



Despojado and his flying partner, Nicole Meinhardt, were indeed number one at Berkeley in '96. He won in master's quad ballet, she won in experienced quad ballet and together they won in open quad team.

plus I was very weak. When I got to Berkeley I found out quickly how much pull a Rev 1 can generate with 20-plus-mph winds. So I borrowed a Rev 2. I finished somewhere in the middle. From then on I competed on a fairly regular basis.

RR: Tell us about some of your other experiences, the people you've met.

RD: Flying almost every weekend, I've met hundreds of people who've asked about the kite and I always offer them a chance to try it. Mostly they refuse, fearing they'll break the kite. But after showing them a few crashes they'll sometimes try it. I can always tell when they've got it—all of a sudden there's a big smile on their face and they say something like, "This is neat."

There was a time when people would try my kite and later in the day they'd come back with a brand-new Rev and would want me to help set it up. Sometimes, without anyone calling anyone, about six or seven of us would show up and have a megafly. This would always draw a crowd. I remember one day Joe Hadzicki, Alan Nagao and yourself, along with others, were flying together—talk about some big names! But then there's the weekend flyers, the ones who basically fly to relax and don't worry about competing. These are the majority of the folks who buy the kites.

"My first time was almost my last time competing. About two weeks later I was attacked and robbed in a parking lot. I was stabbed four times and left for dead."

RR: Have you worked with them?

RD: Well, it's almost inevitable that we end up playing follow the leader. And eventually an individual is going to excel. Slim Warnke is one of them. He has a good basic sense of flight since he used to be a pilot. Almost every week I'd show him something new and the following week he'd want more. Slim has a lot of patience and he practices every day. He's getting too good!

At the other end of the spectrum, in terms of age, is little Jesse Lawrence. The kid is only 8 years old but he's got lots of potential. I've seen Jesse just about every weekend over the last year or two and he's flying like a pro. The crowds really love the sight of this little guy flying and usually it's a stack of two or three kites.

RR: Back to the subject of competition.

What role do you see competition filling? I mean, it's not for everybody.

RD: No, but it shouldn't exclude anybody, either. If you truly enjoy flying then competition gives you the desire to polish your abilities, thus increasing your enjoyment. It's like a focal point to get to a certain level.

But, for those who don't want to compete, just watching a competition will open your eyes to other people's flying styles, gives you more exposure to techniques.

Plus, through competition I've met some very nice people, people I'd read and heard about—all of a sudden you're flying against that person or you'll see them at a festival and come to find out they're everyday folks who have real lives and they too have to scrimp and save to make it to the events.

RR: I think we'd have to consider you one of those people we've read about. What's your reaction to all the attention?

RD: First off, I'm very flattered when people come up and say they've heard of me. But I think the biggest compliment is after I perform when a perfect stranger comes up and

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says to me they liked the performance—it's even more special if they're not kiteflyers. Very flattering.

Occasionally people have told me they've seen a videotape of me playing at a kite store that I've never heard of or been to. I remember one time they said it was in Japan! Shouldn't I be getting royalties for all this unauthorized use of my image?

RR: *Spoken like a true ham!* [Laughter] What have been the highlights and lowlights, if any, of your career up to now?

RD: The most obvious highlight was winning the AKA Nationals this year, against probably the finest quadline flyers ever assembled at one time. This capped off a great 1996 season. But my first time competing is way up there too.

Lowlights? Hmm. I'd say the 1995 LASKC. I remember flying in pretty much no wind and close to halfway in my routine I broke a spar and finished last. But the same day I did a demo and pretty much nailed every beat of the music. It was exciting because it was the first performance of a new routine and the crowd and judges loved it, even though it didn't count. So it was a major mood swing in one day.

RR: *Where would you like to see kiting go, and what does the future hold for Ron Despojado?*

RD: I'd really like to see bigger festivals in the U.S. From what I hear, Europe, Asia, almost every other place in the world has major festivals—we're talking 50,000 to 100,000 people. Along the same lines I'd like to be able to attend some of these—I hope I can get invited to one.

RR: *Are you still going to compete?*

RD: I've always said that if I won the nationals I'd retire. But I'm having too much fun now.

RR: *Is that a yes or no?*

RD: [Smiles and shrugs] I don't know.

RR: *Any last words?*

RD: I'd like to tell people to just go out and enjoy kiting for what it is or for whatever you want it to be, whether to relax, as a weekend hobby or to compete. It doesn't pollute and you're outside getting fresh air. Plus, you'll meet the nicest people from very diverse backgrounds. And don't rule out competing—it only makes you a better flyer. Who knows, maybe someday you'll be a star. **AK**

Champion flyer Ron Reich is a regular contributor to American Kite.

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