

First Annual In-Person Condor Regional Soaring Contest

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Condor flying in general and Condor XC racing in particular is a wonderful way to beat the winter blues while waiting for your glider trailer to reappear from underneath that snow bank in your driveway. However, one big drawback to Condor flying is the lack of personal interaction and camaraderie that is a big part of the XC racing scene. It's a bit difficult to go have a beer and tell lies after soaring when your contest mates are several states (or several countries) away! Also, most Condor races are one-off affairs where you meet online, fly the race, and then disappear again. Even in the races that combine multiple days for an overall score, there is little of the drama and interest in the day's score sheet and the effects of a particular day win or landout on the overall results.

A few months ago Sean Fidler (F2) (of the 'Ionia Michigan Non-Club') and I were chatting about how cool it was to be able to fly in soaring contests in Condor over the winter months. I mentioned that someday I would like to organize an 'in-person' Condor regional contest. Sean thought that was a great idea and suggested we have it at the Ann Arbor, Michigan airport FBO, the same place where we had an informal one-day Condor 'fly-in' last winter.

Organizing the resultant Condor in-person regional contest was both very similar to, and very different from a 'real life' soaring contest.

- First and foremost – ANYONE can organize an in-person contest, as there is no requirement for an airport, or tow planes, or even gliders – only the pilot and his/her Condor setup is necessary.
- A four 'day' regional style contest can easily fit into a weekend, although a holiday like MLK day makes everything a bit easier. We wound up having a practice 'day' on Friday, followed by four contest 'days' on Saturday and Sunday, and I was still on my way back home by 7pm Sunday night and home before 11pm. Based on my experience, a Condor regional could expect to draw in pilots within a 4-hour driving radius.
- You still need to make arrangements for accommodations, as pilots still have to sleep somewhere, and 'camping on the field' isn't an option when (a) there is no field, and (b) it is 20F and snowing outside!
- Soaring weather is and isn't an issue. You can dial in any weather you want, but if it is too good, then tasks become unrealistically easy, and if it is too poor, tasks become a real grind and pilot enjoyment goes into the crapper. For instance, I screwed up the weather on Day 3 by specifying an 'open' class race with narrow thermals. This was fine for me and the other experienced pilots, but not so much for the beginners.
- Soaring sites and glider classes are variable rather than fixed, and this can become an issue. While it is enjoyable to fly a multi-day contest in different areas with different glider classes, pilot familiarity (or lack thereof) can be a problem in more technical sites like the European Alps. We flew four 'days' in four different locations Appalachia (southern Virginia/Tennessee/North Carolina), Rio Grande (southern Texas and northern Mexico), New Zealand, and Central Florida, but there were some gripes that we should have either kept to one site, or advertised the

sceneries to be used so contestants could familiarize themselves with the soaring areas ahead of time.

- A practice day is still a must (ours was Friday afternoon Jan 13) – but for an in-person Condor contest this entails getting the room set up with power strips, a projector and screen for spectators, and for setting up and validating the scoring software. We actually did fly a short task, but as often happens there were only a few scores turned in. For this contest we used ShowCondorIGC (SCI) for scoring, along with a program called CompMan for displaying daily and overall scores on the contest website.
- Just like in a ‘real life’ contest, less experienced pilots need to be helped and mentored. In an in-person Condor contest, this takes the form of help getting sceneries installed on the practice ‘day’ and help with basic task planning for area tasks, etc.
- You still need a CD to adjudicate issues and rule on protests (and there were some). I acted as CD for this contest, and employed a time-tested procedure for protests – I denied them all, including my own! ;-).

Thanks to the power of the internet and the ease of creating websites with Google Sites, it was a snap to put together a contest website (see below for the link). I created the initial site layout, and Sean and Tiffany (Tiffany Fidler, Sean’s wife, is a glider and Condor pilot in her own right and sports ‘F3’ for her comp ID) added pages and badly needed esthetic touches. We advertised on Rec.Aviation.Soaring and via email to the Ionia and Canadian crowd for which the Ann Arbor location would be a relatively easy drive.

So, it eventually came to pass that 10 pilots from at least two U.S. States and Canada converged on the Ann Arbor Michigan airport FBO for the First Annual In-Person Condor Soaring Contest over the MLK holiday (13-15 January 2012). For complete details and daily/overall scores, see the link above (the website will be kept alive until at least the end of March 2012 so that readers of this article can view it).

Practice Day (Jan 13): Sean, Tiffany and I show up a bit early to get the room set up and cover any last minute details. We discover that a cooler that Sean had forgotten from last year’s ‘fly-in’ was still in the back of the room, so an immediate decision is taken to fill it with beer and ice. Some competitors show up and we divide up to help them with setup problems. A short task is flown, which Sean Fidler wins.

