

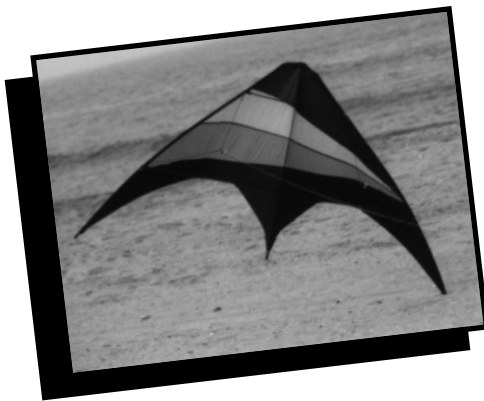
SPORTKITE

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The Simmons Signature

An interview with Mike and Dawn Simmons, designers of one of the most radical sport kites, the Tracer.

Who are the people behind products that set standards in sport kite design today? People with a passion for kiting, willing to expend a great amount of time and energy like Mike and Dawn Simmons of Skyward Kites. They both have certainly made sacrifices to make their mark in the industry and well deserve the recognition. What took us by surprise was that they are also sending a very strong and important message to the kite industry as a whole. They believe that we need to think long term if we are going to see a defined future in sport kiting—a way of thinking that involves everyone, from the manufacturer to the retailer to the flier. Sportkite News agrees. We have to take care of the family. Our kiting family. We reached Mike and Dawn by phone in Sunrise, Florida to discuss how they got started and where they're going.

Did both you and Dawn get into kiting together?

Well, she liked to go and lay out on the beach, but I had to be doing

something. I saw a sport kite for the first time in Galveston. Dawn bought me one, and I started out flying it on the beach. Then one day I saw this guy flying a Top-of-the-Line Spin off. That was the first delta kite I'd seen. So I walked over and watched him fly for awhile. He said, "Hey you want to try it?" As soon as I put that kite in my hands, the bug bit me. A few months later we felt that if we wanted to stay in this and enjoy it, we should make a business out of it.

So you saw this as a business opportunity very early on?

As soon I picked up that kite, I knew this was something that had a big future. I wanted to be a mover and a shaker in it and decided to make some kites for myself. While this was going on, the company I was working for was shutting down and relocating to Texas. I told Dawn that I'll get another job as soon as I finish building several kites for the handful of customers I had. But from that point on, I never caught up making kites for people. It just snowballed from there. *(cont. on pg 3)*

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VOICE IN THE SKY

Some people say that competition takes the fun out of things. I would like to share a bit of my own experiences about that.

Flying in sport kite competitions in the Eastern League has brought out the best in my flying. (Sportkite News will do an exclusive inside look at what the League is all about in an upcoming issue.) Sure, winning is great, but sometimes your name doesn't appear in the top three. It's human nature to complain and feel like your talents weren't acknowledged. As in any sport that's judged creatively, there will always be differences of opinion, and therefore disappointments. As we saw with Nancy Kerrigan's performance at the 1994 Winter Olympics, anyone watching knew she gave a Gold Medal performance. Sports history tells us otherwise.

I've made some terrific friends going to sport kite competitions. And when

I see people who have worked hard receive an award, I celebrate with them. It's part of the spirit. We're not just competitors—we're blue-collar, white-collar, husbands, wives, but most of all friends that share the sky.

Flying your best to a piece of music that hopefully will transcend the graphite, nylon and tricks, can bridge your soul to the audience and make them feel like they're flying with you. The competitor becomes a communicator. This is what I feel brings out the best in the sport and in the individuals who compete. Fly true to your heart and others will truly see your mark in the sky.

Gilbert Velazquez

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Was that the beginning of Skyward Kites?

Yes it was. When I was first starting out the man who really helped me was Cris Batdorff of the former Stunt Kite Quarterly magazine. He introduced me to the Fire Dart which was made by Action Kites. Well, I saw that some improvements could be made and created a kite that I called the Sky Hawk. Being new in the business I didn't realize that this was knocking off someone else's product and that's not the way to do business. So I stopped making that kite. I feel that if you go into business you should do your own thing. So I sat down and designed my own kite from top to bottom. My first kite was the NLK (Nice Little Kite) and then I came up with the NBK (Nice Big Kite) and then the RBK (Really Big Kite) which was a 17 foot sport kite. We had the backing of Cris and Stunt Kite Quarterly which helped to give us a reputation in the industry.

