

BARBERTON PARAGLIDING OPEN 2026

June 14–20, 2026 • Barberton, Mpumalanga

South African National Paragliding Championship • FAI/CIVL Category 2 • Africa's longest-running paragliding competition

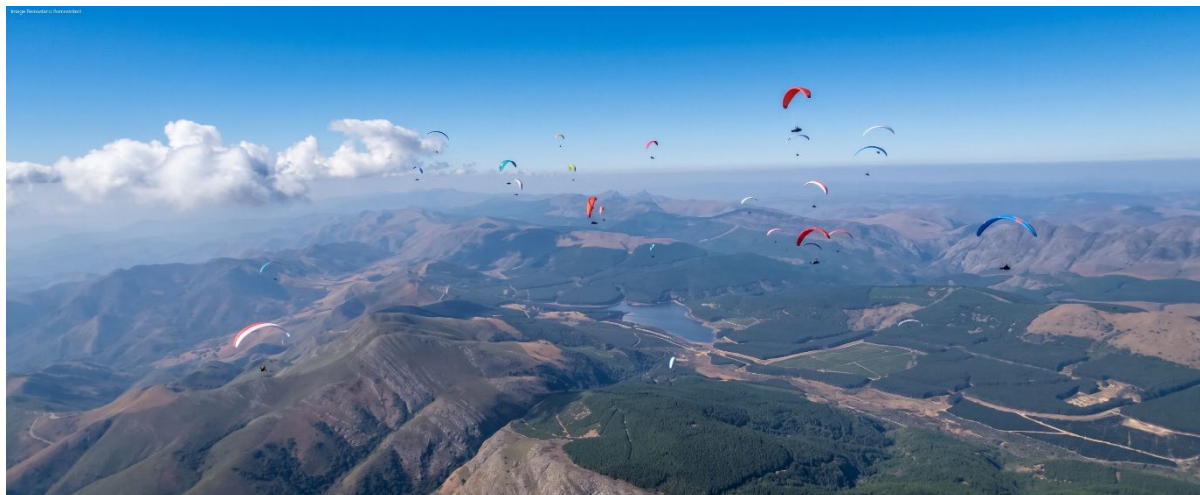


Photo courtesy of Mias De Klerk

Barberton sits in the De Kaap Valley in the eastern Mpumalanga Lowveld, ringed by the Makhonjwa Mountains — a range of greenstone belts that geologists date to 3.5 billion years ago, among the oldest exposed rock formations on the planet. The World Heritage Site designation is recent. The mountains themselves are not.

The town came to life during the 1880s gold rush, and the faded Victorian buildings along Crown Street still carry that energy — a place that was once frantically alive and has since settled into something quieter and more permanent. The surrounding landscape is sub-tropical in character: deep kloofs dropping away from the ridgelines, indigenous forest in the sheltered folds, the valley floor warm and dry in winter with thermals that fire reliably from late morning and build hard through the afternoon.

Competition headquarters was the Barberton Golf Club on De Villiers Street — one of the oldest clubs in Mpumalanga, established in 1894, its fairways sitting at 830 metres above sea level against the lower slopes of the surrounding hills. For one week every June it doubles as a paragliding goal field. The clubhouse becomes a meet centre. Retrieve vehicles fill the car park. For the locals who know to look up, the sky fills with colour.

Lone Tree Hill, the launch site, sits at 1,290 metres on a north-facing slope above the town. The site has been used for paragliding for more than 30 years — initially by hang-gliders, now almost entirely paragliders. In winter the sun bakes the granite and the thermals come up clean, strengthening through the day to anywhere between 1 and 5 m/s. Tasks run west into the ancient ranges and north across the valley flats, with pilots threading through kloofs and over ridgelines before racing back to goal. The terrain is technical enough to separate the field quickly. The distances are long enough that a single wrong call can cost a competition.



Photo courtesy of @skylinkar

What makes Barberton unusual is that the same launch, the same sky, and the same terrain that tests the country's best open-class pilots also sends newer pilots on their first competition task. The BPO runs six classes from Novice EN-A through to Open, which means a pilot who earned their license six months ago and a pilot who has represented South Africa at World Championships are flying the same conditions, chasing the same thermals, and racing back to the same goal field. For pilots taking their first steps in competition flying, there is no better environment — scored fairly against their peers, with full retrieve support, proper task setting, and the mentorship that comes from flying in the same gaggle as people who have been doing this for decades.

