

PILOT SPOTLIGHT: LEAH CATULLO

BY LIZ DENGLER

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I'm originally from Chicago but now live in Stuart, Florida. I fly at home the most, but I like to say I fly the planet. But I have beautiful terrain to fly at home and an LZ just four miles from my house.

Typically, when I'm home, I focus on my job as a primary care nurse practitioner, and I usually travel to fly. I typically travel wherever Ozone wants me to go, which gives me some direction and often gets me flying new and interesting places.

I first heard about paramotoring from a friend way back in the day. But it was about ten years later before I started looking into training. I was directed toward Eric DuFour, who happened to be near my home.

When I decided to go for it, I was smack dab in on my master's program. With my clinical rotations looming, I figured I should try to complete my training before I ran out of time. It was a lot of work to do it all. In the afternoons, when we took a break from training, I would write a paper or do some schoolwork.

I've been flying for about seven years. Honestly, I scared a lot of people in the beginning because I progressed so quickly. When I pick up a new sport, I tend to get after it. I have a lot of experience in other

adventure sports and have progressed the same way, which some folks don't understand. Within my first year, I was doing big wingovers and SATs. It freaked many people out, but my progression was based on Eric's instruction and mentorship. I wasn't just winging it; it was thought out and calculated.

I like having goals and something to work on while flying. It's one of the many reasons I started acro. I'm heading to Turkey to get more practice. You have to be 100% on your tricks in free flight before doing anything on motor; otherwise, the messes are bigger.

By far, Iceland it's the most inspiring landscape I've ever seen. Every day I flew over there was my best flight ever. One day, we found this little canyon to fly, and we ended up lapping it, slowly getting deeper and deeper into the canyon. You have to move into it slowly to familiarize yourself with the terrain and obstacles. The last flight we had on that trip was sunny and perfect weather. We flew over Diamond Beach and icebergs, which was stunning and unforgettable.

Witnessing the shark migration at Jupiter Island, Florida, was another memorable flight. I was flying quite high and saw a massive school of sharks which is typical for the shark



migration time. However, from above, it looked like there was a huge school of fish balled up in the middle of the sharks. When I got lower, I saw it was actually a ball of sharks penned in by other sharks, including a bunch of hammerheads. In all, it was probably 10,000 sharks in this one spot!

When I'm not flying, I love riding my enduro motorcycle. I ride a 501 Husqvarna; it's a lot of bike, but it suits my needs. I like to get out and do adventure rides, but I'll do harder and more technical stuff for practice.

Over the next five years, I'll keep trying to motivate people, one by one, to get into competition and stay motivated. As the chair of the Competition Committee, I see my role as trying to keep people going. I've found that many people want to come to play around with the pylons but don't recognize the amount of work that goes into competing.

As the Competition Committee Chair, my job is not necessarily to compete but to support pilots who want to. Do I see myself doing competitions? Yes, always, but I don't want to be the sole person representing the U.S. For other motivated pilots who want to give it a go, I can help get licenses and plan the travel for events. I'm always happy to travel with other pilots to support them.

Some people feel that international competitions aren't worth the hassle and money. You travel across the world, fly for 15 minutes, and hopefully win. Many people want to try it on U.S. soil first, but we often face funding issues.

Some U.S. pilots are trying to assemble a new motocross-style race (over water for safety purposes). A problem with many competitions is a need for spectators, and this new motocross style would make that more possible. We're working on coming up with a plan to make it safe.

If I had to have a sales pitch for competitions, it would be "Everybody's invited." We need more people to compete, and I am happy to help you figure out how to do it!

If I could change one thing in our sport, I would want more oversight over education and training. New pilots must learn proper techniques and understand the risks. Unfortunately, any unlicensed or inexperienced pilot can post online



Pilots:
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Photo by:
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and make videos offering advice (which isn't always helpful or safe).

The last time I was in Salt Lake, I had a conversation with a free flight friend that changed how I look at many things in our sports. I realized that some people in this industry are not always on point and don't take safety and training seriously. Not every mentor is wise, and I've done a bit of thinking and reorganizing my priorities around this.

Continuing education, especially for mentors and instructors, should be mandatory. I want better safety and education. Not everyone needs to be an instructor to meaningfully impact another pilot's experience. Some people are meant to be mentors.

Maybe it's cliché, but my PPG bucket list is that I want to fly the world. But I don't want to fly the world in the usual

sense that most people have seen. I want to fly the natural places that are true adventures, where if the motor goes out, getting out of there is also an adventure. I flew the pyramids in Egypt, and that was incredible and a super impressive flight, but I'm much more drawn to all the natural landscapes, like giant waterfalls or a remote beach town in Ghana.

The best mistake I ever made in paramotoring was doing my first stalls while on motor (instead of free flight) and not on radio. That was a mistake, which taught me a lot about what not to do in this sport. It gave me a newfound safety sense, and I dialed it back a little. It did take a toll on my progress in some ways, but stalling on a motor didn't ruin me. It just made me realize safety is number one. If I want to keep doing this, I have to be safe.