What lead up to the development of the Tracer?

Let me talk about Cris Batdorff again. He gave me a lot of insight on kiting from a technical standpoint as well as his knowledge of all of the kites that were out there. He would help me out by showing me new ideas. Most people were just flying around and doing routine things in the wind window; we wanted to come up with something that could do ground work [radical maneuvering of the kite close to ground level]. The word started getting out and soon other kite companies were attempting the same thing. So with Cris's help and my ability to picture how the air interacts with the sail, we were able to design a kite that did ground work. Then a new kite came out into the market that took everybody by storm, and that was of course the Big Brother (Julian Wolfe Patrick-Made in France). I saw the attributes that made that kite do what it did best and also examined the Lee Sedgwick

Spectrum Dart. So I took a look at my NBK and the other two kites I just mentioned and from these three I utilized the best attributes that I figured out and racked it up into one kite.

Where did the concept of the cambered leading edge come from?

The Big Brother was the first kite to utilize the cambered leading edge with popularity. There were others in the past, but the Big Brother was the first to work in conjunction with the sail design. What we wanted to do with the Tracer was to create something solid that would fly the way the flier wanted it to. And the only way to do that was to come up with the active tension frame.

You mean the use of the leech line in the trailing edge?

Yes. A lot of people in the past would just design a kite so that the wind would hit it and shoot out the bottom edge to make it go forward. Then they would make some adjustments to make it turn a little better. What we wanted to do was to make the wind do something with the kite because that was what the Big Brother did. We wanted to produce a sport kite that takes the wind, manipulates it and then dumps the air out of the sail when the flier wants to.

So when you had the prototype of the Tracer out on the field, did you know you were onto something hot?

It was the strangest thing. I took it out and was trying to fly it. It must of took me around seven or eight months just to work out the bridling. I had the kite and frame ready. Just looking at it I knew it had to work. So we knew from that point on that bridling was going to do the trick. We have a certain way of balancing our kites. So once we got it the way I liked it, I just kept on messing with the bridle until I finally got the right combination. Then the

day it finally flew right, we knew we had something that was going to take off and get attention. The first time I took the Tracer out in competition was at Jekyll Island, Georgia in 1991. Once I saw the positive response that it got, we knew it was going to be a real mover in the sport kite industry.

Later it got to a point where I could not keep up with production. The demand was just too great. By that time I was negotiating with Skynasaur. They were looking for something more marketable, something that would get them into the higher end kite market. So we agreed on a contract where they produce the kites for me. The Signature Series [Tracer, Trixter, Tracker and Trooper] will always be mine, and I still have quality control which is very important.

How do you maintain quality control without having to go out to the Skynasaur manufacturing plant in Colorado?

I have a program where I'll contact several shops around the country and ask them to send me a sample of my kites. That way I get to see exactly what the shops are getting. It's tough to get a company to produce your product exactly as you would like it.

So how is it working out with Skynasaur?

Things are working out very well with Skynasaur. They realize that quality was the thing that made my kite and my name well known in the industry. Quality is what will keep them on top.

Everyone of my Signature Series kites has my name on it. People can call me if they have a problem with the kite. If I can help you on the phone, I will. Believe me, we get phone calls two or three o'clock in the morning from people with questions on my product. We feel we have the best performing product out there today.

Are there any new plans on the drawing board?

We're working on an indoor kite that is going to be something totally different. We're waiting until we're ready to go into production before unveiling it next year to avoid knock offs.

Do you feel the industry has reached a peak as far as sport kite design goes?

I felt that way when I had the NBK and I now feel that way with the Signature Series. But there will always be changes in materials. Unfortunately I don't see a long term future in the sport kite market unless we stop the practice of knocking off other people's products. In addition, we have to take a serious look at event organization from the view point of the Europeans. Skyward Kites is now looking into the single-line kite market. We're not going to put all of our eggs in one basket.

So you're branching out?

We're doing everything we can to broaden the visibility of kiting. We helped put together a show at Disney World here in Florida. We did the commercial with Spike Lee for Levi's, which all started by us writing Levi's and explaining to them what sport kiting was all about. So a commercial was done showing a groups of kids on the beach flying sport kites by Skyward Kites. We're currently in the process of negotiating with Cypress Gardens and Anheuser Busch. We're going to be designing kites for them for promotional use.