The 2026 Barberton Paragliding Open was the longest-running paragliding competition in Africa — carrying FAI/CIVL Category 2 international status, counting toward the SA Cup and national league standings, and awarding WPRS points to international participants. It was also the South African National Paragliding Championship, with titles awarded across six classes.

84 pilots registered. 80 flew. Five tasks were completed across six days, totaling 175.6km of cross-country racing.

The event was organised by Mias de Klerk of All Mountain Aero and the Lowveld Slope Soaring Club, with Willie de Klerk as club chairman, Daniel Bakker handling technical coordination and scoring, and Deniva Philander as safety director. Medical cover was provided by SA Paramedics throughout. TCS WiFi kept the wider community connected via a live camera stream from Lone Tree Hill during each day's flying.

Sponsors included OHSCare, IndemniFly, Paragliding Logbook, Gin South Africa, Cape Hope Paragliding, the Glen Paragliding Club, Cloudbase Paragliding, Paraglide Africa, Clarens Xtreme, and Skysafari.co.za.



Photo courtesy of Mias De Klerk

The Race, Task by Task

Task 1 — Opening Day

The Makhonjwa Mountains were sharp and clear on Sunday morning, the winter sky the kind of deep blue that only arrives after a cold front has scrubbed the Lowveld clean. Lone Tree Hill was busy — 80 pilots laying out gliders on the grass above Barberton, the valley floor 460 metres below, the ancient ridgelines stretching west toward the border.

The opening task sent the field on a 37km sweep out and back to the Golf Club. Thirty-four pilots made goal — the most of any day all week — and the day set the tone for what was coming.

Francois De Villiers Jnr crossed the goal line first, 1:13:44 after the start at just over 29 km/h. Andre Rainsford-Alberts was 28 seconds behind him. In clock time Francois won. In the scoring, Andre picked up fractionally more leading points for time spent at the front of the gaggle, and the day went to him by one tenth of a point. Both scored 993 — effectively a perfect day. Ruard De Bruyn was two minutes back. Heinrich Marloth, Roland De Vries, and Jon Pio completed the leading group, all within seven minutes of the winner.

Nobody had an advantage. Nobody had a problem. That wouldn't last.

After Task 1: Francois Jnr and Andre tied at 795. Ruard third at 765. Roland fifth at 734.



Photo courtesy of Mias De Klerk

Task 2 — The Fly Over

Task 2 was shorter and the sky was tighter. Only 17 pilots made goal. The task committee routed the field north to a goal on the flats near the Crocodile River, and it was a day that asked for precision on the final glide.

Two of the overnight co-leaders found out what happens when you run out of height 2km from home.

Ruard De Bruyn landed 2.7km from goal. Francois De Villiers Jnr came down 2.4km behind him, at almost exactly the same spot. They had been flying together most of the day and they landed together — close enough to commiserate in person.

While they were folding their gliders in a field, Andre Rainsford-Alberts was crossing the goal line in first place, 1:16:41 after the start. Roland De Vries arrived two seconds behind him in clock time. Heinrich Marloth, Pierre Ackermann, and Russell Achterberg rounded out the leading group.

The day was clean and fast for the pilots who made it through. For the ones who didn't, it was expensive. Francois Jnr was now 151 points off the lead. Ruard was 186 back. Andre had taken control of a competition that, 24 hours earlier, belonged to no one.

After Task 2: Andre R-A leads at 1,475. Roland second (–56). Pierre Ackermann fourth (–73). Francois Jnr sixth (–151). Ruard seventh (–186).



Photo courtesy of Heinrich Marloth

Task 3 — Ruard's Perfect Day

You could feel Task 3 was going to be different from the moment the window opened. The thermals came up early over the escarpment, the cumulus building in proper stacks above the ridgelines rather than the flat broken sky of the day before. It was the kind of Barberton day the locals talk about — everything working, everywhere, all at once.

The task committee set 34.8km back to the Golf Club, with a route that pushed the field west into the ancient geology of the Makhonjwa range before turning for home. Every kilometre of it counted. This was the only day in the entire competition to receive 100% validity — a perfect scoring day.

Ruard De Bruyn, Francois De Villiers Jnr, and Roland De Vries crossed the start gate within eight seconds of each other and spent the next 96 minutes flying the same sky, working the same thermals, making the same calls. The ridges west of Barberton are not forgiving — narrow thermal streets above terrain that would punish a pilot who got it wrong — and all three got it right, together, for the entirety of the task.

