Using just the rear risers Mike Küng manoeuvres the glider with accuracy without producing lift.
All photos: Giorgio Sabbioni

ON THE EDGE

Ice cool Mad Mike goes out to play while Giorgio Sabbioni looks on

"Follow me … then you'll see what is possible." This was Mike Kung, Germany's master of aerial madness, and he was talking to me as he unfolded his glider next to the rocky lava seashore of the appropriately named Puento del Diablo, the Devil's Bridge.

The tarmac road was the only clean place to inflate, so Mike, famous throughout the paragliding world for his acrobatics and extreme stunts, lifted his wing up, said Hello to a passing cyclist and then hopped off into the rocks, to walk tens of metres towards the cliff edge.

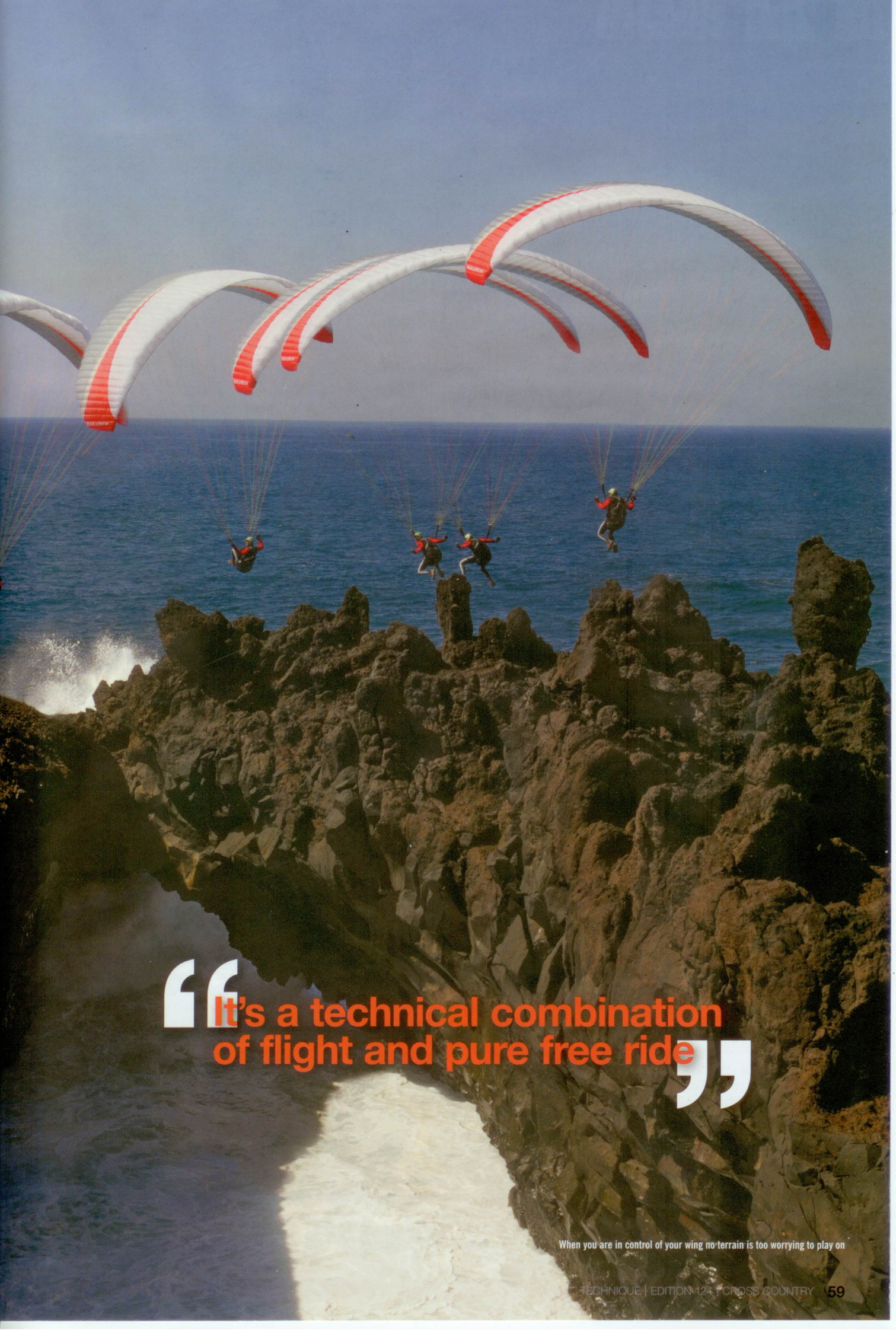
The wind wasn't so strong, but the waves less than 10 m below were crashing against the steep basalt rocks. I know Mike and his reputation, and I knew he wouldn't take off unless he considered it safe, but still, when he launched off the rocks towards the waves I was scared for him. The lift was weak, there were no landing places, the rocks were unfriendly and the waves were big.

