

In our first manufacturers interview with Blackhawk Paramotors, MD Mike Robinson tells what he thinks is right and wrong with the paramotoring scene.

Pureparamotor : When did you start trading and what was the motivation to get into paramotoring?

Mike Robinson : *The company started trading in 1998 as Paratoys. I purchased the company in 2007, changed the name and redeveloped all the product. I'd been involved in aviation my whole life. My parents owned a crop dusting company, and one day here at the ranch we were branding and dehorning cattle and when we finished we were heading into town for a bite to eat. There were about 7 of us in my truck and we looked over to see this fella with a fan on his back flying alongside of us. I just looked over and said, "That's the stupidest thing I have seen in my whole life!" Obviously it was a foot launched powered paraglider. Two weeks later I was flying one, and nine months later I had bought the company. Now I believe we are one of the largest manufacturer of this gear in the world. Last year we sold 607 units.*

Paratoys was a good seller in the US. I didn't understand at the time that the company had an up and down reputation with its customers. Some people loved the company, some others were not so happy. I quickly found I had bought myself into a mess. I quickly realised that, one, with my experience (I had been a fabricator and an architectural engineer type person my whole life) that we needed to reinvent the wheel. We discarded the old products systematically and we started to design and develop new products.

I believe that no other manufacturer has the same number of gliders, frames and engines that we have available. Our latest product is the 14kg trike. It looks great and breaks down with three simple pins, and will fit in the back of a Mini.

What's your guiding philosophy?

This is guided by our students. We train approximately 160 students per year at our ranch, and I've learned who our customer really is. Our customer is not a young person. Our customer is not a lightweight person. They have taught me a lot and guide the gear I develop.

At what point did you bring in the training side to your company? We brought in the training at the very beginning. If you're designing and building gear you've got to train people on it. I never believed in selling someone the gear and wishing them good luck on getting into the air!

The training is extremely important. We use towing machines for our quads, trikes as well as foot-launch. With the quads and trikes they do not take off, but allows them to continually taxi without them worrying about the motor running and the spinning propeller, and allows them

to get in a lot of taxis, and gives them an understanding of how to stabilise their glider directly above their head. Then we introduce them to their motor, and if they can do six taxis down the field with their motor, exhibiting a lockdown of the glider over their head then they're ready to fly.

What makes you different from other manufacturers?

We develop gear that the customer wants and requires. Our average age person is 57 and 225lbs in weight. They aren't dumb and know that the sport is safe, but you have to put a smile on their face! The only way you can do that is with good training and equipment that they're happy with. Keep in mind we have guys who have bought three or four packages from us over the years. Repeat business is a big part of our business.

We export roughly 30%. We have big markets in Australia, New Zealand, Africa, China, and Canada. We'd like to break Europe as people would find our product to be very beneficial, the pricing is fantastic, and they will be very impressed with the performance.

What's your favourite product you have made so far?

We are happy with everything we have produced. The Lowboy Quad has revolutionised the sport! It is much more stable. It is made out of Chromoly steel, and you cannot break it. Last year we had nine guys flying this who weighed over 290lbs!

I am very happy with our 90's and 125's built by HE. We co-designed them. We have the Air Max which is extremely reliable, and the new Talon is out now. We have a 250cc water cooled model that will be out in three months' time. We have sold 60 of our 320cc engines too, used for tandem operations, with China being one of the biggest markets for that.

We now find that our Nitro glider, with the centre third that is completely flat, people are copying us. We are on top of the game, are doing well and our customers are happy.

There is also a lot of politics in the sport, and I would like to see less politics. It doesn't help the sport and certainly doesn't look good for people coming into the sport. They see a paraglider and say "Oh my gosh I've got to get into this," and start talking to people, and the politics turns them off. We have the same problems in the US as you do in Europe.

What plans have you got for the future?

Some people ask why Apple is so successful. The iPhone 6 is on the market, but the iPhone 11 has already been designed. I have pretty much the same philosophy. I cannot disclose any more than I have

already told you but we will never rest on our laurels at Blackhawk. Four years ago, many thought that gliders couldn't evolve any more than they already had – including me! Glider manufacturers are bringing out gliders that perform well, and I'd be happy to see what comes up in the next 4-5 years.

What would you change in the industry, given a magic wand?