The final glide began around 14:25. At 14:10 all three were at 1,400–1,500m, within 500 metres of each other in the air, converging on the same line toward goal. What followed was a sprint across the valley floor.



Ruard crossed goal at 14:36:00. Francois also logged 14:36:00 — a dead heat on the clock. Roland was 12 seconds behind.

The tie was broken by leading points — the scoring system's measure of how much time a pilot spent at the front of the gaggle. Ruard had earned 97.3 to Francois's 85.5. Twelve points, accumulated over an hour and a half of racing identical lines. The only 1,000-point score of the entire competition went to Ruard De Bruyn.

It was the recovery Ruard needed. After the Task 2 landout had dropped him to 186 points off the lead, he was now 94 back. The leaderboard wasn't closed. Andre Rainsford-Alberts still led, but three pilots were now within striking distance.

Seven minutes after the leading trio, Cal Dyker crossed goal on his GIN GTO 3 — an EN-C wing in a task dominated by Enzo 3s and Zeno 2s, finishing ahead of Jon Pio, ahead of Pierre Ackermann, ahead of most of the open-class field. It was one of those Barberton moments where the class designation on paper stops meaning much. He would go on to win Sport EN-C by nearly 600 points and finish seventh overall across all wings. Task 3 was the clearest illustration of why.

After Task 3: Andre R-A leads at 2,245. Roland second (-21). Pierre Ackermann third (-63). Francois Jnr fourth (-70). Ruard fifth (-94).



Photo courtesy of Mias De Klerk

Task 4 — Elapsed Time

Task 4 changed the format and the format changed the race. Elapsed time: the clock starts when you cross the start, stops when you hit goal, and the fastest pilot wins regardless of when they launched. It rewards the pilot who reads the sky correctly, not the one who gets airborne first.

The first wave launched around 11:30 and found a day that wasn't ready. Pilots were circling, tagging the start gate, testing the glide, pulling back when the valley showed nothing. Some re-tagged multiple times. A few made their way back to launch altitude for another attempt. The day was soft and everyone could see it.

Jon Pio was on the hill watching. A fixture on the South African competition scene for well over a decade — multiple World Championship appearances, PWC campaigns, Protea colours — he'd seen enough Barberton days to know what a shut-down valley looks like from above. He waited. Nearly two hours after the window opened, he launched with a small group.

From the ridge he spotted a cloud street forming further west into the valley, away from the front ridge where most pilots were holding. Going that way meant eventually turning into headwind on the final leg. But the street was there, and from altitude he could see other pilots dropping in the sink below. He committed west and the clouds held him high while the valley floor died beneath him. His time: 1:06:54. Fastest in the field by nearly ten minutes.

The net effect on the leaderboard was violent compression. Andre had led by 70 points going in. Coming out: four pilots in 33 points. Andre at 2,865. Ruard at 2,857. Roland at 2,851. Francois Jnr at 2,832. Pio sixth at 2,747.

One task remaining. Five days of racing compressed into a single afternoon over the Makhonjwa Mountains.

After Task 4: Andre R-A leads at 2,865. Ruard second (-8). Roland third (-14). Francois Jnr fourth (-33). Pierre Ackermann fifth (-67). Jon Pio sixth (-118).



Photo courtesy of Heinrich Marloth



Photos Courtesy of Lallie Schoeman

Task 5 — Five Pilots, One Winner

Of the 80 pilots who launched on the final day, five made goal. The task took everything the week had built and compressed it into one decisive scoring column.

Francois De Villiers Jnr crossed the line first — 1:20:03 after the start at 28.76 km/h. Jon Pio was second, less than two minutes behind. Thibaut Chaigneau, the French Ozone Photon pilot who had been quietly accumulating all week, arrived third — the surprise of the day. Roland De Vries was fourth. Russell Achterberg completed the five-pilot goal field.

Then the landout scores arrived.

Ruard De Bruyn — second overall, eight points off the lead — came down at 29km. A kilometre short of the turnpoint that would have kept him in contention. He dropped from second overall to sixth.

Andre Rainsford-Alberts, who had led the competition since Task 2, who had spent three days at the top of the leaderboard — covered 14.8km. Less than 40% of the task. He dropped from first overall to third. A week's work, gone in one afternoon above the ancient hills of Barberton.

The final margin between Francois Jnr and Roland De Vries was 33 points — the same gap that had separated them after Task 4. Both made goal. Both scored well. Neither gained on the other. The result wasn't decided between them. It was decided by what happened to everyone else.



