flying sites. The USHGA is in the best and only position to help there.

This activity is going to happen anyway, with or without us. By being involved, we have some opportunity to help guide and educate potentially reducing risk we experience anyway if we aren't involved. We do NOT believe that our embracing these will necessarily result in flying sites being terrorized with powered harnesses. The sites would still be under local control, same as today. If they don't want them there for noise of site sensitivity reasons, clubs would still be totally free to do that. We are NOT recommending embracing trikes, nanolight trikes, or other types of powered ultralights with wheels, etc. We can make a very clear distinction of what we include and recommend the others seek out the USUA which was not an option 22 years ago. We recommend this be a rather minor modification to current programs: add a special skill for each HG and PG for power assisted launch (or other name to be determined, negotiate a minor word change to the insurance policy which we have already been told is not a problem and modify or get a new exemption for two place training. There is articles of incorporation issue but that is also a problem for our aerotowing and the process of fixing it for towing will automatically fix it for the powered harnesses.

Respectfully submitted,
Bill Bryden