



ONE-AND-

A-HAILE

*Michael Goulian is a natural entertainer, whether he's racing, doing aerobatics or working on his surreptitious ambition to play pro golf. Just don't ask him to sit still...*

MINUTES OF

TORTURE





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hat's it like out there on track in the Red Bull Air Race? It's almost an out-of-body experience."

So says Michael Goulian, the man from Massachusetts and pilot of plane number 99. For the airshow regulars out there, Michael is perhaps more familiar for his exploits up in the clouds rather than down between the pylons. He's three times been on the US Aerobatics Team, a US National Champion and honoured by the International Council of Airshows. These days though, he's as likely to be found racing an Edge 540 as flying his Extra 300SC in airshows; though in either instance crowds can expect to see a bright green blur pushing the limit. Just don't ask him to choose between them.

"For me flying is a way of life, and I love doing what I do, whether it's aerobatics or racing," says Michael. "They are very different though. I guess aerobatics is really 90 per cent the pilot and 10 per cent the plane. In racing quite a lot of the time it's the opposite: 90 per cent the plane and 10 per cent the pilot. You can express yourself through the plane in aerobatics – you can fly hard and aggressive whereas you really can't do that in racing, because the harder you fly, the slower you will go. Every time you deflect one of the control surfaces, you're slowing the plane down. Instead, you need to find the quickest route through the track, while staying as smooth on the controls as you can.

It needs, says Mike, an approach not unlike a downhill ski race. "Because in downhill you can't ski easy, you have to attack the course. But you have to stay supple on your feet, while you're trying to turn on ice – and how can you do that? The Red Bull Air Race is the same: you have to push the plane and yourself to the limit to make the tightest track – but if you go too tight, you leave yourself without energy and often, without options, which is usually a situation that ends up with a pylon hit. It's a question of balance. Do I make a turn as tight as I can and hope it's correct? Or do I make

it a little bigger and give myself an instant worth of correction? That might be the difference between first and second. That's where assessing risk and forward planning come into the equation."

The comparison with skiing isn't an idle reference. Goulian is an accomplished skier and has been playing ice hockey since his early childhood. It paints a picture; suggests a character obsessed with reflex sports and adventure – only that isn't the full story. With an enormous grin, Mikey G admits that if he can't be on the runway, the place he wants to be is the middle of the fairway. "Yeah, I love playing golf, too! I've always said that when I retire from flying airshows and air racing, I'd like to play on the PGA Champions Tour. There isn't enough time to make that happen, but I'd like to become a competitive golfer, even if it's just at a regional level. I'd want to get my handicap down to zero, turn professional and try to qualify for something. It's one of those things on the backburner at the moment."

It sounds rather more ambitious than the average pipe-and-slippers retirement plan, and a little bit out there for someone who's still at the lower end of the age-range in the Red Bull Air Race. He counters that very matter-of-factly: "I believe that anything you're planning to do, you should plan to do well."

Even reclined in conversation, Goulian is irrepressibly active; he very literally cannot sit still – a factor he acknowledges as one of the things that makes him who he is. "Yeah, ask any of the guys around here, they'll tell you I can't sit still: I just can't do it. I can't read a book, I just don't have the attention span. I can just about manage a magazine, but that's the limit of my abilities."

A lack of patience and the inability to sit still don't exactly bode well for a career in aviation. That particular observation elicits a chuckle. Growing up with planes (Michael's father owned a flight school) there was a certain inevitability in Goulian Jr becoming a pilot, but relatively early on he decided airliners really weren't for him. "A lot of people ask why I'm not an airline pilot. It's a simple answer: I didn't like it! If I took off in a jet on a four-hour trip, you can guarantee that 45 minutes later I'd be looking out of the window wondering 'are we there yet? Can this thing go any faster?' I did it for plenty of hours, but I was always thinking about doing

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something else. I just didn't want to be that sort of pilot, which is why I made a conscious decision to stop doing it and start doing this. Everything in life, I believe, is about being in the right place at the right time. I had a little bit of that with the Red Bull Air Race."

Never short on enthusiasm, Goulian's fervour seems to go up a notch when the subject swings around to racing. Being able to do this, he says, is a blessing. "When I was growing up, no one dreamed of being able to earn a living flying small, highly-maneuverable race or aerobatic planes – but somehow I've been doing it for over 20 years, and I still feel super-passionate about it. I think the reason flying still has this passionate hold on me is because I feel lucky to be doing this. It's not a right for me to be here, it's a privilege. Flying in the Red Bull Air Race and owning a beautiful plane is a privilege that isn't afforded to many people, it's up to me to give it 110 per cent of my effort all of the time to make sure I'm not wasting what I've been allowed. I think a lot of the guys feel the same way and that's why we do it well."