But instead of crashing into the sea and drowning he soared towards me using lift created by the waves to stay above the water, but still flying lower than the cliff edge. Then, just like a humming bird he landed on a foot-sized platform on the cliff. The next instant he took a few steps and took off again.

He did it once more, and then again, playing touch and go along the tiny cliff and he looked as if he was enjoying it. Personally, I wasn't, but there to shoot pictures, I carried on taking photos.

Watching, I felt the same way as I did when I saw the first Infinite Tumble ever executed: pure technical ability was being used to create a show-stopper. The risk and possibility of error were so high that the whole performance was more than extreme.

It was our first day in Lanzarote and we were there for Mike to perform some extreme ground handling. But it was only after this first show that I understood what he meant by that: a highly technical combination of flight and pure free ride. It opened my eyes and I realised that with the proper ability everything can be done – from simple soaring to climbing cliffs, walls and, as I had just witnessed, even dancing across the waves from jagged rock to jagged rock.



“It’s a technical combination of flight and pure free ride”

When you are in control of your wing no terrain is too worrying to play on

Mike Küng prepares to soar the blasts of wind from the waves

STRONG WIND TAKE OFF

Mike Kung tells Giorgio Sabbioni how to control a paraglider using the C and D risers

THE IDEA

The C and D risers control and launch method is suitable for medium to strong winds, but can also be used in light wind conditions. If your wing doesn't have D risers then just use the C risers. It was created by André Bucher, who showed it to me nearly 20 years ago, and it's very simple.

THE BASICS

First, always work with parallel arms – don't cross them. Only the risers are crossed.

Stand facing the glider with the crossed risers and parallel arms. Pull the glider up with the A risers while using your body to steer the glider.

As the glider rises stabilise it by using the C and D risers. The glider's reaction will be more gradual and steering noticeably harder than you are used to because there is more pressure involved.

Using this method allows you to properly control the glider on the ground: you can lift it up, stop it, control it above your head, pull it down again or take off when you decide to, even in very strong winds.

IN DETAIL

- On take off open the glider but leave a two to three turn fold on the tips. This gives the glider more weight on the tips and stops it getting blown by the wind.
- If the leading edge is not already semi-inflated, slightly pull the A risers, ready to get the full airflow when you lift the glider up.
- To control the glider on the ground in a strong wind take the C and D risers close to the karabiners, pull them backwards and wide apart from the centre. In this way the leading edge will remain inflated but will not roll over as the A risers are free.
- Prepare to lift the glider. Make sure the C and D risers are wide apart from the A risers, and the brake handles are still on their keepers.
- Hold one A riser in each hand while keeping your arms parallel.
- Lift the glider up by pulling the A risers and taking a few steps toward the glider as it surges above your head.
- Change your hands: when the glider is almost above your head let go of the A risers and take hold of the C and D risers. Practising this change is one of the difficulties of this method, but with proper training you can get it and at the end, you will find it surprisingly easy.

STRONG WIND

When the wind is very strong, lift the glider by using just your body while holding the C and D risers only. This method should only be used on steep take offs, so you can counterbalance the strength of the wind with your body. If the launch is not steep you run the risk of being blown away. The sequence is slightly different from the previous one:

- Firmly hold C and D risers wide apart with the brake handles still fixed to the keepers.
- Hold the glider in place semi-inflated using the C and D risers and keep tension on the A and B risers by using your body.
- Lean toward the glider to reduce the tension on the A and B risers
- Lift the glider up by just pulling your body backwards then taking a few steps toward the glider as it rises above your head.
- Stop the glider above your head using the C and D riser (already in your hands)

GROUND CONTROL

The glider is now above the pilot's head and is fully controlled using the C and D risers. If something goes wrong bring the glider down by pulling the C and D risers – it will come down much more easily and with less effort than pulling the brakes. Pulling the C and D risers, even in strong wind, you will always be able to keep the glider on the ground without the risk of being blown away or lifted off the ground.

