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INTO THE ABODE OF GODS

Felix Wölk flies live volcanoes



An aerial photograph of a town and valley, likely Bassano del Grappa, Italy. The town is built on a hillside, with a dense cluster of buildings and a prominent church spire. The valley below is a patchwork of green fields and forests, with a winding road and a river visible. The sky is clear and blue.

MASTER *of the* ART

Kelly Farina's new book, *Mastering Paragliding*, is designed to teach concepts and techniques that will help pilots progress through the sport in a logical way. Ed Ewing went to Bassano to put theory into practice



▲ **HOT OFF THE PRESS**

Kelly, with the first copy of his book while on launch at Panettone, Bassano del Grappa in Italy

► **HARD DAY'S WORK**

Launch from Panettone, course work, and just desserts

◀ **ITALIAN STYLE**

Kelly Farina on the Bassano ridge. Kelly has been guiding for a decade

All photos: Ed Ewing

“If you relax your arms and roll with it, it’s actually not so bad.” We’d taken off from the 1,556m Panettone launch, Bassano del Grappa, Italy at the height of the day in mid-June. It was what Kelly Farina calls a ‘fizzy’ day, thermals popping off the terrain and the air fizzing with lift. Base was only 200m or so above take-off, and we were five minutes into a planned 45km FAI triangle, heading for our first turnpoint 3km away.

The gaggle was ahead of me and I could hear Kelly telling his troops to relax. “Take this one to base and then we’ll head back along the ridge.”

On day one, sipping coffees and fizzy waters at the outdoor tables of the Garden Relais Hotel, watching gliders drop one-by-one into the landing field next door, Kelly had explained the week ahead. “If you hear me say, ‘This is getting a bit unnecessary,’ that’s code for, ‘I’m about to get the hell off this ridge.’” Everybody laughed.

Kelly is straightforward, and his conversation is peppered with theories and concepts he has developed from two decades of flying. He had 10 years on the competition scene, including a stint in the British Team, and has been guiding since 2002. A long-time contributor to magazines in the sport, he has finally done what he has promised to do for several years, and written a book.

“Mastering Paragliding takes the same approach as my courses,” Kelly explains. “I want people to have fun, and I want them to do really well and be the best they can be without pushing, without being over motivated.

“I want them to have a good set of skills, from groundhandling and carving, to flying XC in the big mountains.”

Kelly grew up in Romford, east London where he was a skater. “I used to spend all my time skating at The Rom,” he says with a grin. The Rom was one of England’s first skate parks and was built in 1978 using state-of-the-art techniques from California. Experimental in its day, it was listed by English Heritage in 2014.

From skating, Kelly discovered snowboarding in the Austrian Alps, and from there paragliding. Now 43 Kelly spends half his year in Thailand kite boarding – his most recent passion – and the other half in Europe, guiding paragliding. In those 20 weeks he works with 140 clients. He has a lot of fans; one called him “the best-kept secret in paragliding” recently on a forum online.

Kelly’s background in skating, boarding and now kiting inform his approach to guiding. There is

less focus on 'learning by doing' or 'following the leader' and much more on understanding concepts and putting specific techniques into practice – and training them until they are embedded. Instead of simply telling pilots to “turn tighter” in the thermal, he carefully runs through his theories of how tight paragliders need to turn to be efficient, and then gives the pilot a simple technique to achieve that.

His talk is peppered with words that relate back to his concepts and theories, which in turn help his pilots know what they can expect from the day and the flight. He breaks down the environment – “mega” and “minor” terrain in the Alps is foothills and big mountains – and he does the same with clouds. That’s not just a big cloud, that’s a stage four cumulus. Scratching it out on our final day for the slowest XC kilometres any of us had ever done – 8km in an hour with hot and sticky 0.3m/s climbs over the flats – he later labels that specific 60-minutes as “technical level 8”.

He talks about the different sized ‘ramps’ in the terrain – slopes and mountainsides – where hot air can collect and travel upwards. And he talks about ‘the carve’, always about the carve. This is the way you turn the glider, the sweet spot you hit when thermalling perfectly as you carve into

the core and power through into the climb. It is the smoothness of the carve that Kelly considers crucial: carve properly, smoothly, and connect it all together and you will automatically have a smooth, efficient climb, leaving others behind. Kelly’s week-long thermalling courses are all focused on perfecting the carve. Only once you have the carve and are able to open and close it in a thermal, are you ready to advance to the next stage of Kelly’s Pyramid of Progression – cross-country flying.

Kelly’s knowledge of other sports also very much informs the way he now teaches flying. “It is a sport, after all,” he writes, when discussing the correct posture for efficient thermalling. That posture is upright, back straight, using the core to control the body, applying weightshift with the hips, not simply slouching over or crossing a leg ineffectively.