Day 1 (Jan 14 0900-1200): Day 1 started at 0730 at the ‘Mark’s Coney Island Café’ where most of the contestants gathered for breakfast and conversation. Unless you happened to glance outside at the snow and ice in the parking lot, this gathering would be indistinguishable from any other soaring contest breakfast. The task for the day was an 18m AT in the Rio Grande scenery. Winds from the east at about 6kt, with good lift up to about 8000’ MSL. I try to push out ahead by going down on the ridges, only to find they aren’t working well enough to keep moving well. Sean (F2) sees this and stays high in the good lift, and wins the day. Luke Szczepaniak (2W) of Canada is second, and Peter Baumeler (USA), a championship RC sailplane pilot in real life, takes 3rd. I almost land out, but manage to struggle home for 4th place for the day. We ran into a problem with scoring when it turns out that Sean’s PC crashed after his finish and ate his IGC file. However, we all knew he had finished and had won the day, so we gave him and Luke identical 1000 pt scores and gave the ‘day win’ cup to Sean.

Day 2 (Jan 14 1400-1800): New Zealand, open class, 170 mile AT. Winds from the west at 6-8kt, moderate but narrow thermals to about 6000' MSL. The ridges are working, but thermals in the valley are difficult to work. Sean and I are neck and neck to the first turn, but he gets a slight lead on the 2nd leg. We choose completely different routes to TP2, but still arrive there at almost the same time. In the end, Sean Fidler (F2) beats me by 46 seconds to win the day and move into undisputed 1st place overall. Peter Baumeler (USA) is close behind in 3rd place for the day. Luke can't connect to lift on the ridges and lands out.

Dinner Task – Palio's in downtown Ann Arbor. A great Italian style restaurant with superb food, lots of beer and wine, and animated conversations all around the table. This is exactly the kind of personal interaction/camaraderie from 'real life' contests that we wanted to recreate for our Condor regional.

Day 3 (Jan 15 0900-1200): Breakfast at Coney Island again, and then a 2.5 hour 3-turn AAT in the Appalachia scenery. Winds from the north at 8-10kt, moderate thermals to 6000' MSL. I push out in front, but miss a critical thermal and get permanently stuck on a small ridge, unable to snag a thermal and unable to go anywhere. Eventually I make a desperation try for a cloud, miss it, and land out. Sean and Luke fight it out for the rest of the task, with Sean winning yet another day and Luke coming in 2nd for the day. With my landout, Luke is back in the hunt for 2nd overall. Peter Baumeler (USA) had to withdraw from the contest due to a sudden family illness.

Day 4 (Jan 1400-1800): Central Florida 5-turn AT with a "Regatta" start (A regatta start means race timing for all competitors starts at the same time, so everyone tries to cross the start line as soon as possible after the gate opens). Winds out of the north at about 6kt, moderate thermals to 4500-5000' MSL. Again I push out in front and get low, with Sean right behind me. Fortunately this time I contact good lift and get back up to cloud base. Luke and the others are right behind. On the second leg, Luke gets out in front, but gets low and has to dump some ballast. Sean is ahead of me by about 1 mile, but I get a pretty good thermal to cloud base and start overhauling them both. About halfway down leg 3 I catch them both and pull out in front far enough to be out of sight. For the rest of the race I manage to stay out of Sean's sights, and finish almost 3 minutes ahead. Sean takes 2nd for the day and 1st overall by a mile. Luke takes 3rd for the day, and squeaks past me for 2nd overall. I'm in 3rd overall, but at least I get a 'day win' cup out of the deal, and keep Sean from sweeping the entire contest ;-).

In summary, our First Annual In-Person Condor Regional was a smashing success, and we are all looking forward to doing this again next year, and maybe even spreading out to different regions. I could even imagine several regional contests around the country, culminating with a national championship at the SSA convention each year! Doing something like this sure beats the heck out of staring out the window at rain and snow, wondering if spring will ever come again. Many thanks to Sean and Tiffany Fidler (F2 and F3) for supporting my mad idea, and to John Sullivan (UFO) for arranging for the wonderful Ann Arbor FBO facility.

As I mentioned before the contest website is at <https://sites.google.com/site/region6condorcontest/>. This link will remain so anyone interested can take a look and see how it was put together, and as the template for next year's Condor regional. Additional photos from the contest are on the Photos page.



Figure 1: Contest 'Airport': "The weather outside is frightening..."



Figure 2: Sean Fidler (F2) demonstrating his winning form to John Morinec



Figure 3: Sean Fidler (F2), Luke Szczepaniak (2W), Frank Paynter (TA)