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07

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JONNY DURAND

by Katrina Balmaceda



SKY WALKER

A YOUNG PILOT FROM DOWN UNDER
SURFS TO THE TOP RANKS OF HIS SPORT

“HANG GLIDING IS A SPORT WHERE YOU NEED TO ACCESS YOUR SUBCONSCIOUS NATURALLY”

TO TOURISTS, MOUNT CUCCO IN SIGILLO TOWN, Italy, is just a good-looking pleasure park. But to a special fraternity of flyers, it is a battlefield. This July, the world's top hang gliding pilots will flock to Mount Cucco to win the Fédération Aéronautique Internationale (FAI) championship title. Australian pilot Jonny Durand will be one of them.

Much is at stake for Durand who, at 30 years, is young for a professional hang glider — especially young for a world number one. Durand claimed the top spot last year, no easy feat as rankings are updated each month. This year he ranks second. This constant threat to his title makes the prospect of a 2011 FAI championship all the more intense.

Monthly competition aside, hang gliding may well be one of the most challenging sports around. One glides at the mercy of the weather. Draughts, currents and wind shear can compromise flight, as will rain and low visibility. If the wind is too weak or the rain pours, a scheduled flight may not happen at all.

Aside from practice, Durand stays on top of his game by relaxing. This, he believes, is the best way to prepare for any

task. “Hang gliding is a sport where you need to access your subconscious naturally,” he explains. Perhaps there are other forces at play: “I have some superstitions about clothes so I will choose the right shorts sometimes when I need extra help.” But you can be sure his skill comes from plenty of experience, too.

Durand entered the world of hang gliding in September 1995 at just 15 years of age. He credits this to parental influence: “My father was already hang gliding and I had spent the last five years travelling around, helping him out in competitions. I just had to wait until I was big enough to lift a hang glider off the ground.” Having joined his first competition in 1997 and gained his first open class win in 2000 at the Australian NSW State Titles, it looked like the top place was a goal within reach. >>



| In 2010, Durand won 9 out of 13 competitions he joined and placed second in two of them

THE MORNING GLORY CLOUD IS THE LITMUS TEST FOR CHAMPION GLIDER PILOTS AND DESCRIBED AS A TSUNAMI IN THE SKY

>> But his biggest challenge came nearly a decade later. Through a partnership with Red Bull, he got the chance to ride the apex of many a hang glider's dreams — the Morning Glory cloud. Considered the litmus test for champion glider pilots, this rare phenomenon is preceded by a sudden strong gust of wind and wind shear. It rolls across the sky at 60 km/h at an altitude of 100 to 200 metres above the ground — much lower than typical clouds.

The Morning Glory can stretch 1,000 kilometres long and two kilometres high. The air amid the cloud is turbulent, while a strong vertical movement at the front of the cloud pushes air upwards. It is often described as a tsunami in the sky. The sight is spectacular, but the risks are real. “The Morning Glory has many dangers,