What is your feeling on where the sport kite manufacturing industry has been and where it's going?

My feelings on the kite industry is that the price is never going to get low enough to where it should be as long as there are people out there knocking off other people's work. This is just not going to help the industry grow. It's a snowball

effect. A company like us should be able to offer, at retail, a graphite Tracer with lines, handles, and winder ready to go for \$100. But the only way to offer this at that price is to get the quantity out. We can't get the quantity out because there are people knocking off kites. Even some shops and some magazines are promoting this kind of practice, which in turn is taking money out of the kite company's pocket and prevents them from offering their product at a lower price. Everybody will end up making fewer kites which will hurt the industry as a whole. This is going to take cooperation from the shops and the fliers. That's where the Trooper, Trixter and Tracker come from. We're trying our best to offer the flight quality of the Tracer at a lower price.

How do we ensure a future in this sport?

There are two things that need to happen to ensure a long term future in sport kiting. First, there has to be cooperation between the shops and the buyers to stop the knock offs. Sure you might be able to get something close to an original for a little less money, but we're going to have to bite the bullet. We have to offer a product that people can afford. Two hundred dollars is just too much for a kite.

Second, we have to get more people involved in kiting by way of the festival approach as opposed to the competitions. Last year in Europe we saw what the kite industry is capable of. Sport kites are fantastic and that's my forte and how I got started in the industry, there is an entire industry out there in just kiting. Dawn and I have spent a lot of time in Europe being exposed to the way they do kite festivals. Single-line kites take precedence over there. The sport kite market is as big over there as it is here. But the largest market is the single-line fliers. This is where people have the opportunity to make and fly their own kites. Single liners can fly

when sport kites can't. They take up less room and you don't have to have someone at the controls at all times. The sky is decorated more and that's what attracts the most people.

What we're trying to do is to get more people interested, create more enthusiasm. And you do that by having something up in the sky at all times. The smallest event we went to in Europe had an attendance of about 80,000 people. You have to get the entire industry involved, sport kite fliers and single line fliers. The people were there to see the entire kite festival not just the competitions. Sure the sport kites provided some of the flash for the event, but the majority of the crowds were there to see the single liners. They had kite building classes for over 2,000 kids. Each and every one of them is a potential kite flier whether it's a single line or dual line that they will get into.

If you notice, a lot of the old timers in the kite industry, meaning the big name fliers, are very well known because they hit all of the festivals overseas. They go to places where they can enjoy the sport. I see them everytime I go overseas. People like Pete Dolphin, Fran Gramkowski and Robbi Sugarman. They have found out that there is a fun part of it all.

I noticed at the 1994 East Coast Championships in Wildwood New Jersey, there was a large exhibition of single-line kites. Even at the 1993 Newport Rhode Island Sport Kite competition they had a beautiful display. I guess this is the trend now.

That's right. Last year we had Roger Chewing of Sky Festivals come with us to Europe. So that's the direction we're taking here in the States. It makes you appreciate both aspects of kiting when you see them combined, as opposed to alienating sport flyers from single liners. You can make a full package for people to enjoy.

What about sponsorships in the industry, any feelings on that?

This is something that I brought up when I first came into the industry at one of the KTA (Kite Trade Association) meetings. At many of the events being put together, people are not looking long term at this. We've had a lot of big corporate sponsors come into these festivals. And I've personally seen only one person ever give a corporate sponsor their money's worth. If a sponsor comes with several thousand dollars for a festival, they should have a field with their name totally around it. Their names should be above the sound tent. You as the spectator or participant should know who the sponsors are. Lacking this approach, we have a lot of one-time corporate sponsors. And that's killing us. It's a tough situation because to put together a

sport kite competition you need every penny you can get, whether it's to pay for the judges, fees, the sound system, or the supplies. But somebody, somewhere is going to have to bite the bullet and give corporate sponsors their money's worth.

I'm currently negotiating with Ocean Spray and Harley Davidson for the 1995 Daytona Kite Festival. I want to do everything that I can to give them the coverage they deserve. I would like to have Bob Anderson [West coast single line builder/flyer] fly his new kite off of a Harley Davidson if they would be willing to donate a Harley.

What new kite?

Bob is currently building a single line kite that will be three times larger than the Space Shuttle. What

I would like to show is his kite lifting a Harley off the ground. Now that'll get attention!