On his thermalling courses, which he runs in Bassano and Greifenburg, he hangs up pilots in their harnesses and explains the body position he wants to see them in. “Straight back, now lean over, into the thermal. Your nose should be in line with the risers and your risers like this.” He adjusts the risers so the outer one is higher than the inner by the width of a fist.



Kelly Quotes

“The goal is the journey as a whole. If our skill set is a toolbox, the beginner has little more than a monkey wrench.”

“The good XC pilots seem to be lucky all the time”

“Practise efficient carving often enough and before long it will become your style”

“If nature throws a certain shape, you need to adapt to that shape”

“The smaller the muscle, the better it is for listening”

“The difference between good pilots and the rest is very marked but can be simply stated: they are making fewer mistakes”

“Observation suffers when pilots fly wings that are too demanding”

“The Golden Rule is the pilot shall keep their own body’s progress through the air as smooth and constant as possible”

“Pilots who climb-out day-in, day-out are carving smoother lines”

“Pilots rarely go down by making one mistake – it’s all too often a series of errors”

“The fewer mistakes you make the less performance you need”

“Climbs that form in areas of extreme rotor should be avoided at all costs”

“You want to go from strong line to strong line, not just blunder around the landscape”

“Dogs and pirates bury things. We should not.”

MEET THE PILOTS



▲ Johnna Haskell, Maine, USA

"Kelly is an exceptional coach. He knows how to push me enough and to tell me what to work on next, which is what I love to do. I started six years ago and my early progression was not good, so I started seeking out people who were on the top level. Now I work with Kelly, Kari Castle and also Dave Prentice. I first came in 2012 and learned to thermal – all week, 20 hours. I took that to Mexico and flew 150 hours. When I came back to see Kelly two years later he was like, 'Oh Johnna, you've been working!' And we were the same! He got it across to me."



▲ Saptarshi Roy, California, USA

"I started in 2003 and have 170 hours. This is my fifth trip with Kelly. Now when I'm at home I hear him in my ear! It's the system, that you know it's not just voodoo. Usually it's like, 'How is that pilot going up?' 'I don't know, he's just a sky god!'. But now I catch myself and think about it. Am I diving in the turn? Is my airspeed constant? Am I turning fast enough? That has become ingrained. Those little improvements all add up. I'm getting better. When it's lighter at home now I do well, so something is working!"

▼ Ioan Jones

"I started flying in 2000 after climbing Mont Blanc. I trained in Wales, then headed to the Alps with no clue. The reason I keep coming back to fly with Kelly is it's safe, and I learn something every time. I have ambition to fly big areas and mountains, but I don't have the time. So as a guide, as someone who teaches me, he's excellent. All these theories he talks about? They work. I now feel confident going up the Brevent and flying XC. It has accelerated my learning. Otherwise you're just bumbling along with your understanding."



▼ Matt York, UK

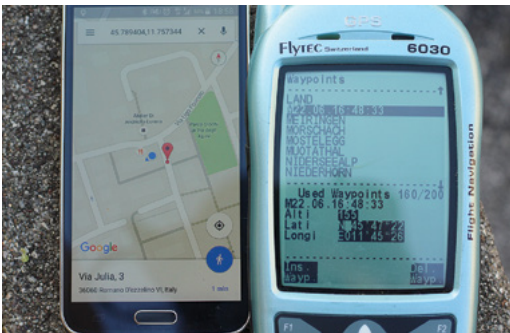
"This is the sixth time I've been out with Kelly. I started flying in 2012 and came out to learn to thermal with just 10 hours. Very green! Something clicked, and it's Kelly that keeps me coming back. He gave me a system. Not just, 'You're in a thermal, now turn' but how to go round. I really like his pyramid of progression. The first thing is, can you get off the ground? The second is can you go round in circles? You're doing everything systematically, focusing on training one bit at a time. Your consciousness goes forward."



After our first day in the air we are reviewing photos and I ask him what he thinks of my body position. "Hmm. It's alright. Lean in more, put your nose right in line with the inside riser." It's literally a matter of leaning in a couple more inches, achieved most simply by straightening my back.

Later that evening, the longest day of the year, we fly from the summit of Panettone at 8pm to land 1,400m below at sunset. On the smooth flight down I try out some circles, my new body position in mind. Wow, I think, as the glider locks in a little neater, a little sharper, than before. Twenty years on and off I've been rolling around the sky and no one's ever told me to straighten my back and put my nose in line with the risers.

Several years ago Kelly was trying to write down some concepts to help his clients fly better. "I was trying to understand what I do," he explains. "I was telling pilots, 'Turn tighter, turn tighter,' but when they asked 'How tight is tighter?' I didn't have any answers."



