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2006 FAI Grand Prix

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



Friday, September 8 - Day 6

John Good Reporting

A long period of hot, stable, blue weather has come to an end in the Alps. No complaints were heard today about a lack of cumulus clouds or instability. The problem was just the opposite – we had overdevelopment, towering cumulus (ending as cu-nim), thunder, lightning, rain and high winds. *You have to see the image of Eric at right with his big hello wave - Ed.*



By some combination of skill and luck, today's task managed to avoid the worst of the troublesome weather and allowed all pilots got home. The later finishers were only just in time to scuttle into the safety of the hangar before the rain hit, and indeed a gusty crosswind made the patterns and landings more interesting than normal. One option that St. Auban shares with few airfields is that of a landing directly across the axis of the field (which here is pretty much north-south). Instead of 4000' you have more like 1500' of runway to land on, but when the wind is easterly at 20 to 25 knots, that's more than enough.



The task had its problems. In the past week we've learned something about the orthodox routes through the local mountains when headed to the northeast. Watching the tracking displays today we saw some very unusual choices. It was clear that pilots were being seriously constrained by the weather. Views to the northeast and north during the day were not

reassuring – by 14:30 the buildups were serious and large areas of the sky were ominously dark. By 15:00, thunder and lightning were evident. Fortunately, the sky to the north-northwest held good-looking cumulus clouds that didn't overdevelop – we thus knew that

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if pilots could reach the final turnpoint (about 60km north of here) they could get home. Most pilots took plenty of height near the final turnpoint and then found conditions along the final leg to be about the best of the day.

Doug Jacobs had a very tough first leg. After one of the best starts of the week he found himself with Fridolin Hauser of Switzerland, circling in good lift above the cliff known as Authon, some 12km north of home (and about 6km ahead of the main gaggle). The normal route heads east from here, but this was blocked by rain showers and the odd bolt of lightning. Doug began a circuit to the southeast, attempting to skirt around the trouble. About the best you can say was that he was able to stay in the air (though not without some struggle). More than half an hour later he was back at



Authon, not quite as high as before. By this time the only choice was a route to the left of the course, which would probably have worked at least as well earlier. In the meantime, Fridolin (joined by several others) pursued a scheme of staying high and tiptoeing around the areas of bad weather. This brought him home in 1 hour 42 minutes for first place; Doug's time was 2:06, eleventh for the day.

Doug says this contest has renewed his appreciation of just how intricate soaring in the Alps can be. Lift is often excellent but rarely easy to predict. The many mountains and ridges have a different character from day to day and even hour to hour. When lift extends only a thousand feet above the peaks (as has been typical here), you can be struggling again only minutes after finishing a good climb – and this is especially true when moving into rising terrain, as is nearly always the case when starting at St. Auban. The local experts certainly don't always get it right, but they do seem to know how to bet at most of the many decision points during a flight. And when you bet wrong in this terrain and weather, it's rarely a matter of losing a minute or two – 10 to 15 minutes is more typical, and this contest has supplied more than a few examples of some excellent pilots getting stuck for a half-hour or more..



Starts continue to be a problem here. Today the pre-start soaring conditions were about the best they've been all week. Everyone was able to climb well above the maximum start height; unfortunately this resulted in six penalties: three for starting too high and three for flying too fast while diving off the excess height. It was much the same story yesterday, when seven pilots (including Doug) started either too high or too fast.

It's clear that starting all pilots at approximately the same time, place, height and speed is

challenging. Yet it's important – you want all competitors to have a fair chance. And you certainly want penalties to be rare – spectators should be able to assume that the order of finish is the order of merit. The Grand Prix rulesmakers will no doubt be considering how to make this work better in view of experience that suggests there's considerable room for improvement.

We had dinner tonight at a formidable local restaurant known as La Magnanerie (which apparently signifies that it was once a location where silkworms were raised). This was definitely getting on toward fancy, and the price (wine included) broke through the \$40/person barrier. But the quality of food and service made it seem like good value.

As I think you can tell from several of my reports, I arrived with a good opinion of the food here in Haute Provence, and nothing during this trip has caused me to revise that. We haven't had the chance (or perhaps the occasion) to stop at the true heavy hitter of local restaurants, La Bonne Etape. This place resides in the gastronomic stratosphere (it appears in the famous Michelin Guide), and dinner there will set you back well over \$100/person. In return, you'll be served a truly artistic meal that you'll remember for years, and the quality of service will make almost any ordinary fancy restaurant seem as if it's staffed by chimpanzees. How a very small town manages to support a place of this quality is a bit of a mystery. But it's certainly fair to say that les Provencales both know and love good food.

It looks as if I'll be late in filing this report - a fuse has blown in the accommodations building and taken out our internet service. I'll submit this in the morning, and then one more report, at the close of the day tomorrow (Saturday) the final day of the 2006 Grand Prix de France.