

ONTARGET

BY PAT CANNON

A Task, is a Task, is a Task?



I was having lunch the other day with a fellow competitive pilot and we were discussing a championship event in which there was some controversy about a three-part task. The area of disagreement surrounded the decision by some pilots to not attempt to make the first task on the sheet, bypassing it to fly on to the goal set by the second task. The question being raised was, “Is that fair to elect to pass on a task in favor of another”, and “Does that not constitute flying your tasks out of order, as specified on the task sheet?”

In this particular case the launch point, for those that elected to pass on the first target, was in compliance with the minimum distance from launch to goal rules, but was not at all aligned with the path taken for the balloons already aloft and trying desperately to acquire the first goal. It was clear to all that if you made goal one you would not make goal two. Most of us have been there, more than once, I would guess. The key is, did we recognize the problem before we were in the air or after and what did we do about it?

That brings us to the theme of this article. There are tactical decisions that are well within the bounds of the rules that can be used to maximize the point values attained by the competitor. Tactical in a sense that decisions have to be made to purposely blow off a goal or task in favor of one that presents the better tactical choice.

When does this happen? Well, let’s look at any set of two or more tasks, called by the director, that require the wind line to remain either constant or to change in accordance with a forecast. If something changes that causes a misalignment of the wind and goals, it will become quite evident, rather quickly, that both cannot be made. Which do you pick? How do you recalculate launch and trajectory to maximize your score? There are a number of factors that will come into play.

First, however, let’s answer the question. Yes, it is fair, because the rules provide you with a specific set of criteria from which to plan your flight. No, you are not flying the tasks out of order. You are merely flying from a point that allows you to acquire one target better than the other. Which one you go for depends on these factors.

We will start with an easy scenario. One goal has a limited scoring area and the other will score anywhere on the map through the use of an observer. It then stands to reason that the limited scoring area is the goal you choose. If the limited scoring area task is first, you fly to it first. You then fly as close to the second goal as possible and obtain a score. If the limited scoring area task is second, you fly to the second goal, but you must take care to fly as close to the first task goal, without losing your wind line to the limited scoring area goal. This is just tactical flying and knowing the rules that pertain to obtaining a valid score. Assuming that you score on the limited scoring area goal, how well you score overall will be a function of threading the needle as close to the non-limited scoring area goal as possible. Just a few points can make the difference in a championship event.

Another fairly easy scenario is when neither goal has a limited scoring area. This one takes some careful observation of balloons already in flight and a thorough understanding of the wind from the surface, right up to several thousand feet. Many a score have been saved by using the very high winds to provide just enough turn to put you in the top of the scoring field at the goal that could not be reached in the lower wind patterns. In this case, you fly to the first goal and then use whatever works to move you as close to the second goal as possible.

When both have a limited scoring area then you are going to have to choose between them by estimating which goal will afford you the better score. This is not a fun guessing game, but if you just happen to still be on the ground, you will have a better chance to choose the right goal. The keys to making this decision are “How many balloons are flying at each goal” and “Is there enough steer to insure a good score at whichever goal you choose?” If the task structure is blown by some late weather change but the steer is still sufficient to make at least one of the goals, you will want to fly to the goal which provides the largest number of valid scores and fewer pool points. Remember, you must score in this case to make this decision work, and you will need to score well. The goal with fewer pilots will almost certainly have



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higher pool points, which you will also have added to your score. A high finish with a 900 plus score and a high pool point miss will fair well in the overalls.

Unfortunately, if you are already in the air, you may have little choice. In that case, you lose the tactical advantage to make the choice and have to live with the results. In this case, concentrate on making the very best score you can on the target you have already chosen, even if it's the one with fewer pilots acquiring it. If you score well into the 900s, the net effect will not be as bad when combined with the low pool points of the other goal.

Sound confusing? It can be, especially if there is a third or fourth task to run in addition to the blown task. Hopefully, the third or any subsequent task is a pilot declared goal or task that uses the expanse of the map, such as the max distance or land run task. But, even with these tasks, you need to consider how much the wind has changed and what

effect that will have on your ability to make the subsequent goal(s) from one of the other two.

These situations can be real nail-biters if you are not thinking the situation through. This is where tactics come into play. You are not only thinking about the task sheet and flight, but you are running different scenarios in your head and considering the point results for each.

Remember that flying and planning skills alone don't win competitions. Using everything at your disposal and a solid knowledge of the rules will provide you with the ability to make the tactical decisions that will put you in the lead.

