

Encounters Too Close For Comfort—Allan Pothercary

During the '04 summer season Marilyn and I were pleased to accept several invitations to fly demonstrations at shows and festivals.

This served to give us more arena experience and helped us to get our name, Close Encounters, our sponsors Kite-world.co.uk, the kites we fly and review, all better known to the kiting public.

With the help of Michael from Kiteworld, we have also been giving two and four-line lessons and answering lots of questions about kiting, clubs, competitions and other events and festivals.

I suppose we have converted around 15 to 20 semi-interested people to becoming much more serious flyers with many more that we don't know about, hopefully on their way in to the sport too!

So what is arena experience? Well, having demonstrations to prepare for certainly keeps you focused. Sometimes we would put in most of the weekend before and perhaps an evening during the week, just to polish up a couple of fifteen minute slots – the rest of the hard work having been done during the winter!

A lesson quickly learned at Weymouth was that our lines were too long, too thick and too heavy, so an investment in the thin, orange lines of 50lb, 100lb and 150lb was necessary to give less resistance to the lower winds and improve the range of our kites.

Shorter lines not only reduce the weight and drag but were a must when we found that at some events flying arenas were very small and often oblong in shape – which *could* be OK if only the wind stayed in that direction!

Ballet routines are carefully choreographed to show off both the technical skills of the flyer and allow interpretation of the music and the music dictates where the kites should be in the sky and exactly when they have to turn.

Shortening the lines means that you can't go as wide or so high before turning and therefore necessitates the requirement to move about more to maintain synchronisation. This is one of the reasons we like arenas to be kept clear – we are not looking at the ground!

The minimum length that most pairs fly on is 125 foot (145 feet for some of the teams) otherwise there is just not enough room in the sky.

Imagine an opposing ladder down – that is – at the top of the window both kites fly to opposite sides and turn down, flying around the bottom wing tip, then level, back across the window.

Each kite mirrors the other, but one of them is one (and a bit) kite width's lower, obviously, so you don't collide. If the ballet is written so that there are four of these moves by the last one - the bottom kite will be skimming the ground or, when the arena is too small we could be doing something we do not like to do, which is flying over the heads of the crowd - it's a feeling a bit like going past a speed camera at 32mph – it probably won't flash – but you are never quite sure.

In a low wind it's easy to make adjustments as we go (you build up an understanding of each other over the years), but landings, of course, are the biggest problem and can cause all your hard work and the public's enjoyment to come to an unscheduled end if there is not enough room and your kites tangle up in the boundary rope or get punctured by the poles.

Individual flyers do not have this problem because the changes they can make as they go along are not noticed - there is not a partner to communicate to, or compare with, therefore, making improvisations is much easier.

Four liners rarely get these problems due to the manoeuvrability of this type of kite and the shorter lines they use.

Once the crowds have thrilled to a successful pairs demonstration their expectations are lifted when they see the team flyers setting up. These guys fly best on 145 foot lines and are even more restricted with impro. Anyhow – the audience want to see the best of the routines – the ballets that made them champions or high finishers in Europe and the World Cup.

In the interest of safety, Close Encounters have now rewritten some of the routines as a contingency, minus some of the landings or the bits that take them low over the crowd in high winds, but it does mean that sometimes you miss out.

During the '04 season there were a couple of times where both us and the British team champions, Matrix Management were unable to fly at events simply because the wind was so strong and the arena so small that public safety would have been at serious risk. We do apologise for this - we felt bad about it too – we didn't travel all that way *not* to fly!

If you attend a festival where a STACK event is taking place, public safety is always the highest priority. The arena will be a minimum size of 110 x 110 metres (very comfortable) with line judges warning of impending infringements by either kite or pilot.

The penalty for crossing the boundary, even from the outside when you are not actually competing, is immediate disqualification.

If you are a festival organiser and are intending to put on the spectacle of team flying, please remember that they will have everything carefully rehearsed with long lines and will require additional space to walk back to get lift and to run forward to slow down or land in high winds, Give them the chance and they'll give you the best.

We look forward to seeing many more of you in 2005.

Safe and happy flying – Allan and Marilyn Pothercary.

Close Encounters are the current Winter League Cup Holders, Winter League Champions and STACK UK Experienced Pairs Champions.