



HEAD IN THE CLOUDS

LIZ DENGLER

(NOT) LIKE RIDING A BIKE



Photos: Gary Waterman

In March 2023, I injured my knee while speedriding in France. If you want to get technical, my wing was balled-up in my hand while skiing to a suitable launch. I turned and stuffed a ski tip into the soft side of a mogul, but the frozen top prevented the ski from popping back out. I fell in slow motion (read: sat down), my leg twisted, my boot failed to release from my binding, something popped, and I punched the snow in frustration. I knew I'd just messed up my knee two weeks into a month-long trip.

Fortunately, on a speedriding trip, you can still play every day if you just stick to the flying bit and don't make turns on your skis. With a wing, I could just point it, huck, fly, and land – no turns or knee stress needed.

Back home, I faced the dreaded MRI, which confirmed a massive bone bruise and a torn ACL, which would require surgery. Recovery would be at least six months, but the doctors assured me it would likely be a year before my knee was feeling like itself again. I'm no stranger to recovering from surgeries, having not been kind to my joints in my early years, but I was young, and recovery after each was quick. I was dreading this.

I went under the knife in early May and faced down my long recovery. I was religious about physiotherapy, anxious to get back on my mountain bike and under my wing. As I improved, I hoped to get back in the air before the snow. Unfortunately, a rogue pinched nerve in the back of my knee set me back months.

By the time the pain was gone, it was winter and my dreams of getting in the air vanished. Devastated, I continued physio but didn't trust my knee to handle skis for speedriding. When spring finally arrived, my partner and I took a trip to the desert to escape the lasting grip of winter in our mountain town. Mountain bikes and wings in tow, I was eager to get back in shape, physically and mentally.

At a favourite ridge-soaring site, I pulled up my wing for the first time in over a year; it felt like breathing life back into my body. It was so familiar yet intimidating. Though I trusted my knee at this point, something felt off. Kiting was natural and easy, but stepping off the edge and taking to the air was daunting. Being in the sky felt different this time around.

I pressed on and slowly started to feel the flow again in that early morning ridge lift. However, I found myself to be more cautious than I was before my injury and landed well before the thermals turned on.

After our trip, I returned to my home site, hoping the familiarity would ease some tensions and help me regain comfort in thermic air, but I still struggled to convince myself to let go. There were days on launch when I could feel the conditions were perfect. Before my incident, I would have been stoked and already in the air, but I wasn't. Even in those morning thermals, my bump tolerance was non-existent.

I began flying the "switch", the time when the drain from the mountains finally stops but before the thermals of the morning cook really turn on for this leese side. Though tricky to time, it was the perfect air to take some lightly bumpy sleds, gradually get used to being in thermic air again, and dial in those landings in a poppy LZ.

Patience will pay

I continuously remind myself that this was the first extended break I've ever had from flying. I'm starting to realise how much I took for granted: my physical abilities, mental fortitude, and even my emotional connection to flying and the pilot community. I am slowly getting used to flying again, but I'm nowhere close to where I would like to be.

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I still struggle with certain aspects, and I feel very alone and disconnected from the community I was once so ingrained in. I battle more with fear even though my injury wasn't related to flying or, in the grand scheme of things, very severe. I long for the sky, so it's a strange conflict to be beckoned by the air and ground-sucked simultaneously.

Mostly, I struggle knowing that I'm not the same pilot I was before and worry why it hasn't come back faster. I was away from mountain biking for the same time, but getting back on the trails was a breeze. The flow, the technical aspects, and the joy of it all came back the moment I got on the saddle. Why couldn't paragliding be as easy? It turns out that returning to flight (at least for me) is not like riding a bike.

I expect that, with time, these trepidations will pass as I slowly chip away at the pieces bogging me down. It's difficult to accept that this will take longer than I'd expected. Much like my physical rehab period, I am now learning to excel in patience.

That said, new sports I picked up during recovery (adventure motorcycle riding and fly fishing) continue to provide comfort and experiences on those days when paragliding isn't calling to me. However, I eagerly anticipate the day when paragliding feels normal, and I can combine it with my new hobbies into a grand adventure. **✈️**



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