



## Katrin Senne reports from the 2020 Helli Lasch Challenge



World champion glider pilots enjoyed a week at Motse Lodge in Tswalu, South Africa

**H**EAVEN on earth! This is how every glider pilot would describe the Helli Lasch Challenge...

Located in the Kalahari in the northwestern part of South Africa, three hours' drive west of Vryburg and one hour's drive south of the Botswana border, Tswalu is the largest privately-owned nature reserve in South Africa, extending over 140,000 hectares.

Tswalu is a labour of love for the Oppenheimer family, who took responsibility for this remarkable reserve in 1998, continuing the vision of the late Stephen Boler, from Manchester in the United Kingdom, whose dream it was to return this previously farmed land to its natural state. Since then, their commitment to conservation has seen indigenous species reintroduced and real strides made towards the restoration of the Kalahari, undoing of years of neglect. In its new incarnation as a private nature reserve and conservation success story, Tswalu

is bringing the Oppenheimer's ultimate ambition of "leaving the world better than we found it" a little closer each day.

This prestigious gliding challenge was introduced in 2001 by Carol Clifford and the Oppenheimer family as a living memorial to Helli Lasch, Nicky Oppenheimer's late father-in-law. The aim of the challenge is to promote international gliding relations, and South Africa as a glider destination, while developing the capabilities of the South African gliding team.

This year was the ninth time the Oppenheimer family has invited some of the best glider pilots in the world, with their partners, to this exclusive Kalahari lodge.

Well-known names, such as Andy Davis, Sebastian Kawa, Michael Sommer, Louis Boudierlique and Wolfgang Janowitsch, to name just a few of the very best, have been among the pilots previously invited to Tswalu to enjoy a luxurious nine-day glider pilot's

dream of a lifetime! The most exquisite food and five-star lodging is not the only item in this package. Travel expenses, cars, gliders, aerotows, helpers... everything is sponsored by the Oppenheimer family. The invited champions have the times of their lives, and unselfishly share their knowledge and experience in the form of daily lectures and workshops with the South African team and fellow pilots.

The first challenge was held in 2003, inspired by the 2001 World Gliding Championships held in Mmabatho, South Africa, and it has been held every two years since then.

But who was Helli Lasch? Helli was born in Germany, in 1912, to a family that had run a large and successful machine-tool business. He came to South Africa in 1932 to gain some experience before taking over the family business. After getting to know Orcillia, getting married and facing war in Europe, he stayed and started his own business in Johannesburg. The two had three daughters. In 1968, the eldest daughter, Strilli, married Nicky Oppenheimer of the Anglo American mining company and former owner of De Beers. Nicky and Strilli had one son, Jonathan, who is following in the business footsteps of his father.

#### Aviation fanatics

Nicky and Jonathan are both aviation fanatics and exceptional pilots. Both fly their impressive Augusta AW139 helicopter, which they use for many private applications and even game counting at Tswalu. Jonathan also has a love for fast jets and spends almost half of his life as P1 in his personal Global 6000.

Helli started gliding in Bern, Switzerland, in 1947. On the fifth day of his entry-level course, he completed his first solo flight in a Grunau Baby. Sixteen days later he had completed his Silver C with a DFS Olympia Meise and a Spalinger S18. Highly inspired, he flew in the South African National Gliding Rallies in January 1948 and December 1948 and won the second event in a Minimoa. In 1950 he took part in the World Gliding Championships in Örebro, Sweden, with an Air100.

While he was on a business trip to Berlin, Helli took an opportunity to look at the SB6 of Akaflieg Braunschweig, where he met Björn Stender, the man behind the SB6. Helli and Björn spent a day sketching a radically new glider which Helli financed in full – a super high performance 18m glider with full span ailerons and flaps and sleek composite construction. It first flew in 1962, two years



Katrin Senne with Jonathan Oppenheimer (centre) and Uys Jonker

before the D-36 designed by the legendary team of Friess, Lemke, Waibel and Holighaus. While Helli revelled in flying his BS-1, he had to bail out following an unfortunate inflight wing failure in 1967. Orcillia ordered an H-301 Libelle to replace the BS-1 and, at Helli's request, Porsche supplied Glasflügel with the leather for the cockpit, so that it matched the latest in Helli's taste for sports cars. In 1982 Helli acquired a DG-400, in which he died on approach to land at Parys.

