

What would be the best tactical approach when competing at a f5j model glider competition?

In **F5J competitions**, the goal is to maximize your flight time and landing accuracy while minimizing your motor run height. The tricky part is balancing the need for a reliable start against the big score penalties for launching too high.

Here's a tactical breakdown of the best approach:

1. Pre-Flight Preparation

- **Know the weather:** Check wind strength, thermal activity, and cloud patterns. F5J is heavily influenced by thermal lift.
 - **Understand the field:** Scout for thermal trigger points — treelines, asphalt, plowed fields, or sunlit slopes that can generate lift.
 - **Model setup:** Use a climb angle and motor power setting that gives you quick height without overshooting your intended launch altitude.
 - **Watch earlier groups:** Note where thermals form (over trees, fields, buildings, slopes) how they move, and how strong they are.
 - **Wind and cloud clues:** Light puffs of wind shifting direction, birds circling, or small cumulus clouds forming are thermal indicators.
 - **Compare to your slot's start time:** Thermal cycles can last 5-10 minutes; if you see a cycle starting just before launch, plan accordingly.
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2. Launch Height Strategy

- **Don't just max height:** In F5J, every meter above 200m costs you 3 points (and below that, 0.5 points per meter from launch height).
 - **In strong thermal conditions:** Launch lower (60-120 m) if you're confident you can hook a thermal right away.
 - **In weak/marginal lift:** Launch higher (150-190 m) to give yourself more search time.
 - **Emergency conditions:** If you see no lift at all, it's better to go high and take the penalty than to land at 4 minutes.
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3. Flight Plan

- **Watch other pilots:** See where lift is being found before your slot. If someone hooks into a thermal, take note.
 - **Look for ground signs:** Dust devils, moving grass, shimmering air, birds circling.
 - **Scan during climb:** Even while motoring up, start looking for subtle cues.
 - **First 1-2 minutes:** