

# ONTARGET

BY PAT CANNON

## The Role of the Crew Chief

**B**ack in the first article of this series, I touched on the roll of the crew chief in competition. In this article, I am going to expand on the idea and outline the responsibilities that you, your crew chief and your crew commit to.

First, let's make a general statement that I believe to be true. If you ever want to win a national championship, you will need a crew chief with the same drive and goal setting that you have. That individual will have to know almost as much as you know about maps, GPS, and rules. It will likely take a long time to nurture the learning that will take place, so now is as good a time as any to get started.

Do you remember when I said it takes commitment to win. That means on the part of your crew chief as well. They are going to feel your same feelings of frustration and panic when things don't go as planned. They will share your elation and joy when they do. The key is, as you simultaneously share these same emotions, you are beginning to be in total sync. It will take that to do well.

Let's start with map preparation. My wife/crew chief, will be right there at my side when we are preparing maps. She colors roads, is familiar with the PZ structure, knows where the power lines are. She is with me when we choose goals and has an opinion about the quality of goals. Her description of the goal area is as much for her benefit as for mine. The next time she sees it, it might be in the middle of a four part task with wind in the ten knot range. She needs to be able to recognize that goal's features and know where I will approach from in order to do her job, which is to help me acquire it from the air.

She is knowledgeable of the goal list, knows the goal numbering system, and has visited every goal with me in the chase vehicle. This also means that she has familiarized herself with the road structure and can navigate around the map with a sense of direction. She will have the help of a navigator as well, who has also driven the roads. That combination will get her to the goal fast. Why? Lose a baggie sometime to a passing pedestrian, because your crew is still looking for the goal, or has made a wrong turn. That comes

under the heading of a technical mistake and can cost you the competition. In terms of division of duties, this area is pretty much mutual. Each of you has the same responsibility for familiarity with the structure of the road, terrain, and goal system that you have chosen to use.

Next, let's go to the briefing. We start with the master briefing. This is where you have the chance to ask questions regarding the rules, either those written, or those that pertain to a particular flying area. Take notes. Make the changes to the rules, in the rule book. Put clarifications in the rule book. This is where I let her do the writing, since any thing I write will probably not be decipherable by common man, not even an extraordinary crew chief.

It is at this point that we begin to separate some of the duties that we will have during each briefing. It is this division of duties that keeps it all orderly when you and the other 99 pilots and crew chiefs are rushing the door at the end of the briefing. Here are a few of the responsibilities as we delegate them.

**Weather** - It is my responsibility to write down the pibal winds or to check them against earlier pibal or forecast wind trends. I concentrate on the wind's relationship to the lineup of goals and targets.

**Task sheet** - My crew chief is responsible for reading the detail in each of the areas of the task sheet for rule application and subtle variation. I look at, and read the task sheet as well, but she checks it for completeness and for items like the gravity drop rule. That's a good one that will cost you big time if you miss it. She pulls the rule book out and actually reads the a,b,c's to make sure we understand them.

**Markers** - During the master briefing, it will be determined how your marker must be identified. Is your observer required to sign the tail? Do you have to sign the tail? Does your name have to appear on the tail, or just the number? All important to the outcome and this is my crew chief's job, She has always been responsible for the markers and we have never been penalized for forgetting a signature or proper ID.

OK, briefing is over and we are in the chase



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vehicle. She drives, I sit on the passenger side with my map and navigate. At this point, our navigator is looking over my shoulder. They really need to know where we are going and probably have their own map in the back seat. If they lose orientation during the drive out, we are really in trouble. We always have special driving maps in the car, all marked with the goals for orientation.

During lay out and inflation, my crew chief is placing the markers in my basket corner pouch in the order in which they will be used. After inflation, she checks the order and if the first one needs to be marked for a following Pilot Declared Goal, the tail is clipped to the board.

At this time, she has already placed the radio, GPS, task sheet, weather, diagrams and drinking water, in the basket, while I am preparing for lift off. Now, here comes the final touch. Prior to liftoff, she calls all the items off, and I verify. Again, we have never been penalized for any of this.

During the chase, (well, it's not really a chase, because she is out ahead of me all the time) she will have the navigator take her via the most expeditious way, to the first goal that the observer will need to measure. She doesn't really care where I am, because if I don't tell her that I am off course, she expects me to show up somewhere near the goal. A crew that follows the path of the balloon, will not be where they

need to be when the marker is dropped.

If we are using GPS in the vehicle, she and the navigator will verify the goal number and confirm their location by goal number. She will communicate the location to me and provide me with landmarks, other balloon proximity, and will signal me if necessary with our halogen beam. If we need a pibal at the goal, she can put one up and read it just as well as I can for the first five hundred feet.

I know of at least one crew chief that puts her whole crew in day glow orange vests and lines them up on the final approach wind line. How's that for guiding the pilot in to the goal? The crew chief's familiarity with the pilot's flying style makes it a lot easier for them to provide the pilot with information that will assist in lining up with the goal.

In short, the crew chief stays ahead of the game and that takes a huge burden off of the pilot while flying. I never, ever worry about how the crew is doing and whether the observer will be where he or she needs to be to observe the mark. Carol, my lovely crew chief will agree with me when I say that she runs the ground side and I run the flight side. That division of duties has produced an optimum level of performance and substantially reduces the work load on the pilot. Result!! No technicals, less flying mistakes.