If the wind is weak then you can steer with the brakes, although generally I only steer with the brakes for ground handling tricks like rock climbing, because I can get more lift to go up.

LAUNCH

With the glider above your head being controlled by the C and D risers, it's now time to turn, take hold of the brake handles and then run to take off.

Why use the C and D risers and not the brakes?

The most important thing about taking off is proper control on the ground. Inflating and controlling the wing is not only the start of the flight, but a precise phase when the pilot must have full control of the wing before making the decision whether to take off.

Using the brakes to control the glider on the ground is the most familiar method, but by pulling the brakes you increase the lift of the wing, and run the risk of getting airborne while facing the wrong way with twisted risers.

With C and D risers held wide apart in your hands, as illustrated in this article, you have maximum control of the glider and your movements will produce less lift and be less likely to pull you off the ground. This works so well that it is almost impossible for the wing to fly unless you want it to, even in strong winds.

The second positive aspect is that by holding

the C and D risers wide apart the pilot is stable underneath the canopy. Even if the pilot is lifted up he or she will still be able to steer and control the glider while flying backwards. One of the most common problems – and causes of accidents – at take off is being lifted up in strong wind. By only holding the brakes it is easy to be lifted by a stronger gust but also impossible to keep yourself balanced in the centre and in control of the glider, as the risers have a natural tendency to want to untwist.

Another strong wind take off technique using the A and D risers is often used in Australia. In it you hold both A risers in one hand and the D risers in the other. Whilst it works if the glider rises cleanly and straight, it is hard to control and difficult to steer the glider using only one hand.

TIPS FOR CONTROL

Ground handling is not the same thing as just getting into the air. Similarly, launching a glider is a two-stage process: instead of simply thinking 'How can I get into the air?' I first ask, "How can I be safe and under control on the ground?" and then I ask, "How can I safely get into the air?"

With full control on the ground I have time to think – "Everything is cool now, the air is perfect" – then I turn around and go.

With this method you can decide when you launch. With many other methods once you lift the glider up in strong winds you have to take off.

The technique works best when the wind is really strong, because having the C and D risers in my hands means I'm normally safe. If the wind is too strong and I'm lifted up when I don't want to be I can stall the glider using the C and D risers and put the glider down. If I only had the brakes in my hand and the same thing happened then I'd be gone – I would lose control of the situation. This makes a big difference and it's why working with the C and D risers is always the best.

Using this method allows me to jump, climb, fly backwards and do all the manoeuvres that I do. XC

Mike Kung runs specialised ground handling courses for pilots of all levels. Contact him through his website for details - ***www.madmikekung.com***

Mike Küng

EVOLUTION

Mike Kung Explains Extreme Ground Handling

Originally the basic idea behind ground handling was 'playing', just flying close to the ground combined with soaring. Now I would say it's a discipline in its own right – a specialised way of flying just like acro or cross country.

The interesting aspect for me is the sport part. Normal flight is wonderful, but for me it's not interesting enough. I want to have a challenge in what I do, and ground handling is somewhere I can grow and find new challenges. It's much more interesting than acro, for example, because I see so many new possibilities.

In acro the sport is already at a level where it is difficult to create something new or special. But in ground handling combined with soaring near the ground, flying or top landing, kiting, or rock climbing with the paraglider there is a lot of potential to get better or find extreme challenges. For me, that makes it the most fun and the biggest challenge there is in paragliding.

Also, and maybe this is the most important overall point, if you are a good ground handler, normally you are also a good pilot. For example, the reasons behind collapses are easier to understand if you do a lot of ground handling, because you see what is happening to the canopy all the time. And you develop a better feel for the glider – when it is overshooting, when it's falling back – if you train at ground handling.

I know that not all pilots are really interested in improving their ground handling but things are changing. It's like when hikers first started walking with sticks everyone said; "Are they stupid?" but now people see the sense in it.

Paragliding itself is safer and easier to understand if you practice ground handling, but for me it's more than just training, it's a distinct sport. In ground handling you always have to be awake, always thinking, looking around and being safe, you have to feel the glider at all times and that in turn puts you in touch with the elements around us. And from there, anything is possible. XC

Interview by Giorgio Sabbioni