Timing for a Thermal Duration Contest

The timer's role at the typical thermal duration contest can be as simple as running a watch or as valuable as being a coach to the pilot. The timer can simply run a watch, keeping the pilot aware of the time, and reporting the time and landing points to the score keeper. However, the timer is allowed to help the pilot during the flight. Some pilots welcome the help and others prefer the timer to be quiet and just work the watch. How much of this actually occurs will depend on the timer and the pilot involved and how they wish to work together.

It is easy and it is fun. Plus, you can learn a lot by watching how pilots manage their flights, read the air and set-up for their landings. Even if you don't feel ready to fly a thermal duration contest, working as a timer is a great learning experience.

TIMING

The timer's job is to record the duration of the flight. When asked to time for someone, he will need to know the specified task in effect. For example, the CD may have declared an 8 minute round. That means the pilot is trying to have his flight last EXACTLY 8 minutes, not a second more or less. Not everyone hits it exactly but the timer can help by keeping the pilot informed of his time throughout the flight.

Ask you pilot how he would like to get the time. Some would like every minute. Some may not want any updates till half way and some may not wish an update till there are two minutes left. For the last two minutes each pilot has a preference, but typical is to give a notice when there are two minutes left. Using the 8 minute task, during the 6th minute typically pilots want an update every 15 seconds. This is usually when they are planning their landing. During the last minute the pilot wants an update every 5 seconds and to have the last 10 seconds counted down.

Clarify all of this information with the pilot before you go to the winch.

Time starts when the glider leaves the winch or hi-start hook.

Time stops when the plane touches any earth bound material such as a branch, grass, or the ground itself. The plane may still be flying but if it touches something, time stops. If the plane has not touched at the end of the last minute, stop counting but keep the watch running so you can record the whole flight. If it is 8:06, that is what you report. If it is 7:49, that is what you report.

HELPING

At the winch, double check with the pilot that his transmitter and plane are on. Go out and get the tow ring and hold it at the front of the craft until the flyer says he is ready for it. If there is tension on the line, continue to hold and give it some slack until the ring is on the hook. Then, ease off on the slack until the flyer feels the full tension on the line. Move clear of the plane, check your watch and announce the timer is ready.

When the flyer is off the winch line and ready to move away, direct him out of the launch area without pulling on him. You are his eyes on the ground, to insure he doesn't trip or step on anything and is headed in the direction of the landing area. With two minutes left, or with less than 200 feet of altitude, you should be positioned at the landing area.

LANDING

The landing area can become quite busy. The pilot is focused on his plane. You should be focused on the watch, but whenever possible be aware of other planes in the area. You could help the pilot avoid a mid air which will not help his time and might cost him his plane.

You should be upwind of the outside edge of the landing circle. Position the end of the tape downwind and point out the 100 point end of the tape (the center of the landing circle). Ask your pilot if he has any particular orientation for the landing tape he may prefer. For example he may wish the tape away or toward him.

While you are moving to and standing at the landing circle, keep a eye out for interference from other pilots and planes. If you have to, explain it to your flyer with enough time to move to another circle or to avoid getting in the way of another plane making a landing.

Landing is measured at the tip of the nose of the plane. The plane must be upright. Most contests will not allow points for a plane that lands inverted or flips over. It can "stick" into the ground, sometimes called a "dork" or dart landing. Check with the CD about local rules, before the flight.

Once a landing is completed, measure for landing points and get out of the circle before turning off the radio. State the time and landing points aloud and remember them and do not reset the watch until you have recorded the scores.

COACHING

Your pilot may be interested in what the other pilots in the flight group are doing. Be very gentle with your suggestions. No matter how bad a pilot he may be, he is still the pilot and still in control. You are offering advice, not instructions. Never take offense if he does not follow. Keep your communications short and to the point so as to not interfere with the pilot's concentration.

LOOKING for LIFT

In the first two minutes the flyer will know if he will need to look for lift or fly to the other thermaling gliders. As the flyer looks for lift, you should look for other craft that may have found lift. Just because you see gliders circling, don't call out lift until you see one or more going up. If you see signs of lift tell the pilot how far away it is before he makes a decision to turn towards it and then realizes it is too far away. You can be helpful if you know how to spot lift indicators:

Vultures or birds of prey circling in lift.
Flags or streamers moving in directions other than the prevailing wind.
Birds, such as swallows, feeding on the wing in a confined area.
You feel a shift in the wind or a change in its temperature

SUMMARY

Ultimately the pilot is in command. Your primary job is to time, to record the landing points and to report them to the score keeper. However be aware that you are allowed to help if you feel able and if the pilot is willing to accept your assistance.