Helli preferred to fly long distances and liked to be the "lonely eagle". Instead of "goldfish bowl flying", he set goals that tested both man and machine. He was very successful in many things and did everything with a distinctive sense of humour and eccentric style. My father, Klaus Keim, worked for Helli as an engineer in South Africa for a few years, taking care of the "modification" of his gliders. Klaus became friends with Nicky, who had started dating Strilli, and took him for some glider flights – and this was the start of a life-long friendship. At this time Carol Clifford stayed with the Lasches during her visit to South Africa after completing school. Helli has been described as a modern hero who loved extreme things and is a true legend.

On 29 February this year, the international pilots invited to the 2020 Helli Lasch Challenge arrived in Johannesburg, where they were received by event organiser Carol Clifford, the "mother of South African gliding" and for many decades SA team captain. They included Lukasz Grabowski, runner-up in the 15m Class Worlds; Wolfgang Janowitsch, the reigning 18m Class world champion; Sjaak Selen, Standard Class world champion; Felipe Levin, runner-up

**ON THE FIFTH DAY OF HIS ENTRY-LEVEL COURSE, HE COMPLETED HIS FIRST SOLO FLIGHT IN A GRUNAU BABY. SIXTEEN DAYS LATER HE HAD COMPLETED HIS SILVER C**



Gliding legend Helli Lasch set gliding goals that tested both man and machine

## AN OUTLANDING WAS A REAL POSSIBILITY ON SOME DAYS, OVER TERRAIN WITH VERY LITTLE OPEN SPACES AND AIRFIELDS THAT WERE FAR, FAR APART



Unforgettable: a candle-lit dinner under the stars

✧ in the Open Class Worlds; and myself, 2017 women's world champion.

The South African team included Laurens Goudriaan, Attie and Uys Jonker, Nico Le Roux and Dolf Pretorius. This year was very special for a few young upcoming pilots: Jason Adriaan, Michael Tiffin, Phillip and Tienie Jonker, Dicky Daly and Cameron Ireland, who were invited to join the senior pilots for the first four days of the event. Imagine being a junior with the opportunity to fly in two-seaters with the best glider pilots in the world! During the second half of the

week promising seniors, Riaan Denner, Hanno du Toit and Rob Tiffin, joined the training group and my daughter, Eva Senne, was there for the entire week.

Where in the world can you get daily gliding lectures by the top pilots in the world? Daily theory workshops – mental strength, by Wolfgang Janowitsch; AAT correct flying and planning, by Felipe Levin;

and team flying, by Lukasz Grabowski and myself – were presented and discussed.

Training facilitator and former world champion John Coutts gave deeper insight into storm flying, showing why South Africans call him "the storm guru".

There were a number of well-equipped gliders to choose from: a Nimbus 4D, Janus C, two Duo Discuses, two JS1s, two JS3s and an ASG 32 Mi. John Coutts set daily tasks of between 300-600km after a detailed weather briefing, sending young pilots in the two-seaters with experienced pilots.

We started around lunchtime and always did a regatta start, so that we could have a direct comparison of where, who and why some pilots were faster than the others. As a non-flight instructor and pure competition pilot who flies mostly single-seaters, it was astonishing to see the benefit of flying in a two-seater and to pass on knowledge to less experienced pilots. We usually make decisions, like selecting the left or right cloud street, just based on gut feel. If you have to explain this decision, you have to evaluate and analyse your gut feelings. It often becomes much clearer to yourself.

Pilots switched between single and two-seaters to allow students the opportunity to fly with as many different champions as possible. Discussions on board were about which is the next cloud to take, left or right cloud street, how to fly cloud streets efficiently, which speed to fly at, MC setting, which is the best way to fly into the turn point or AAT sector, thermal speeds and bank angle, final approach optimisation... and many other topics.

### Outlanding

Not all the gliders were equipped with sustainers and the weather was not always homogeneous. An outlanding was a real possibility on some days, over terrain with very few open spaces and airfields that were far, far apart! The cloudbases were not the typical South African standard, making flying very interesting – even too interesting on some days for most of the pilots' liking.

With the exception of the 4km tarred runway at Tswalu, finding an outlanding spot in the nature reserve seems impossible from the air. The area is covered with trees and bushes, with no visible open spaces. However, amazingly the crew of the Duo Discus managed an absolutely scratch-free outlanding, 8km from the airfield in the deep, red Kalahari sand. The game drivers helped "track the glider down" making light work of the retrieve. There was clearly a good reason that evening to celebrate!

