



The vertical limit

The British team came a creditable third in the World Helicopter Championships – but is the competition dying on its feet? Pat Malone reports



Can the World Helicopter Championships regain their former glory? The 2008 contest, held in Germany in August, attracted 43 teams, compared with more than 80 a few years ago, and when one considers that 10 of them were from Russia, 12 were German and only seven countries turned up, it starts to look a little threadbare. Add to that the fact that the results were predictable and the judging sometimes capricious, and the prospects start to look bleak.

Unless there are major changes in the format of the Championships there is a very real risk that they will fade into history. A fundamental problem is that the precise tasks to be flown during the competition never change, conferring an advantage on those who can practice most. With the Russian authorities backing their team with unlimited practising opportunities, they can field *de facto* professionals who have flown the championship events every day for years, and tend to walk away with the contest.

No private entrant can realistically expect to win. The British team performed better than ever, but some Brits had practised for little more than 20 hours in total; the Russians had flown at least 20 hours a week for two years. In the seven days before the competition British team captain David Monks and his co-pilot Jonathan Penny spent £1,000 on fuel alone, not counting the cost of seven hours' flying to Eisenach in Germany, and that was just for an R22 – Britain's team included a JetRanger and a Gazelle. Even with generous sponsorship from Hayward Aviation Insurance, Eurocopter and Lord Laidlaw of Rothiemay, the British team is too heavily handicapped to win.

The FAI and its rotorcraft commission, CIG,

Above: Andrew Tae and Mike Buckland demonstrate precision flying in Andrew's JetRanger
Inset: the World Championships in Germany were well organised and ran smoothly
Below: Team GB flies the flag in Eisenach before putting up its best-ever performance



need to take action to revitalise the Championships or see them die. A first step would be to shake up the events so that the competing teams do not know what tasks they will be asked to perform until the last moment. The contest then becomes more one of flying skill, less one of deep pockets. A crew who has spent hundreds of hours metronomically popping a boat fender into a barrel is likely to

shine if they're asked to pop a boat fender into a barrel; ask them to do something new and their mettle will be tested.

The CIG also needs to get away from partisan judging that sees officials making up or discarding rules as they go along. The British placed great store by learning the rules, with regular quizzes for team members; in particular, they had learned the relative penalties for every