

United States Soaring Team Selection

To reach the pinnacle in any sport is a remarkable achievement. This is especially true for pilots who are selected to become members of the U.S. soaring team and go on to represent the United States at World Gliding Championships.



Team Selection

In the distant past, pilots were elected to the U.S. Soaring team by their fellow competition pilots. The election process, while having some good features, was considered to be somewhat unfair to talented new pilots. In mid 90's the system used to select team pilots was changed to a more performance-based approach. Currently, United States Soaring Team pilots are chosen by the Soaring Society of America (SSA) based on recent performance in National and World-level competition. After each of the US Nationals, competitors' scores are compared to the winner's score. The winner of each National soaring contest receives a score of 1, and the other contestants are ranked relative to the winner's score. The pilot's current year and the best of the two previous years' performance are considered when selecting US Soaring Team members with the current year being weighted more heavily.

US Soaring Team rankings can be very close with only a fraction of a point separating competitors. When US pilots do well in world level contests they earn bonus points that count toward their selection to future US Soaring Teams. The number of team members who represent the United States at a World Gliding Championships is ultimately determined by the World Championship contest organizers and the SSA.

How it works

The ranking of potential US Team members is basically the average of this year's National's standing and the best of the previous two years. The ranking is done separately for each competition class. To favor recent performance, this year's standing gets weighted a bit more than the best of the previous two years, but that's basically all there is to it!

There is a bit of fine print that comes up for pilots who have been on a US Team within the last three years, and we'll get to that after we explain what the 'standing' is and how a pilot's current year's standing gets favored a bit. A pilot's standing for selection to a team for any national contest is simply the pilot's score divided by the winner's score; for example, if the contest winner's score is 5000 and a pilot's score is 4000, then the pilot's standing for the year is $4000/5000$ or .80.

To even things out a bit from year to year, the selection process adds in a pilot's best standing for the best of the previous two years. So if a pilot has a standing of .98 in 2003, .97 in 2002, and a win (a standing of 1.00) in 2001, their overall standing would use the .98 in 2003 and the 1.00 in 2001.

To give more weight to recent performance, the current year's standing is multiplied by 52 and the best of the previous years' standings by 48 – yes, they add up to 100. So you can think of the final result as consisting of 52% from the current year's standing, and 48% from the best of the previous years' standings. In our example, the pilot's overall standing would be $52 \times .98 + 48 \times 1.00 = 98.96$.

An example of how team selection works

How to calculate the rankings used to select pilots for U.S. soaring teams is really quite simple as the example below shows.

2000 15-Meter Nationals			2001 15-Meter Nationals		2002 15-Meter Nationals	
Contestant	Points	Ratio	Points	Ratio	Points	Ratio
Winner	8900	1.000	8540	1.000	7800	1.000
Pilot BG	8800	.9887	8490	.9941	7700	.9871
Pilot 47	8600	.9662	8300	.9718	7750	.9935
Pilot 8U	8790	.9876	5530	.6475	6800	.8717
Pilot 4D	8876	.9973	4576	.5358	5400	.6923

2002 Team Ranking Example

HIGHEST RANKINGS FROM 2000/2001

Pilot	Ratio	Year	Team Ranking Yr 1
Winner	1.000	2001	$1.000 \times .48 = .4800$
BG	.9941	2001	$.9941 \times .48 = .4771$
47	.9718	2001	$.9718 \times .48 = .4664$
8U	.9876	2000	$.9876 \times .48 = .4740$
4D	.9973	2000	$.9973 \times .48 = .4787$

RANKINGS FROM 2002

Ratio	Team Ranking Yr 2	Total	Rank
1.000	$1.000 \times .52 = .5200$	100	1
.9871	$.9871 \times .52 = .5132$	99.03	2
.9935	$.9935 \times .52 = .5166$	9830	3
.8717	$.8717 \times .52 = .4532$	92.72	4
.6923	$.6923 \times .52 = .3599$	83.86	5

World Championship substitutions

World Championships and Pre-worlds are often held on dates that conflict with the dates for the U.S. Nationals. Pilots who have participated in either of the two most recent World Gliding Championships [WGC's] or the most recent Pre-World Gliding Championships [PWC] may substitute their standings in these events for their current year's standings in the U.S. Nationals. This substitution keeps pilots who fly in world championships or pre-worlds from losing their team standing due to not being able to fly in U.S. Nationals because of date conflicts. These international standings are calculated in exactly the same manner as domestic standings. As for the US Nationals, standings from the world competitions contribute only to the selection in the class flown at the worlds.

Another part of the rationale for including these standings is that the WGC and PWC have a more competitive set of pilots than U.S. Nationals, participation in the pre-worlds particularly should be encouraged, and the WGC/PWC tests the pilot for precisely the skills that are being sought for in the US Team selection.

Bonus points for World Gliding Championship performance

If team pilots perform extremely well at world soaring championships, they can earn bonus points toward team selection. Pilots who finish in the top four places at the WGC receive bonus points – from 1 for a win, to .25 for fourth place – to reflect their outstanding performance and its predictive value for likely future success.

For example, Gary Ittner's fourth place finish in the 2001 World's earned him .25 in bonus points, as did Bill Bartell's fourth place in 1999. Note that neither of these bonuses affected the selection to the following WGC, but it's a nice idea nevertheless.

Junior & Feminine Team Selection

Selection for these two teams is basically the same as for the other competition classes, but they are independent of the class flown. Because of the small number of competitors in these categories, the best performance in any Nationals for the year is used, provided that the performance is at least 60% of the national winner's score. The Junior Soaring Team is made up of pilots who will still be under age 26 in the year of the Junior WGC.

Following the team standings

It can add extra excitement to national championships if it is known which contestants are in the running for team selection before and during the event. Typically the lead for team selection changes often and comes down to the wire during the last days of the nationals. Before a Nationals starts, you can see the score that a contestant needs to tie another contender, and during the Nationals you can see how things stand day by day on the web at http://acro.harvard.edu/SOARING/JL/US_TEAM