

# NO. Stopping

by Christina Ammon

For those searching for something more than just the norm. We lay it all down, including what others call sanity, for just a few moments on waves larger than life. We do this because we know there is still something greater than all of us. Something that inspires us spiritually. We start going downhill when we stop taking risks.

*-Laird Hamilton, big wave surfer*



## The number-one ranked acro pilot in America, Nova Dasalla, is hoping to pull off a new trick this summer.

Some people prefer the certainty of well-trod paths. Not Nova Dasalla. The San Francisco-based pilot is on a nonstop quest for novelty—new lifestyles, different art forms, and, most recently, a new acro trick he calls the “Carambole.” This maneuver entails a seamless transition from the deadly high-altitude jump rope that is an Infinite Tumble into the maple-seed-like whirl of a SAT. When done correctly, the move resembles the Spanish billiards game it is named for: The wing turns in one direction and then suddenly pings off in a different one. If Dasalla can pull it off, he’ll be the first.

He and a few of his acro buddies have come close. They’ve done the Infinite-to-SAT combination as part of a sequence of moves they call the “Esfera.” But while the Esfera allows rotations between the maneuvers, in a *true* Carambole the transition must be done with no pause between the maneuvers. “It’s much harder,” Dasalla explains.

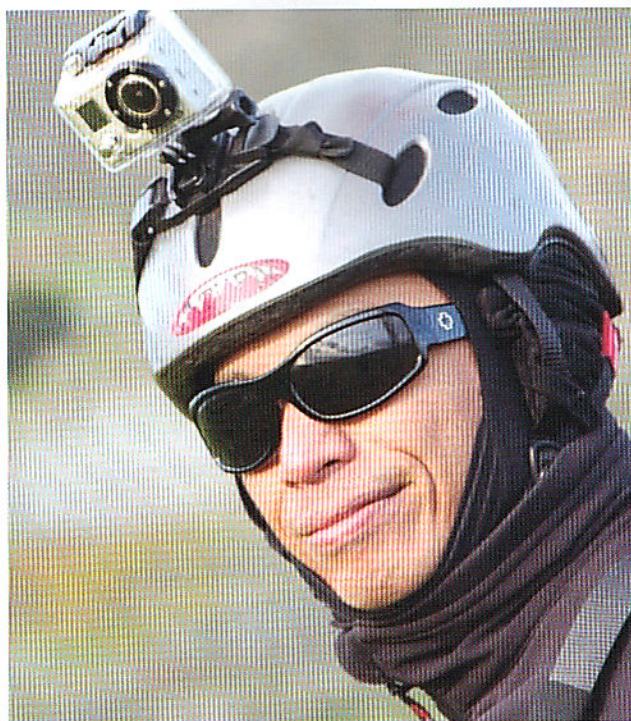
When talking about acro, Nova’s communication style is bold and exacting—borderline fundamentalist. Details matter. There is a right way and a wrong way of doing the maneuvers. For example, a helicopter does not count as a helicopter if the wing is oscillating and the wingtips are deflated.

Dasalla thinks many pilots are in a rush to learn the tricks and make them look like the ones they see on the Internet. The results are often sloppy. “Just making the wing do crazy things like swinging around it wildly by yanking hard on the brakes doesn’t mean you’re doing acro.” He calls this rash approach a “microwave mentality.”

“When a pilot can effortlessly control the wing with sensitivity, awareness, flow, intelligence, touch, and timing—without depending primarily on brakes—he’s doing acro!”

### Inflection Point

In 2009, Dasalla was the first American to pull off the Infinite Tumble. The granddaddy of all acro moves, the



Infinite requires impeccable wing energy management. Poorly timed brake inputs can land the pilot in the wing with a good chance he or she won’t get out.

When Dasalla posted his Infinite video online and claimed to have completed it first, a small controversy erupted. Again, details matter. *Is an Infinite Tumble five, or 15 to 20 turns?* In 2009, the FAI defined it as an entry tumble, plus five straight vertical rotations. Dasalla and his peers said it should be 15 or more. “That’s why it’s called The Infinite. Because it doesn’t stop,” Dasalla contends.

Whichever criteria you choose, Dasalla meets both, achieving 15 turns in 2010.

How important is it to him to be declared the first? Dasalla’s answer is diplomatic: “When I train, I don’t have any thoughts about maintaining my ranking. Instead, I focus on achieving excellence in my tricks and moving past any fears that arise. When I focus more on the process than the prize, that stuff takes care of itself.”

Venturing into unknown territory has inherent risks. It’s hard to write about Nova’s acro-trajectory without mentioning his now well-known accident in September 2009—an experience that had dramatic physical and emotional consequences. One of his routine maneuvers—the Misty-to-Helico—went dramatically wrong, resulting in riser twists and auto-rotation. After falling

**ABOVE** What does performing acro at peak level feel like? “It’s tough to describe in words,” Dasalla says, “but I’ll try by succinctly saying, it’s ‘going without knowing.’” Photo by Pearl Schroy.