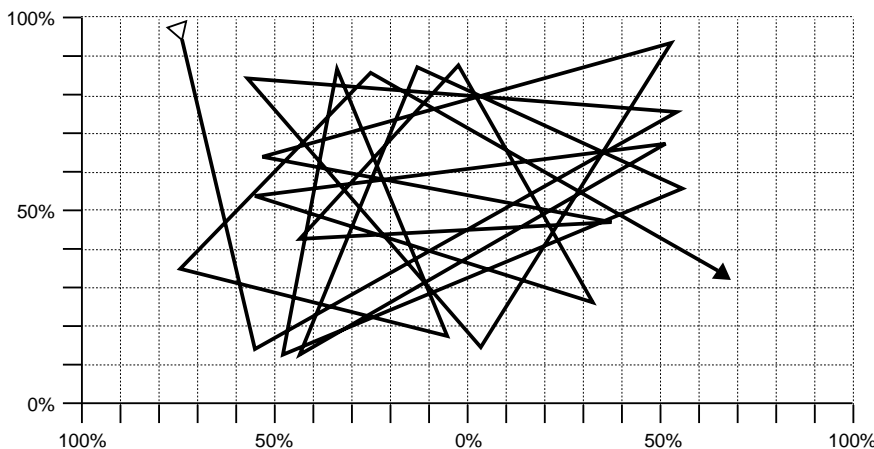
Any closing thoughts on corporate sponsorship?

Event organizers have to think creatively to make it work. If you watch beach volleyball you know who the sponsors are. There were many times when we could have gotten beer sponsors, but you have to think of the other side of that, especially if you want to keep it family oriented.



SKYWRITING

COMPULSORY FIGURE 1027



The judges will be looking for consistent speed and clear crisp corners.

Warning: This maneuver may be hazardous to your health.

[Editor's note: Cartoon was provided by George E. Preston of Mount Clemens, MI. George's son, Greg Preston, is an Intermediate class competitor and judge on the Eastern League. He is also a member of the Monmouth Ocean County Kitefliers club of New Jersey. Look for more of George Preston's work in upcoming issues.]

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- July 23 & 24
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Newport, RI
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- August 20 & 21
New York Stunt Kite Championships
Uniondale, NY
203-531-1084
- September 10 & 11
Sandy Hook Stunt Kite Championships
Sandy Hook, NJ (Location may change. Please call 908-280-8084 for updated information.)
- September 24
Belmar Kite Festival
Belmar, NJ
908-280-8084
- September 21-25
Sunfest
Ocean City, MD
401-289-7855
- October 8 & 9
Outer Banks Stunt Kite Competition
Nags Head, NC
919-441-4124
- October 8-9
Wildwood Int'l Power Exhibit
Wildwood, NJ
215-736-3715
- October 12-16
AKA 1994 Convention
Wildwood, NJ
800-252-2550

Vary your vinyls

With a little of experimentation you can either cut down on some unnecessary weight or create a much smoother leading edge on your sport kite.

First, let's discuss the weight issue. An overlooked part of our sport kite is the weight of those leading edge connectors. Try shaving off one third to one half of the length without sac-

rificing their holding strength for the top and bottom spreaders (fig 1).

Another option would be to replace your existing connectors with foam pen holders (found in an office supply store). These work great on the wrapped graphite rods made by Advantage™ and SkyShark™ (fig 2). Use these only for indoor or extreme low wind flying.

Second, streamline your connectors for better performance. Most vinyl connectors supplied with your sport kite can be turned around and attached to the leading edge spar as shown in figure 3. This prevents your flying lines and bridle from getting hung up on the leading edge connectors when doing aerial flip overs, turtles and axle rolls.

Fig 1. Shaving off weight on your vinyls

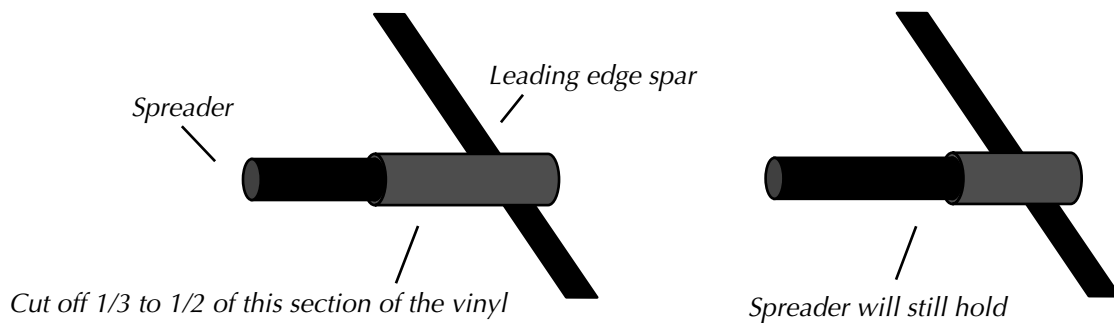


Fig 2. Using foam pen holders as a leading edge connector (indoor, low wind use only)

