

Foundations of Flight: Approach with Confidence—Part Two, Holding Area



Definition

The holding area is the section of sky where canopy pilots wait to reach their entry altitude for the landing pattern. Using a pre-planned, structured flight path creates a more predictable and manageable way to create space between other jumpers and read the surface conditions clearly. Departing the holding area at the appropriate altitude ensures the landing pattern becomes a reliable tool for consistency and accuracy. In some cases—like a long spot or being too far downwind of the landing area—using a holding area may not be possible. A long, straight-in approach or a “Z-pattern” is acceptable in these situations if they still adhere to the landing direction flow.

Preparation

Before each jump, determine the optimal holding area by checking the wind conditions and an overhead map. Connect the dots between your predicted deployment point, holding area and landing pattern. Include the planned direction (left- or right-handed) and the corresponding altitudes.

After deployment and a canopy-control check, fly to the holding area without delay to arrive there with as much altitude as possible. Doing so gives you enough time to create vertical separation from other jumpers and check wind indicators. While in transit, scan the airspace around you for canopy traffic, especially in the direction of jump run, and possible alternative landing areas below, should an off landing be necessary.

Execution

Once in the holding area, the goal is to gradually lose altitude while maintaining an advantageous position upwind of the landing area. However, simply being upwind and drifting or spiraling aimlessly isn't enough. How you maneuver in the holding area directly affects safety, efficiency and accuracy.

If you have ever observed a tiger pacing back and forth in a cage, you will notice that they typically do so in a specific pattern. The travel path creates the shape of an elongated figure eight, or infinity sign (∞). The footwork allows for the predator to keep a fixed gaze on its target while remaining in motion, able to pounce at any moment. To do this, a tiger turns toward its target at each end, never turning its back. Similarly, canopy pilots can use this same

method as a technique to gain greater situational awareness.

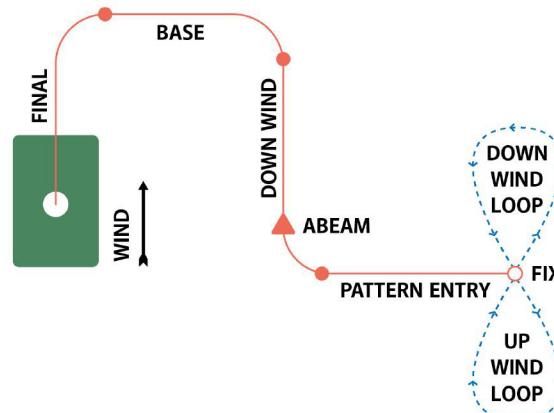
In skydiving, "tiger turns" are a figure-eight-shaped maneuver used to delay your progress over the ground and gradually lose altitude until reaching the landing pattern entry—time to pounce. The long axis of the holding pattern is oriented parallel to the landing direction. There are three segments to this type of holding pattern: upwind loop, center or ground fix, and downwind loop. The fix acts as an intersection you cross multiple times while descending and is located orthogonally to the final approach of the landing target. If possible, start abeam the target, facing in the upwind direction. There is no set number of crossings or mandatory altitudes. The fix serves as a visual anchor to guide your attention to important information. This establishes a clear picture of the next action to take and fosters an intuitive flying method that improves the overall canopy flight experience.

When winds are calm, both the upwind and downwind loops take an equal amount of time to complete. However, as a general rule, slow your rate of turn on the upwind loop (holding) and expedite the heading change on the downwind loop (running). This is because in strong wind conditions it will take more time to reach the fix while facing into the wind than when traveling with the wind. The goal is to make the loops symmetrical regardless of the conditions. You can verify this with GPS tracking.

This illustration shows the concept of using figure eights in the holding area, and an effective way to lose altitude in the holding area, while maintaining visibility on your pattern entry point.

A well-planned, well-executed holding procedure offers several advantages: increased situational awareness through improved visuals of the landing area, wind indicators, ground speed and fellow jumpers (especially those setting the landing direction already on final). As a result, jumpers can better anticipate scenarios and make more informed decisions. Multiple jumpers can share the same holding area by stacking up vertically and controlling their descent rate with brakes. Each jumper leaves the holding area when reaching their pattern altitude. This is referred to as the pattern entry point. As jumpers sequence their departure from the holding area to start their landing patterns, a good measure to avoid conflict is to have only one jumper per pattern leg. Next month's installment will cover the landing pattern and some strategies to improve accuracy.

Information about AXIS' coaching and instructional services is available at axisflightschool.com. The author intends this article to be an educational guideline. It is not a substitute for professional instruction.



This illustration shows the concept of using figure eights in the holding area, an effective way to lose altitude in the holding area, while keeping your pattern-entry point visible.