To help find those answers he went on a long flight through the Alps on his own. “I was on autopilot, watching what I was doing almost as an observer,” he says. “And that was when it clicked. Every turn I was doing was taking me 16 seconds.”

It was a real lightbulb moment. “I came home from that flight and wrote everything down, got it all on paper and tried to put it in some sort of order.”

After realising every circle he was doing lasted 16 seconds, it followed that every 90-degree turn lasted four seconds. That led on to his ‘Four for 90’ rule (p73, XC172), which forms the basis of how he now teaches thermalling, and gives his clients a firm technique that they can work on.

On my first flight in Bassano with some of his crew I flew with Johnna Haskell, a US pilot who has adopted Kelly as one of her three flying mentors as she progresses through the sport. Meandering down through the evening air I joined Johnna in a small, light thermal above a spine. Wow! I thought again, she’s locked on! Johnna was fully engaged,

working the lift, carving cleanly through the air, in a perfect 16-second turn, opening and closing in the surges of lift. The positive, focused energy in her flying was palpable as she got as much as she could out of the weak climb.

“I don’t want to be a social pilot,” she explained later that week. “I’m here to learn and get better. It’s the same with skiing, I want to always progress, to be the best I can be.” A former climber, she got into flying for the adventure, but has a competitive streak too. “I like to get really good at things, I like to put 100% in. But competition is not always a healthy thing for me. There is a safe progression, and sometimes you need coaching to get there.”

That coaching works. “Last year I went to a comp and all of a sudden in one task I was in second place!” It was the Tater Hill Open, an annual fun comp in North Carolina. “I hadn’t realised I had progressed. I was like, oh!” Overall she came sixth.

“What was great was he was there for me when I was at that competition – I emailed him and he

▲ A DAY IN THE LIFE

Clockwise from far left: Flying the ridge in Bassano; Above the inversion on Panettone; Saptarshi Roy climbs out above the River Brenta; Lunch and a retrieve puzzle



▲ **FIRM FOUNDATION**
Matt York on launch

came straight back. He stayed involved.”

Later, Kelly laughs. “I used to take a lot of photos of the top of Johnna’s wing, I don’t any more!”

Around the same time as Kelly was flying on autopilot and writing down his theories, he was also learning a martial art. “Wing Chun involves reacting without conscious thought in real time. It’s exactly the same as paragliding really,” he says. “These guys have been learning it and passing it down for 300 years.”

To cut a long story short, as he worked his way through the Wing Chun syllabus he realised it had remarkable parallels with paragliding. It led him to develop his ‘Pyramid of Progression’, which is the foundation of his book. ‘Basics’ like groundhandling and thermalling form the foundation, with natural flying, no vario, at the top.

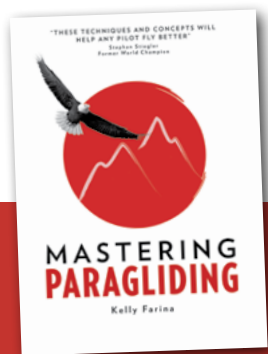
Board sports, martial arts – for Kelly they inform and help explain the discipline of paragliding. Understanding that has allowed him to develop his teaching theories. This is not the usual way to approach flying, he knows, but it gets results. “I don’t want to turn out clones,” he says, “when they start questioning me and asking why I teach the techniques I do, then I know they’ve become good pilots.”

To fly well and progress requires discipline, he knows, and that requires concepts, techniques

and structure. Also self-knowledge, honesty and willingness to learn. Knowing where we stand on the pyramid of progression is the first step to understanding how to get better, and what to work on. That way, we can relate ourselves to the sport, and to those around us in the sky.

Everything from the basics to the higher arts of our sport can be taught, is Kelly’s main message. And they can be taught in a structured way that does away with a lot of unfocused trial and error. They depend on establishing a firm foundation in the basics – groundhandling, launching, the carve – and progressing systematically, working on each level at a time. With each level the sport opens up, and pilots can progress safely, secure in their knowledge base. It is not a short-cut to learning, rather it is a route map to progress, with the ultimate aim of becoming an independent master of paragliding yourself.

It is a route map the pilots on Kelly’s course in Bassano are all too happy to sign up for. Driving up to launch Kelly tells some tale about a rude pilot he encountered on launch the week before. “Imagine if I said that to my Wing Chun instructor?” he says, in mock horror. “Imagine if I made that face? I’d get a whack round the ear!” And everyone laughs. Kelly Farina, mastering paragliding one pilot at a time. **XC**



Mastering Paragliding

Kelly Farina’s new book, *Mastering Paragliding*, is a new approach to flying XC. Kelly approaches pilot progression in a systematic way, from understanding the basics to high-level XC advice. It is available in flying shops and schools now.