Final Results

Overall / Open

Pos	Pilot	Glider	Points
1	Francois De Villiers Jnr	Ozone Enzo 3	3,556
2	Roland De Vries	Ozone Enzo 3	3,523
3	Andre Rainsford-Alberts	Ozone Enzo 3	3,496
4	Jon Pio	GIN Boomerang 12	3,442
5	Pierre Ackermann	Ozone Zeno 2	3,410
6	Ruard De Bruyn	Ozone Enzo 3	3,329
7	Cal Dyker	GIN GTO 3	3,229
8	Ria Moothilal	Ozone Zeno 2	3,109
9	Francis De Klerk	Ozone Zeno 2	3,106
10	Heinrich Marloth	Niviuk Icepeak X-one	3,083



Ladies

Pos	Pilot	Glider	Points
1	Tyla-Jane Christodoulou	Ozone Delta 5	2,370
2	Khobi-Jane Bowden	UP Summit X	2,202
3	Emma Emanuel	Flow Freedom 2	1,431
4	Andrea Greyling	Ozone Delta 5	1,342
5	Lee-Anne Lombard	Flow Freedom 2	1,086



Performance EN-D

Pos	Pilot	Glider	Points
1	Pierre Ackermann	Ozone Zeno 2	3,410
2	Ria Moothilal	Ozone Zeno 2	3,109
3	Francis De Klerk	Ozone Zeno 2	3,106
4	Pierre Carter	NOVA Xenon3	2,938
5	Russell Achterberg	Ozone Zeno 2	2,716
6	Abraham Meyer	UP Meru	2,685



Sport EN-C

Pos	Pilot	Glider	Points
1	Cal Dyker	GIN GTO 3	3,229
2	Jan Minnaar	UP Torre	2,729
3	Gerhardus Combrinck	GIN GTO 3	2,642
4	Gideon De Villiers	Ozone Photon	2,528
5	Mathieu Lanot (FRA)	GIN GTO 3	2,454
6	WJ De Vries	GIN GTO 3	2,376
7	Tyla-Jane Christodoulou	Ozone Delta 5	2,370



Intermediate EN-B

Pos	Pilot	Glider	Points
1	Khobi-Jane Bowden	UP Summit X	2,202
2	Zane Esplin	UP Summit X	1,731
3	Calvin Smith	BGD Base 2	1,679
4	Kelvin Van Baalen	777 Rook 4	1,542
5	Aaron Pagel	UP Summit XC4	1,524
6	Emma Emanuel	Flow Freedom 2	1,431



Novice EN-A

Pos	Pilot	Glider	Points
1	Amanda Sterndale (AUS)	Ozone Geo 7	401
2	William George Schaerer	Ozone Swift 5	191
3	Bain Ulyate	Niviuk Koyot P5	156
4	Johannes Loubser	NOVA Prion 5	146



Sooty Falcon Team Cup

Pos	Team	Pilots	Points
1	South Africa	Cal Dyker, Gideon De Villiers, Jeremy Holdcroft	8,901
2	Réunion 974	Mathieu Lanot, Thibaut Chaigneau, Karim Gassab	6,561



More Than a Competition

Results tell part of the story. The rest of it happens at the goal field, over braais after the day's flying, in the retrieve vehicles winding back up to Lone Tree Hill through the afternoon heat.

The field this year came from seven countries — South Africa, France, Germany, Turkey, Italy, Ireland, and Australia. International regulars like the Réunion Island contingent of Mathieu Lanot, Thibaut Chaigneau, and Karim Gassab have made Barberton a fixed point on their competition calendar, and their presence raises the standard of the whole field. Thibaut's third place on the final task, ahead of Roland De Vries, was one of the performances of the week. Germany's Mathias Widmayer, Turkey's Kayhan Dura, Ireland's Gavin Andrews, and Australia's Amanda Sterndale — who won the Novice class outright — added to the international texture that has become a defining feature of the event.

The Ladies competition deserves particular mention. Tyla-Jane Christodoulou won the class convincingly on 2,370 points, also placing seventh in the Sport EN-C outright standings — flying a Delta 5 in a class dominated by GTO 3s and holding her position across five tasks. It was a strong and well-deserved result in a category with a proud history at this event..

The 2026 edition delivered what it always does: five hard tasks, honest racing, and a leaderboard that kept moving until the last pilot landed on the last day. The event returns in 2027. Registration opens early, with an early-bird window closing at the end of April.