

Pack's Defining Word... "Awesome"

By: Gary Leach

A story of opening weekend at Packsaddle Mountain in Kingsland TX.

As I departed my home in Austin TX, the day greeted me with big blue skies and strong westerly winds that had me holding a slight left turn just to keep a straight path driving up U.S. Hwy 183. I made my way to The Escape to meet Paul Greenwood and Amy Tomko to take our ride to Packsaddle Mountain (affectionately known as "Pack" to its pilots). The afternoon winds prediction was SW 5-10 mph, and we planned on riding them!

It was a big weekend for Pack. Recent emails to the Pack online forum expressed the fervor of pilots as if they were evangelicals at a pulpit of a Sunday celebration. For February 1 commenced the Pack 2008 flying year. The first weekend was upon us, and we planned to be there and accept all it had to offer.

The day's temperature was in the low 70s. As we trekked our way to Pack, the warm Texas sun was bathing us through the windows of the SUV. Bright, warm, peaceful... it seemed to make for a simply-Texas day. It was, after all, the first weekend of February. 😊



Packsaddle Mountain is an historic site on private lands in the Texas Hill Country. It peaks at approximately 400 feet above a hay field LZ and is a favorite foot launch site in Texas, known for its ridge soaring activity. Packsaddle Mountain is managed by the Austin Free Flight Association under contract with the land owner.

We drove with an anticipation of watching hang gliders for a better part of the day due to relatively high winds. We envisioned them zipping around and traversing the hill, as we watched and hoped the winds would settle down to allow us paragliders to join in on the day's fun. To our surprise, an updated weather forecast reported L&V (light and variable). This prompted us to check the local-area AWOS (automated weather observing system) for a second opinion. It reported 0 mph winds. As we headed off the highway and down a back country road, Pack came into view. We noticed the air was clear of pilots, and saw two people hanging out on the hang glider ramp.

As we approached the locked gate at the property entry point, we came across two hang glider pilots. Paul stopped the vehicle, got out and walked over to talk a few minutes. They discussed the flights already flown that day and noted the pilots had taken some sled rides. We were all hoping for a better round of winds that afternoon. As we were sitting at the gate, we received a

phone call from a pilot-in-waiting at the top of Pack. He provided us with a real-time on-site weather report. Thermal cycles were just starting to come through. Wow – what timing!

As we approached the launch area atop Pack, we met up with Mike Wykoff from San Antonio. When asked what he thought about the expectations of the day, he stated “It looks like it’s going to be awesome!” With an enthusiastic smile and a laugh, it was obvious he was excited to be there for his first flight off Pack for the 2008 flying season.



Dave Hayner, hang glider pilot

At 2:40 pm, winds on Pack were coming in at 13-15 mph. This brought two of our hang glider pilots out to test their skills. Dave Hayner and Gary Morris launched off the ramp, and we witnessed a couple of nice flights. They had limited air time, but they were happy to be flying again! Gary Morris reported that the thermals were good enough for a couple of passes on the ridge and said, “...so I was happy.”

These winds also brought Paul Greenwood out to play with his paraglider, awaiting an 8-10 mph cycle to launch at about 3:00 pm. During his hour-plus flight, he thermalled up to 1,020 feet above launch and played back and forth and across the hill as if it were his own personal play toy. He pulled off some flying that most on-lookers only wish they could do. The rest of us paragliders sat back, relaxed, and watched Paul for a while... then Mike Wykoff decided it was time for him to join Paul in flight (Mike was Paul’s first student and sign-off as an instructor). Soon after, another hang glider pilot, Robin Rogers, took his first flight off Pack for the year... and he did it with his brand new wing! He was proud to show it off, and made a short, nice flight.



*Paul Greenwood
USHPA Paragliding Instructor
Co-founder, Paraglide Texas*



Mike Wykoff

As the day progressed, the winds picked up to 15-22 mph, and they remained with us for a better part of the afternoon. As the flying day looked like it may soon fade away, the winds began to settle down. As they approached 8-12 mph cycles, the paraglider pilots prepared for flight. First was Mike Wykoff launching about 6:00 pm. He began to soar the ridge as we prepared more pilots for launch. I soon followed, joining Mike in the hill’s buoyant air. It was smooth, and we were able to maneuver our wings across the full breadth of the

southerly-facing ridge. We flew a short while, and welcomed Dan Bishop as he joined us. We were able to work our way to 210 feet over launch and enjoy a view of the Texas Hill Country that included three major lakes in the Highland Lakes chain. On one of my passes back across the launch area, I noticed Amy Tomko winging up.

In no time, we had four paraglider pilots enjoying the air Pack provided as our playground. Our flights ranged from 15-35 minutes, and we all witnessed yet another beautiful sunset that Pack had to offer!

Mike Wykoff chuckled a little in appreciation of all Pack had to offer on that day, "It was nice to get four of us up in the air at once... super-smooth air."

Video of this day is at:

<http://youtube.com/watch?v=ttq-zfcBWDM>



Amy, Mike, Dan & Gary closing out the flying day

Dan Bishop noted that he was glad to be "back in the saddle again." As for me, I think I speak for all Pack pilots when I say "we eagerly await many more flying days a Pack this year." And as for Paul Greenwood, I'm sure he was gleaming with pride knowing that two of his recent students (Mike and Dan) helped "lead the pack at Pack" this year!

To close out the flying day, six of us made our way to a Mexican food restaurant just up the road. There were five paragliders and a hang glider. We shared our stories, checked out our videos and pictures we'd taken throughout the day, and enjoyed a great dinner with an awesome group of friends. Amy Tomko summed up the day with one simple but very defining word, "Awesome."



*Gary Leach
Co-founder, Paraglide Texas
2008 President of the Austin Free Flight Association*