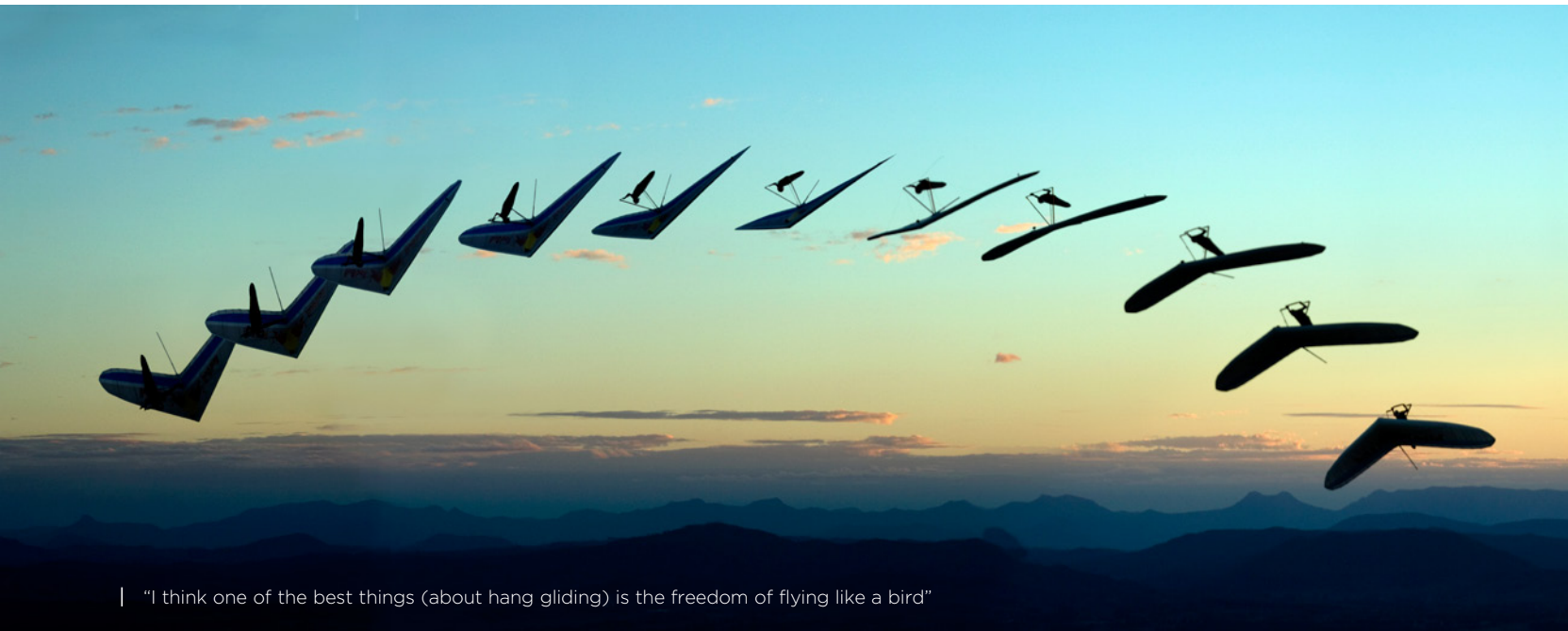
from crocodiles on the ground to extreme turbulence and down draughts in the sky. The fact that so many unknown dangers can happen is what makes the Morning Glory so dangerous,” says Durand.

Australia's Gulf of Carpentaria is one of the few remote regions in the world where the Morning Glory phenomenon occurs. As many as eight clouds in a row can roll over an area during the season from August to November. It was here, in the salt flats of Burketown in Queensland, where Durand faced the cloud. After several dawns, it finally rolled in on 20 and 21 September 2009. With the Red Bull team present to capture the adventure on video, an ultralight airplane lifted Durand up to the cloud and released him to ‘surf’ the sky's big wave.



| Durand takes on the Morning Glory, a rare cloud formation whose exact magnitude and cause remain a mystery

All photos courtesy of Incite Images/Red Bull Content Pool




| “I think one of the best things (about hang gliding) is the freedom of flying like a bird”



| Durand achieved a world record in 2009 for the longest foot-launched flight in the world from any aircraft, flying 317 km without an engine

“This was the most amazing experience I have ever had in a hang glider,” Durand recalls. “It felt so surreal riding this monster cloud in one of the most remote areas of Australia. Even after nearly two years have passed, I can close my eyes and vividly remember every detail.”

Having surfed the Morning Glory, Durand may have already flown the most extreme flight he may ever take. But it does not need to remain his greatest achievement. Having placed second last year in the FAI Pre World Championship, only one pilot stands between Durand and the sweet number one spot this year. If Durand gets his way — and, perhaps if he chooses his shorts right — he may soon be basking in another wave of international glory. 



CLOUD-BASED CHARITY

Glider pilot Jonny Durand is an active supporter of the Cloudbase Foundation, a non-profit organisation formed by hang gliding and paragliding pilots around the world. The group uses donations from persons and parties outside the pilot community to fund charities that benefit children wherever they fly. This includes the US and countries like Ghana and Ecuador. The funds are also used to support existing missions, schools and hospitals in these areas. The pilots involved actively help to find donors wherever their competition is located. In May 2011 alone, pilots competing in the US raised over USD4,000 for the foundation.