The sensations of flying a race plane are, says Goulian, difficult to explain,

Hot under the collar: Practicing, racing or performing, Goulian likes to give it 100 per cent.



Photography: Marikus Kucera

Last-minute wing modifications in Abu Dhabi left Goulian struggling for pace.



Goulian together with team co-ordinator Brad Huelsman (right) and engineer Timothy Hess will be playing catch-up this weekend.

even to other pilots. “We’ve all driven a car fast, but to drive a car in the Monaco Grand Prix or the Daytona 500, that’s a different story. When you get into a plane like the ones we have in the Red Bull Air Race it’s the same thing. It really is an almost out-of-body experience. You have to be so focused and in the zone; thinking about the task at hand, getting from gate to gate. For me it’s about a minute-and-a-half’s worth of torture. You’re trying to do that while combating the very high G-forces and figuring out where the wind is coming from and a dozen other little things. The sensation of doing it... it really is indescribable.

Despite a run-in with the stewards in Abu Dhabi, and an uncharacteristically vehement outburst of disappointment, Goulian remains upbeat about his chances for success this season. His team, he says, are in their best-ever shape. “At the end of 2008 we were disappointed. We went down a path with the plane that didn’t really work and always felt we were trailing behind with the technology. We’ve tried hard to make sure that won’t be the case in 2009, but in Abu Dhabi we made a lot of aerodynamic changes to the plane, most of which weren’t good. On paper they looked great, but the plane got worse and worse. As soon as it arrived in the United States we hit the ground running. We’re doing everything we can to rectify the problems, and we don’t expect to be fully at race pace until the next race in Windsor, but we expect a much better result in San Diego than we had in Abu Dhabi.

It’s a frank assessment, but the underlying tone from Team Goulian is positive: a gamble with late modifications to the wings has failed, but the plane is in fundamentally good shape. “Yeah, actually the airframe is something I’m very happy with,” says Michael. This is the third year I’ve been in this plane and this is the first season I’ve been happy to go flying – which is going to make a big difference.”

Despite much talk of horsepower and aerodynamics as the season opened, Goulian insists comfort comes first. “I would sacrifice a little speed to have a good-flying plane. When you’re at 30 or 40ft, doing 220mph, you need to have confidence that you can move the controls as fast as you want and as hard as you want and know exactly what the plane will do. If you have even a little question mark in your mind, that isn’t

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where you want to be. Over the winter we didn’t quite finish everything we wanted to do, but I wanted the plane put back together early. It wouldn’t matter how fast the plane was if I didn’t feel comfortable in it. So we stopped a little early, leaving out a few of the modifications we might have done if we’d had more time. As a result I’m comfortable in the plane – and that’s the most important thing.”

Despite extolling the virtues of handling, Michael Goulian is also swift to reaffirm his love of speed. It begs the question: does he think of himself as a born racer?

“I think anyone who walks around saying ‘I’m a racer’ probably isn’t! But my wife says I like anything fast, and I guess that’s the truth. If you have a passion in your life – whatever it’s for – then it becomes ingrained in you. I guess I am a racer because I love to challenge myself and see how I stack up against everyone else – whatever I’m doing.”

It’s in that spirit that Goulian admits to an admiration for more earthbound motorsports, citing a sneaking desire to occasionally switch places with NASCAR driver Carl Edwards. “I’ve done just a little bit of race-car stuff and it’s been really good fun, and I’m lucky enough to have met some of the NASCAR guys and their teams. I think this and that are

similar. I like being part of a team and motor racing is a team sport. You can be the best pilot, but if you don’t have the best team, it’s never going to work.”

The new format of the 2009 Red Bull Air Race, tweaked to improve the show by doing away with the head-to-head contests, appeals to Goulian. “I like the format very much; you’re going to find most of the pilots are very happy with it. It’s really more about the fastest person winning, which is what we like about it. Previously, you could have had the fastest time, but finish 10th. With a racer that just doesn’t sit very well. We all want the fastest guy to win.”

After an unrewarding trip to Abu Dhabi, Goulian is back on home soil for the next month. For many pilots the expectations of a home crowd are an added pressure, but Mike insists that for him it isn’t the case. “This year I have very high expectations for our team, so if there is any pressure, it’s self-imposed pressure. My guys have done an unbelievable amount of work over the winter and I feel they’ve put me in a good machine. I owe it to them to go out and fly as well as I can – so the pressure is internal rather than external – though obviously you always want to win in your home country!”

Watch out for fireworks from green number 99 here in San Diego.

Photography: AP Images for Red Bull Air Race