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- [SSA Home](#)
- [Home](#)
- [About](#)
- [News](#)
- [Reports](#)
- [Open](#)
- [18-Meter](#)
- [15-Meter](#)
- [Standard](#)
- [Club](#)
- [World](#)
- [Junior](#)
- [Feminine](#)
- [Camps](#)
- [Press](#)
- [Gallery](#)
- [Committee](#)
- [Financials](#)
- [Calendar](#)
- [Funding](#)
- [Selection](#)
- [Organization](#)
- [Links](#)
- [Archive](#)
- [History](#)
- [Champions](#)
- [Site Updates](#)
- [Contest Results](#)

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2006 FAI Grand Prix

St. Auban, France, September 2 - 9, 2006



Saturday, September 2 - Practice

John Good Reporting

We awoke to bright sun this morning, but by 9:00 rather thick high clouds had moved in. So it seemed as if the first official practice day of the 2006 French Grand Prix of Soaring might not amount to much.

Nonetheless, we had le briefing at 10:00. The extensive weather forecast presented there said that rather thick high clouds had moved in, which meant that the soaring might not amount to much. But if some sun would poke through, we might see lift as strong as 0.6 meters/second (1.2 knots). In the face of this, a rather ambitious task of 150km was set. Few present believed we'd actually see much flying.

There was also some discussion of the rules (which will be fully briefed this evening when all competitors must be present). Those of you who have followed previous Grand Prix events know that the rules differ from those that apply to the "traditional" style of glider competition. Grand Prix races are designed to appeal to spectators, and include several innovations:

- The maximum number of competitors is 20. (Here at St. Auban, 14 pilots are on the entry list.)
- Races are relatively short – tasks are supposed to be set so that nearly all pilots finish (early enough that spectators are still around to enjoy this).
- A "racehorse" start is used – all competitors start simultaneously
- Pilots carry tracking devices that report their position in real time, making it possible to watch the race as it is happening.

REPORTS

- [Latest Report](#)
- [Sep. 1 - Arrival](#)
- [Sep. 2 - Practice](#)
- [Sep. 3 - Day 1](#)
- [Sep. 4 - Day 2](#)
- [Sep. 5 - Day 3](#)
- [Sep. 6 - Day 4](#)
- [Sep. 7 - Day 5](#)
- [Sep. 8 - Day 6](#)
- [Sep. 9 - Day 7](#)

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No team funds are used for Grand Prix events



- The scoring is strictly by place – actual speeds aren't important. On a day with plenty of finishers, the winner gets 10 points, second place gets 8, third gets 7 and so on down to ninth place, which gets 1 point. Tenth and lower get zero points.
- Only finishers can earn points. If only, say, 4 pilots finish, then the winner gets 5 points and the others get 3, 2 and 1. A pilot who gets most of the way around the course but fails to finish gets the same score (zero) as one who never even attempts the task.

The "racehorse" start is one of the big innovations in the Grand Prix style of racing. And, not surprisingly, it has proved challenging. Pilots are used to a competitive type of start, where the idea is often to get higher than others and it's nearly always important to evaluate the task and the weather to decide when is the best time to start.



Here, the start time will be controlled by the contest officials. The rules say that the start will happen 20 minutes after the last-launched glider releases from tow. But the organizers may delay the start if they feel that some pilots are having difficulty getting into position for a good start. In good weather, this should rarely be a problem. But when it's tough to climb it can easily

be the case that when the flag is supposed to drop six or eight pilots are ready to go and the rest are struggling and in danger of being left behind. Delaying the start may improve things, and may also simply mean that a somewhat different group is now having difficulties.

The important purpose of the simultaneous start is of course to make it easy for spectators to understand the race. When everyone starts at the same time, the order of merit for the day is the order of finish. Unfortunately, penalties are possible and can interfere with this scheme: If I beat you home by 2 minutes but have incurred a 5-minute penalty, your score will obviously be better than mine. Pilots can earn penalties by starting incorrectly (e.g. by exceeding the height limit), by failing to get within 500 meters of any of the designated turning points, by finishing incorrectly, and with a number of other faux pas. It seems clear that if for any reason penalties are common, spectator appeal will be considerably diminished.

By 14:00, the sky had improved considerably - much sun was at last reaching the ground. The launch got underway at around 14:30, and the task was opened at 15:05 (with just ten gliders to launch and six towplanes, things go quickly). From the ground it was clear that several pilots flubbed the start procedure, which specifies a penalty for anyone who is not behind the start line for the minute prior to the announced start time.

Once the start was complete we retired to the contest office (located in the same building where we are staying). The feature here was an animated display based on the real-time position reports from the position trackers being carried by most pilots. The software does an excellent job of depicting the position and altitude of gliders, set against a high-quality 3-D rendition of the terrain.

Watching this, we soon saw that conditions near the home field were tough indeed: in the early going, few gliders were able to stay as high as tow-release altitude. They dribbled north along the "home" ridge, often retreating and clearly willing to stop for anything resembling a climb. After about a half-hour of survival flying (which included a couple of land-backs) we saw Dimitri Timoschenko (ET) of Russia deviate east of the direct course to the first turn, where he clearly found better conditions and started to make reasonable progress. He really never looked back and had a fast run around the rest of the short course. By contrast, all the remaining gliders still in the air were following (or attempting to follow) a more or less direct line to the first turn, and this was slow going indeed. It was clear that Dimitri was crushing the rest of the field.

But no. Early on, the tracker carried by Eric Napoleon of France has ceased transmitting. We spectators were foolish to have thus dismissed Eric from the race. He is a former World Champion and this is his home turf – he has thousands of hours flying in these mountains, and knows every rock and pebble like the back of his hand. This day which proved so tricky for many was an open book to him. He certainly found plenty of lift better than 0.6 m/s. He called his finish as Dimitri (much the best of the others) was still 50 km from home.

Tilo Holighaus provided some late-day drama. Around 17:45, by which time all other pilots had either finished or given up the fight, Tilo arrived at the final turnpoint some 40 km north of St. Auban. His tracker said he was at a decent altitude but well below what would be needed to get home. Twenty minutes later he was still near that turnpoint, about 300 meters lower than when he first arrived there. It was looking rather grim.

But Tilo has lots of experience at St. Auban, and though the thermals were dying there was some help in the form of weak ridge lift. He used this to stagger home, arriving about when even the optimists were ready to hitch up his trailer.

We are told to expect better weather tomorrow.

It shouldn't surprise you to hear that in France the food is much appreciated by visitors. In my view, Haute Provence is near the top of the gastronomic scale. An important aspect of this is the fact that there isn't a tremendous amount of tourism here. Any shop or restaurant that hopes to succeed can do so only by appealing to the locals, who have very high standards. Tourists benefit from this.

A short ways north of the airfield is a small market. It styles itself a supermarket, but is about a fifth the size of a store that would earn that designation in the US. Nonetheless, it has a selection of cheeses that few gourmet cheese shops back home could hope to match. I tried to count the varieties and lost my way at something above 200. Roquefort (my favorite)? Please specify, monsieur – we carry six different brands of Roquefort.

A few things are different in the markets here. Shopping carts are smaller and they don't "track" – all four wheels caster (this no doubt is related to narrower aisles). Produce is plentiful, cheap and of excellent quality. When you select, say, some tomatoes you are expected to take them to a scale, weigh them and push the appropriate tomato button which causes a price label (with barcode) to be printed.

Bags are not provided as a matter of course – you are expected to

bring your own, and to bag your own groceries. If you are a naïve American, they will be happy to sell you a sturdy plastic sack in which to carry off your purchases- John Good

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