

ONTARGET

BY PAT CANNON

The Art of the Baggie Toss

A couple of weeks ago, I lost a major competition on the basis of a badly thrown marker. As I watched the marker sail from my hands, over the center of the target to a sickening landing fifteen feet the other side of the center, I could not help but wonder how that would effect the weekend. Well, my bad toss cost me over four hundred points. My third place finish was less three hundred points from first.

No, this is not an article on professional whining. It is however, an article on the art of the baggie toss, throw, drop, release, whip or fumble. Whatever you call it, it is not something that just comes naturally. It takes a lot of practice and an intense concentration on your altitude, speed, direction and actual distance from the target. The greatest of pilots, having flown through wind sheer, down valleys, and over tree lines to bring the balloon close to the target, can blow it all with a bad drop.

Let's first look at the marker drop, both from the standpoint of the rules and then by discussing the different techniques employed by most competitors. The important rules, the ones that can cost you points and money are simple. First and foremost, whatever type of drop you employ, the marker tail must, I repeat must, be unfurled when the marker leaves the basket (12.4.1). I have witnessed a marker dropped almost dead center, with the rubber band still wrapped neatly around the entire thing. Thump!! This can be judged as an unauthorized or modified marker and it's costly (12.4.6 BFA). Another favorite of mine is watching a throw with the tail wound around the baggie, in the hopes of gaining some horizontal distance and trusting that the thrust of the throw will cause the tail to unroll. Pretty serious gamble in my opinion. I've seen the tail stay rolled up. Plop!! Big point loss. Lastly, a wind up throw can cause the tail to tie itself in a knot, forming a nice little loop or bow. Once again we find ourselves wasting all that hard flying work, just to embarrass ourselves at the target.

The other rule is the one usually hidden in the applicable rules section of the task sheet. It is the Gravity Marker Drop, BFA rule number 12.4.4. The penalty for infringement of this rule is NO RESULT. Sometimes the devil will tell you during the briefing and sometimes he doesn't. Don't make this mistake. Read the rule and know what you may and may not do. If the officials see your hand extended beyond the basket rail, you may get penalized and only to gain an inch or two.

There are however, no rules that limit your technique, or ability to propel your marker to the target, with the only exception being that you are not allowed to artificially propel your marker. No slingshots. OK?

Technique is important and is developed through practice. Let's look at several different methods of getting the marker from the basket to the target or goal.

Straight down drop or release: We usually reserve this one for close passes over the target, say within ten feet, at altitudes up to a twenty-five feet or so. It looks easy, but remember to judge your forward speed. Even at altitudes of less than ten feet, I have seen (and done) a drop that sailed past the center of the target, simply because the drift was not calculated against the rate of descent and forward movement. If you are leaning out of the basket and your pass over the target is at a foot or so, you can be pretty accurate. I like to give the marker a slight push downward. This helps to take some of the miscalculation out of the drift. One technique I have seen is to hold the tail of the marker in one hand and drop or push the marker with the other. This complies with the tail unfurled rule and allows you to feel the weight of the marker itself prior to release. If you elect to release the entire marker with one hand, make sure that the tail is S-folded on top of the bag, so that at release, the entire tail unfolds right away.



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Underhand toss: This modification of the first technique is for lower altitude drops and is usually used when the altitude is less than ten feet and the horizontal distance to the center is ten feet or less. The idea here is like horseshoes or the famous Bruce Bussey “Baggit” game. The object is to lob the baggie to its destination with some accuracy. Actually, this technique and the one above should be practiced over and over again from a moving object. That can be your balloon basket in flight or from a moving vehicle. The result is the same. You need to know how to calculate the drift brought about from movement. I actually do this from the roof of my house. It nicely approximates the altitude and distance for the last two techniques and will save you a costly mistake in misjudgement. I also lob a few from my truck in motion. Put the basket in the truck and have someone pass by the target at different distances. Keep the speed down to about five miles per hour. You won’t believe how effective this can be until you try it.

Overhand throw: This one can be a little dicey and is fairly inaccurate if you have not practiced. My use of this throw is limited to distances of more than ten feet and usually under thirty feet. In addition, your altitude for this one is usually between ten feet and up to one hundred feet. The reason you need this in your inventory of deliveries is that an underhand toss will just not give you the distance and a wind up or whip will likely pass beyond the target.

There are two dangers in this delivery. First is the knuckle buster delivery where your hand contacts the burner frame. The marker usually flops out of your hand and falls pitifully short of the target. Included in

this delivery is a slew of unsportsmanlike language. The second is the ability to tangle the tail up in the overhead. To remedy this, simply S-fold the tail on top of the bag. Place the thumb on the folds and throw. The tail will unfurl as it leaves the basket.

This throw is hard to practice, but one method is to place your basket in the truck or up on a platform, with the uprights installed. Practice throwing out of the side of the basket, at the ninety degree point from the target, well away from the overhead and suspension lines.

One note here is to make sure that your crown line and parachute lines are secured and not draping down. You will hear more about this in the wind up throw. Again, practice this as a static throw and from a moving vehicle.

Wind up or whip throw: This is probably the most unpredictable method I know of for getting the marker from one place to another. It is usually reserved for those desperation throws, where all you hope to do is to reach the scoring area. On the other hand, with a little practice and technique honing, this throw can save the day for you.

With practice, I can wind up and throw an eighty gram marker over a hundred feet. If the marker is like many of those we have been issued, in the hundred to hundred twenty-five gram range, you can place it up to one hundred fifty feet from the basket.

This one has to be practiced from the roof of your house or from your basket. I recommend that you start with the basket, maybe even with the balloon inflated. Why? How many times have you seen someone winding up for the throw, only to have the whole thing tangle up in the lines

above? Oh yes, we have all been there, done that and have the t-shirt.

If the parachute line, turning vent lines or crown lines are on the side of the basket you are winding up on, hold them in with your free hand. Then lean well away from the basket so as not to contact the lower basket edge. From this point on, it’s all timing.

Depending on the distance I am throwing and the weight of the marker, I will usually hold the tail at a point eighteen to twenty-four inches from the bag. The complete tail must be placed in your hand and held in your fist. The tail is held between the thumb and the second bone of the index finger, tightly. The hand is moved rapidly, toward and away from the target, not in a circular motion, but in a line parallel to the ground. Every time the bag head moves down, the hand should be in transition to a for-

ward, or toward the target, direction. It’s in the timing, to get just the right momentum and torque.

Done correctly, at release, your hand actually extends well forward, toward the target as you let go. Done incorrectly, the marker may go vertical and hit the balloon, go inside the balloon, or just plain drop straight down. Not a pretty picture. To get the maximum out of this throw, you must practice, practice, practice.

At Albuquerque, in 1997, I was able to lay the marker within one foot of the center from over eighty feet away. A new Harley was in the offing and I brought it home. Practice can have positive results.

Next time, the key grab.