200 feet and hitting the north side of Utah's Point of the Mountain at 40 mph, he was dragged 100 feet by his reserve. Dasalla was left with two broken legs and a broken back and shoulder.

After months of intense rehabilitation, he had to learn to walk again.

But a good attitude helped him reframe the event as a lesson learned, instilling in him a new appreciation of life and relationships. He refers to this emotional transformation as being like a new acro move, calling it an "Inflection Point." Soon after, he met his wife, a fire-spinning beauty named Jinju. "Without the accident, I wouldn't have much of what I have today: a beautiful wife, a great job, and a completely renewed, revamped, and reenergized vigor for life . . . and love."

Both Nova and Jinju contribute creative ideas for an endeavor called "Project Esfera," which combines acro and fire dancing. "Jinju realized that the dance I do in the sky is, like hers, a flow art, and combining them in a video would be a first." They hope their collaboration will inspire others to face fears and live their dreams. As they travel the world with their project, they will highlight local organizations that are helping

**RIGHT** A true Carambole entails transition to an Infinite Tumble to a SAT with no pause. At this time, no one has done the real Carambole yet. Photos by Nova Dasalla.

children.

This won't be the first time Dasalla has enlisted his visibility in the service of others. Last December, he attempted to be the first American to make the Infinite on a paramotor. While he didn't pull it off (*yet*, he emphasizes), he did bring attention and donations to an organization called the Global Children's Peace Project. "For sure, when I make the Carambole," Dasalla says, "a philanthropic organization will benefit!"

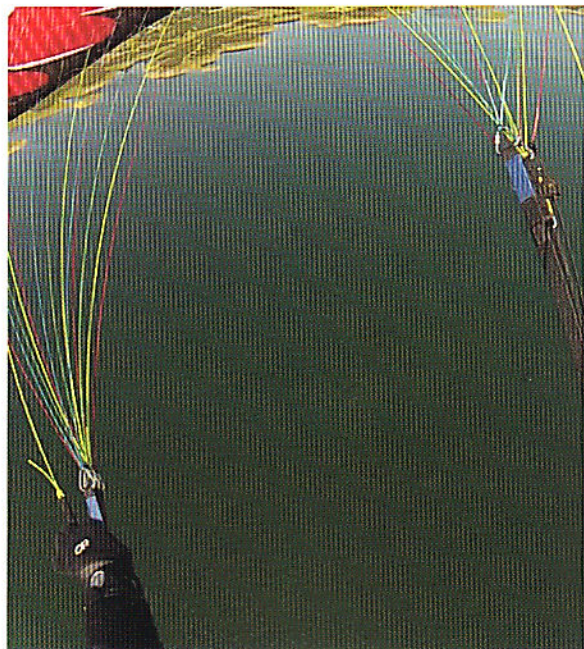
He has set his sights on The Cloudbase Foundation, an organization of pilots determined to help children who are living near flying sites worldwide. "I hope more pilots will make donations," Dasalla says.

### Fear Management

As Dasalla ventures into new acro moves like the Carambole, it's hard not to wonder if he is haunted by his 2009 accident. He actively counters his fear with a program called OPS, or "Optimal Performance Under Stress." The practice involves a lot of conscious breathing and simulation through visualizing. He adds that OPS has been used in the field in the military's elite special operation forces.

But he doesn't seek to eliminate fear completely.

"Fear isn't all bad, when channeled carefully," he







explains. "A good friend of mine has a tattoo wrapped around his wrist. On the top, it says, 'Fear' and on the bottom, 'Fuel'. On both sides, it says '='. So, it reads 'Fear = Fuel = Fear = Fuel'."

### The Solution

As with many firsts in acro paragliding, if Dasalla does pull off the Carambole this summer, controversy is bound to rear its head. Someone will claim he did it first, but didn't put it on the Internet, or enact a sloppy equivalent. But in Dasalla's mind, the move must be done cleanly, or it doesn't count. "What would happen if pilots started to proclaim, 'I made goal every day at the PWC in Valle' or 'I vol-biv'ed across the entire Karakoram mountain range in Pakistan' when they only hit two turn points or only flew 10 miles down-range? Did they really do it? Aren't they missing some important details?"

Dasalla thinks he has the solution to the Carambole and hopes to achieve it this summer, before heading to Europe for this season's competitions. I ask him again how important it is to be the first.

"I think it's important for sponsors to see that their athletes are pushing the sport and being innovative, for sure," he explains. "I also think it's a personal measure

of accomplishment to try to do things that no one else has done. For me, I'd rather be a leader who takes some risks trying new things than a follower who does what everyone else can do."

When I ask him what the solution to the Carambole is, America's number-one acro pilot remains closely guarded.

"Ancient Filipino secret," is all he'll tell me. 🇵🇭

**ABOVE** Dasalla and his wife Jinju find common ground in acro paragliding and fire spinning. Both arts engage "The Flow." Photo by Pearl Schroy. **BELOW** Dasalla's dramatic paragliding accident in 2009 resulted in an emotional transformation he calls an "Inflection Point." Soon after, he met his wife Jinju.

