

18th FAI World Formation Skydiving Championships La Salmagne - Maubeuge (France)

By Vana Parker

The 2008 Skydiving World Championship took place in France at Maubeuge Skydiving Club, which is the home of the World Class French FS teams. It is also in northern Europe, which is prone to poor weather conditions - cloud, wind and rain. These conditions are not great for skydiving.



South Africa had both 4 and 8-way open teams representing the country at the World Meet. The 4-way team consisted of Colin Rothman, Dave Sumter, Amy Kirtland, and Vana Parker with Julian Boule on camera for the competition. Dave, Colin and Vana were also members of the 8-way team along with Emile and Pierre van den Berg, Dennis Parker, Brett Shaw, Stuart Robinson, Marc Boucher (alternate) and Dave van der Merwe (camera). The focus of the training for the World Meet was predominantly 8 way based, with the team aiming for a 12 average. The 8-way has completed at least one jumping or tunnel camp roughly every 8 weeks for the last 20 months. As the 4-way is a fairly mature and experienced team they followed a maintenance training plan - tagging tunnel and jumping camps on to the 8-way training where possible.

Historically attending the World Meet has meant at least a 3 week trip to Europe for the teams and this year was no exception. The trip started in Italy at Skydive Marche where initially the 4-way did 3 days of jumping followed by 7 days of 8-way training. The weather conditions in Italy were brilliant and it was the first training camp with no training days lost for bad weather. The sky was blue every day with an average temperature on the ground of 35 to 38 degrees. As the drop zone is close to the sea the humidity is also quite high so we literally sweated our way through the 2 weeks of jumping!! The heat itself was tiring and it was only possible to do 8 jumps a day, with proper jump preparation and debriefing, due to sheer exhaustion!

The Porters being used in France for the World Meet do not have steps so it took a while to get used to squashing the teams into the door to exit the plane. The jumps went very well with the 4-way refreshing their knowledge of the formations and exits. The 8-way jumps were great and the team definitely jumped a proficiency level. The 8-way jumps were feeling very solid and much more precise than before. Marco Arrigo, Italian coach who is on the 4 and 8-way teams, coached us for most of the time. His help was critical to our success - (and the girls did not mind the eye candy either!!). The Italians made us very welcome and organized special meals on the beach in our honour. We were also fortunate enough to be there for an unbelievable air show, where the Italian Tricolori team put on the most spectacular formation flying. A highlight of the camp was when Dave Sumter did his 2000th skydive and was "pied" by Vana and Colin (his long suffering team mates, who have done most of those 2000 jumps with him).

We travelled from Italy to Belgium on Thursday 7 August and drove from Brussels to Maubeuge, the venue for the Championships, in the rain. The competition site was very well organized with massive marquees for dirt diving, packing and accommodation. There was lots of additional entertainment on the site including a crane bungee jump, an outdoor wind tunnel, trampolines, various displays of motorbikes and quad bikes, shops etc. The competitor's village was set up nicely with all delegation tents around a square.

There were 8 Porters flying and when the weather was good they were happy to fly most of them at the same time. This meant that even a round of 4-way, with 32 teams in total, could be completed in around an hour and a half. It was very impressive when things start moving there. The competitors' accommodation was located about 40 minutes drive away from the competition site through fairly windy roads. When we arrived at the accommodation we were informed that there was not enough space for all of us and it was expected that team mates share small double beds. This did not go down too well with the predominantly tall and male SA delegation. The chalets were quite nice and the location was beautiful and after two days of serious negotiation in broken French we managed to get additional chalets allowing everyone to sleep in their own bed at least!!

With the accommodation sorted out the only remaining problem was the weather. It rained on Thursday when we arrived, it rained most of the day on Friday but we managed to do one jump for each team in the evening. Saturday the weather was partly cloudy but we were able to complete an official training jump in both 4 and 8-way. Both jumps went very well with the 8-way team surprising themselves with a nice score. The competition draws were handed out on Saturday afternoon. The 4-way draw is a bit tricky with 4 of the first 5 rounds including AB (memory) jumps. The 8-way draw was very nice for the team with only a couple of tricky jumps.

The opening ceremony took place in the town of Maubeuge. The competitor's procession walked through the streets of Maubeuge. The streets were lined with spectators who clapped and cheered at us. Due to the French translation of 'South Africa' to 'Afrique du Sud' we were alphabetically first and therefore the first delegation in the procession after the local dignitaries. The Aussies were not far behind and at one of the "rests" in the walk purchased a whole round of beers. All the Porters did a fly by past the procession, which was quite impressive (although Dennis and Brett thought they could have been closer!!).