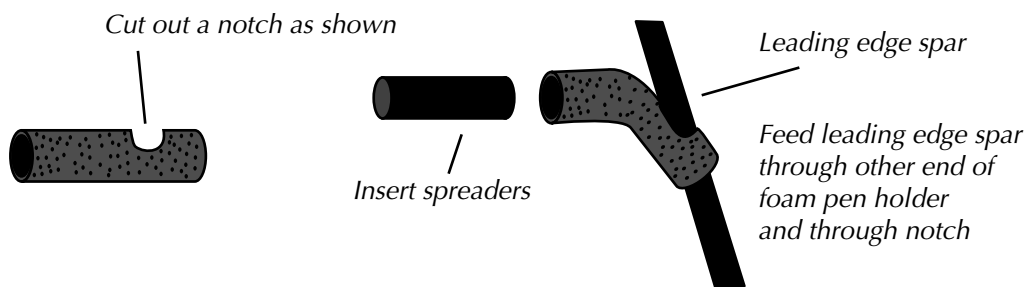
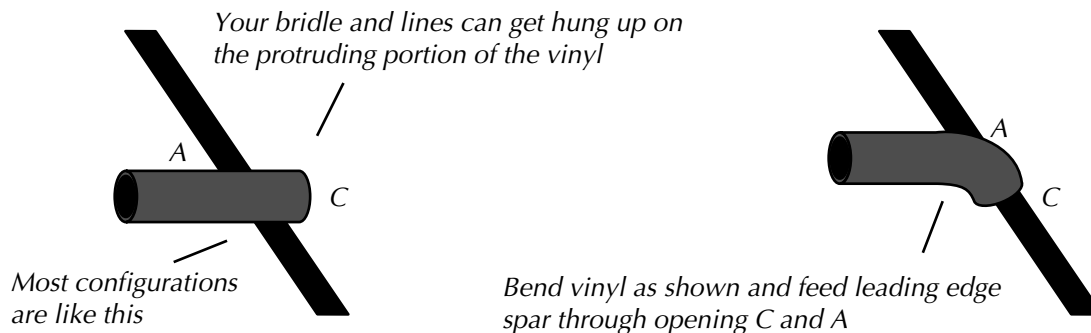


Fig 3. Turning your vinyl connectors around for a smoother leading edge



Working with your wind window

In the last issue of *Sportkite News* we talked about how your position relative to the kite will have an effect on the flight characteristics of your kite. What we want to show you here is that you can change the individual zones of the wind window. By simply moving in a lateral fashion what was the power zone can now be changed into the edge of the window. Depending upon the strength of the wind, this will either be a quick and easy thing to do in light winds, or a bit of a physical effort on the part of the flyer in medium to high winds. The length of your flying lines will also be

important. Shorter lines will enable you to switch your wind window zones more quickly than flying on longer lines.

Should you have your kite down on the ground in the power zone of your current wind window, you may have difficulty relaunching it. What you want to do is move to the right. This accomplishes two things. First, it now changes your wind window relative to your kite on the ground. What used to be the power zone is now your left edge. Second, this allows you to do an easy leading edge launch from the left edge of your new wind window (fig 1).

Figure 2 takes it the other way. Lets say your flying in your left edge doing some graceful moves. While your performing such maneuvers you may want to gain speed and climb much quicker than if you were to fly back into your power zone. If you were to move to your left as you're flying what was your left edge now becomes your new power zone.

Understanding this concept will help you have better control over your kite in any wind situation.

Experiment and fly safe.

Fig 1. Moving your old power zone into your new left edge.