**F**OR me, gliding is one of the most beautiful hobbies. At the age of 14, I joined the Sindelfingen Air Sports Association and acquired my aeronautical licence at the age of 17. For me, two things are what make gliding so attractive: on the one hand, exploring new landscapes and areas, and, on the other hand, flying beyond your own limits, that of the weather and that of the plane.

In 1991 I moved into Germany's women's national team for the first time. Most of my more than 3,000 hours of gliding (since 1986) have been done in competitions. The big leap was made in 2007: world champion of the 15m Class in Romorantin, France. I repeated this in 2017 in Zbraslavice, Czech Republic. I finished the WGC in Hosin, Czech Republic, in 8th place in the 18m Class after 9 WT in 2nd overall place. In 2020 I got 3rd place at the 18m WWGC in Lake Keepit, Australia.

In 1992 I achieved my first world records in a two-seater with the well-known Italian gliding hero Adele Orsi-Mzazuchelli. My latest world record was flown in 2018 in the 15m Class flying a JS3 over a 300km triangle in Potchefstroom, South Africa.

My whole family is enthusiastic about flying and helps with competitions. I like to fly with my father, Klaus, in our family two-seater ASG 32 Mi. Also with

my daughter, Eva, who also did her first solo flight at the age of 14. I don't just feel good in the 15m racing class – I also like to fly in the 18m Class with my new JS3 Rapture, or in the two-seater class.



■ Katrin Senne is a qualified engineer and Dipl. Betriebsw. She is married and has two sons and a daughter. Katrin has been a representative of Jonker Sailplanes in southern Germany since 2019.

All champions had the opportunity to test fly a JS1 or JS3. Those who hadn't experienced these amazing South African gems before climbed out of the gliders with big grins on their faces. Even Ventus 3 pilot Wolfgang Janowitsch and EB29R pilot Felipe Levin were very excited about the handling and performance of the JS3. Felipe complained, laughingly, that "half of the wing was missing", but truly enjoyed the superb handling the JS3 has to offer.

Every day new culinary delights from the kitchen surprised the guests, presented at ever-changing locations. At times, there was a cosy meal around the pool, then in the "boma" (enclosure) around the open fire or under a large pergola on a long table. But the absolute highlight of the week was after a game drive till sunset; a dinner in the open air on a sand dune with candles and lamps under the most beautiful, sparkling starry sky that you can imagine. Pure romance! It doesn't get any better.

### Unique

"Tswalu – It's Heaven on Earth" will always be remembered by those privileged to experience it. A unique and eventful week – much too short in the end – packed with impressions that you won't be able to forget. Even the weight scales back home will not forget the week so quickly. Every pilot surely managed to increase his wing loading! And on the last evening some participants ended up in the pool fully clothes, wanted or unwanted. How else could we end such an event?

A big thank you is due to the helpers on the ground, Carol Clifford, Martin Lessle and the tow pilots, Rowan Hill, Riaan Denner and Laurens Goudriaan.

In times of COVID-19 and the worldwide shutdown, it is difficult to write about the



impressive and unique experiences we had at the Helli Lasch Challenge 2020. Since this amazing week, the world has tumbled upside-down and is in a state of shock – a bad dream that lies over all life. We can all work together and follow the world's best practices to slow down the spread of COVID-19. We can only hope that this danger can soon be contained and that everyone can return to normal life, in a new era of life "after COVID-19".

As the first cases of the Coronavirus reached South Africa, the Oppenheimer family donated R1 billion to assist businesses. We can only thank the Oppenheimer family for their contributions to the South African people and to the gliding community.

Let us be confident and pray and hope for the best for all our gliding friends and all people in the world.

Above: All champions experienced flight in the JS1 or JS3 (photographs by Katrin Senne)

■ [www.jonkersailplanes.co.za](http://www.jonkersailplanes.co.za)

Below left: Katrin, Uys, Felipe and Wolfgang after landing

Below right (l-r): Felipe Levin, John Coutts, Lukasz Grabowski, Laurens Goudriaan, Wolfgang Janowitsch, Nico Le Roux, Michael Tiffin, Jason Adriaan, Uys and Philip Jonker, Martin Lessle, Eva Senne, Dicky Daly, Carol Clifford, Cameron Ireland, Riaan Denner, Tienie Jonker, Katrin Senne, Dolf Pretorius, Attie Jonker