I think that there needs to be a training and certification system that is accepted worldwide, or at least wherever there are countries with a good population of pilots. Like PADI is for scuba diving.

There is also a lot of politics in the sport, and I would like to see less politics. It doesn't help the sport and certainly doesn't look good for people coming into the sport. They see a paraglider and say "Oh my gosh I've got to get into this," and start talking to people, and the politics turns them off. We have the same problems in the US as you do in Europe.

Where it stems from is that many of the European manufacturers will make anyone a dealer in the US. If a beginner goes and buys a unit, all of a sudden he's a dealer and that's not doing the customer any good because honestly, that guy doesn't know anything – he doesn't know how to design and build cages, doesn't know how to weld, doesn't know how to do anything. Yet all of a sudden he casts himself into the limelight as being an 'expert', and that causes a lot of frustration among newbies.

Another issue is that a lot of companies are pushing reflex gliders on beginners. They are telling them that they can learn on a reflex glider. That's a bunch of bologna. Reflex gliders are less forgiving than classic gliders, they are going to launch and land at much faster speeds, and speed gets people and equipment hurt and damaged. A beginner belongs on a beginner glider. I'm a little disappointed that three or four manufacturers are pushing these on people when it just isn't safe.

Does the industry need to focus more on developing beginner and intermediate gliders?

I think so, instead of telling people to advance. This comes down to their having no idea who the customer is, who has the disposable income and the time to be a purchaser. These people just want to fly low and slow. They want to explore. They couldn't give a darn about agility and speed.

The industry keeps promoting pylon racing which I think is just crazy. We'll never promote this as a company. Low level, high-speed flight with small fast gliders and big motors, and these guys are risking their lives. When you make a mistake at low level at high speed, these reflex gliders will recover when they want to. There isn't a good recovery. This is why the gliders are not getting certified. That makes them dangerous and the idea of flying around pylons stupid.

Pierre Diet from Spain and I are developing a new race called the Triangle Race. We will be introducing it on April 21st here at Blackhawk. There will be around 200 pilots. It is all about low and slow, X/C is big at the get together with many taking their first significant X/C! It is about going somewhere – not flying about a field.

The race will have a Le Mans start. Your equipment will be laid out, and when the horn goes off you will run to your equipment, and launch. That should be very spectator friendly!

I won't go into more detail other than you will have a gallon (editors note, 1 gallon is 3.7 liters) of fuel and will have to go one lap of 3-7km per leg. You will have to pit stop to refuel, re-launch and do one more lap and that will be the finish. A total beginner could possibly win that race! We will have classes for quads, trikes and "Foot Launch", and though everyone wants to win it is about participating and fun. It will show that even experts can mess up a launch just as much as anyone else! They can come into land and not get their gas cap off – there's all sorts of things to think about. A fast glider (smaller glider) will run more RPMs and will use more fuel. It's about cross country, fuel efficiency, good take off and landing skills, while giving spectators something to enjoy.

What's your top tip for flyers?

This goes back to training rather than equipment. Number one is to fly your glider off the ground, and number two is to fly your glider to the ground.

What this means is you don't immediately go into launch mode, but inflation mode. Know where your glider is. Don't put on excessive throttle unless your glider is clearly above your head and locked (no oscillations) down so to speak. Then you fly the glider off the ground. The second thing is when you come into land, you must keep the glider loaded and kite it evenly to the ground. This can actually be done with a Quad or Trike as well as foot launch! Your flight is not over until your glider is safely on the ground and clear of your PPG

Finally, if you have any problems after training, always go back to the ABC's.

You're now the biggest US manufacturer?

Yes we are. It is about the responsibility of business. If you take care of your business your business will take care of you. I have eight employees here. Several are putting their kids through college. My longest serving employee has been with me for 15 years. We work a lot of hours but where people need time off for their kids or family we give them that time off. Someone will step in to do their work while they're enjoying that time off.

It is about the products we develop. We have more engines and we design and manufacture our own gliders. Adventure are doing their own gliders as well but between us and them, we are the only two companies building the whole package. Other companies that just build paramotors will sell you the paramotor and then will make \$x in commission from selling another company's glider. Our philosophy is to get people into the air with the best quality, best performance, and the best value.

Mike, that's great - thanks. You've given us a lot to think about and a useful insight into paramotor manufacturing in the US. We look forward to seeing how your triangle event in April goes - best of luck.