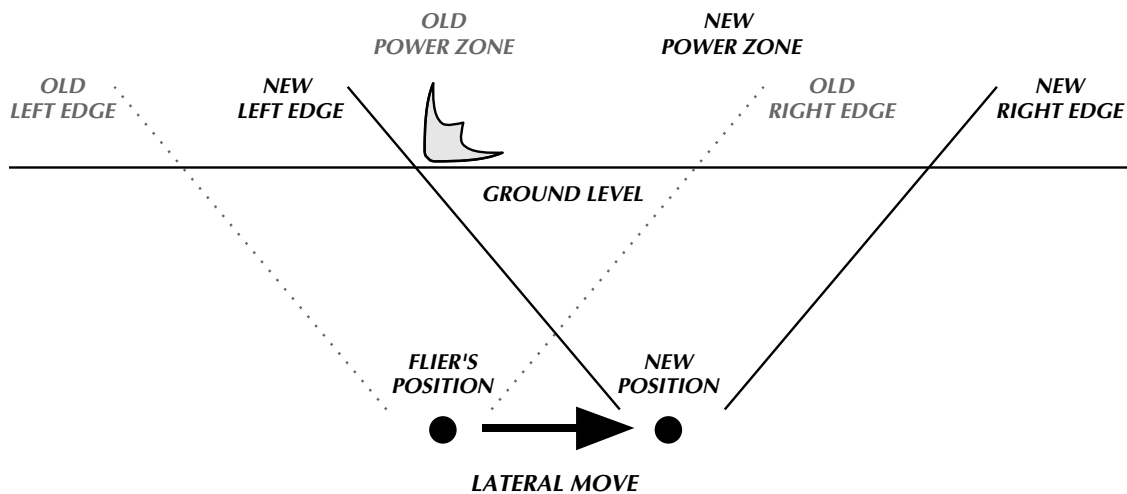
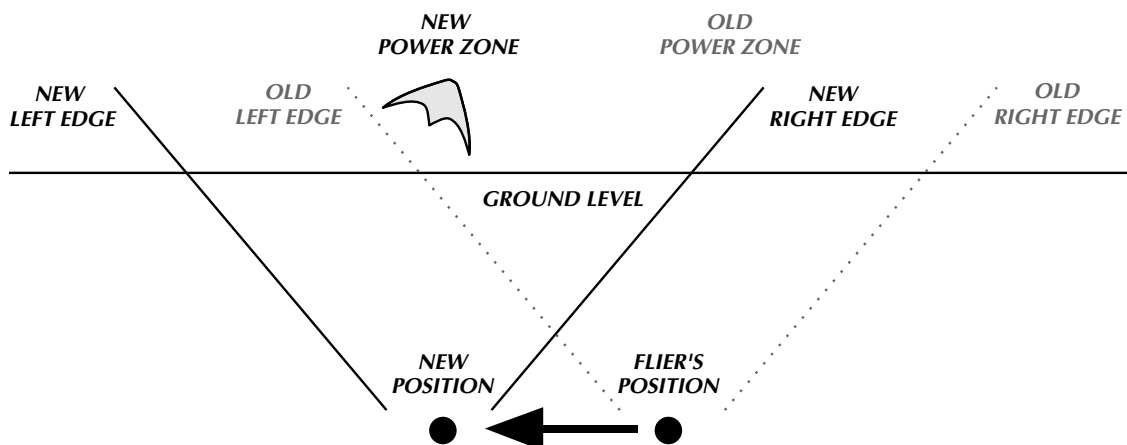


Fig 2. Moving your old left edge into your new power zone



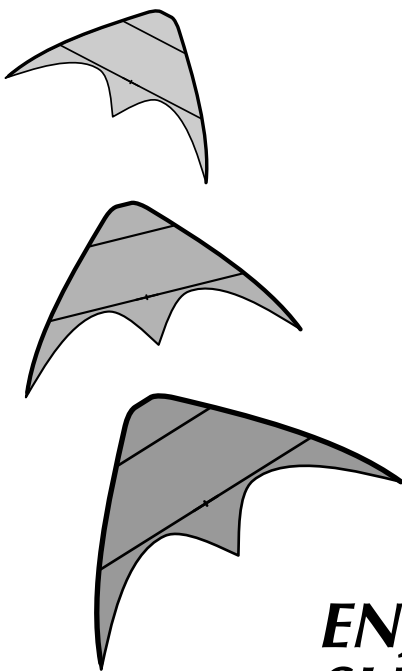
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