Chanel Robinson and Claire King were also in France attending the Judges training. It was brilliant for us to have the support but more importantly they worked really hard to learn and get as much information about judging to take back to SA. They were allowed to join in the opening procession with us but they were not allowed to eat and socialise with us at the drop zone - something about showing favouritism!! Dennis and Vana took their kids, Tano and Abby, with them. The kids loved running around the dropzone waving the South African flags!!

The competition officially started on the Sunday morning with the 4-way on the first call at 7.30am. As expected the weather was terrible and so all the 4-way teams spent time waiting in their tents. When the slightest break in the clouds appeared there were calls for the first teams to kit up, shortly followed by an announcement to standby when the clouds closed again. The 8-way was on call from midday so at least there were more people to chat to for a short time until they were released at 2pmish.

The 4-way eventually got a jump in late afternoon, which went very well despite being an AB (memory) jump for the whole team. The second round of 4-way was called and the SA team even got to fly in the plane through about 5000ft of cloud before the organizers called the aircraft down again. They are putting two 4-way teams into each Porter but there is no co pilot bench and so 3 people have to sit on the floor. This is unbelievably squashed especially for teams including tall jumpers like Colin and Dave. Every team hopes that they get to exit second for the extra comfort but you only know who is jumping where when you get to boarding point - at which point there is much friendly celebration/comiserating!

On Monday the weather was much better. The 4-way was on call from 7.30am and we literally started jumping early and did 3 jumps before the 8-way arrived at midday. The jumps were very good with jump 3 being a particular highlight - we did not score so many points but the jump was difficult and we executed it well. The 8-way competition started at lunchtime. Our first jump was a great start and we surprised ourselves with 14 points on an average difficulty jump. The jump was very clean and precise and seemed to flow really nicely. On the second jump we hit thick cloud at about 6000ft and so we could not see the last 10 seconds of the skydive on the video. The judges gave us a re-jump, which we did immediately. We only exited this jump at 11500ft, the required altitude is 13000ft, and so did not get full working time. The team decided not to ask for another re-jump as we wanted to continue with the competition. In fact the re-jump had gone very well. The third jump was excellent - it was a fast jump but we managed to score a couple more points than our main competitors so we were very happy. The fourth jump was also good but we missed the 13th point by a millisecond and then we also were given a bust to bring the score down to 11. The day had been a very long day for some of us and we finally got home around 10pm feeling elated but pretty exhausted too.

The next day we managed to complete an additional two rounds of 4-way and one round of 8-way. The wind was very strong during the jumps and the meet director did not allow the women's teams to jump. On the last 8-way jump the whole South African 8-way was going backwards under canopy - a condition that none of us has experienced for many years!!

The 4-way was happy with their jumps although Dave hit the door/floor on exit and had a pretty impressive bruise to show for it. The 8-way jump was very nice and we turned 14 points in time - unfortunately the judges thought there was a bust and we ended up with 13 (there was no bust!). The bust meant that we were now in joint 6th place with the Belgium team.

The next morning we woke up again to howling winds (stronger than the previous day). Half of the team tents were blown down during the night. All teams were on call from 7.30am and basically we all sat around for the whole day.

In a World Meet event it is necessary for the organisers to specify a time for the semi finals and finals to take place. Only the top 10 scoring teams will jump the semi final and the top 6 will jump the final. The Meet Director announced the cut off time for the semi finals after only 6 rounds, this meant the end of the competition for the 4-way team. So after only 6 jumps the team finished on a 15.7 average - not too bad!! We were pleased with our performance.

At that stage, the 8-way team was sitting in joint 6th position and were eligible to do the semi final round. The weather cleared briefly and all teams completed round 7. The jump started really well but hit a problem towards the end - there was so much confusion that no-one knew where to go next. It was quite amazing as we all stared at each other in freefall - you could almost hear the clock ticking away!! (We are laughing about this now). It is quite normal for a team to have one bad round in a meet and we still scored 11 points on that jump! This meant we finished in 7th position overall and so were not eligible to jump in the final. The 8-way finished on a 12.8 average which is excellent (above our goal) and so the team was very happy. We definitely had a great meet.

Thanks again for all the wishes from SA. The team members all sacrifice a lot of time, energy and money to compete at the World Meet and the support really makes a difference.

This is the third World Championships in a row where the competitors were unable to complete all the 10 rounds. This coincides with the IPC decision to reduce the length of the championships from 7 days to 5 days in 2003. During the FS competitors' meeting a suggestion was made to increase the competition back to a 7 day event. Obviously the location of the competition is critical. Whilst it poured with rain in the north of France the south of the country was experiencing beautiful sunny weather. Hopefully a drop zone in southern Europe will put a bid in for the 2010 competition!!

The 4-way and 8-way teams are both part of a skydiving project (Project Skyhigh). Due to its success the project will be expanding this year so there are opportunities for new people to join in the fun. If you are keen, let us know.

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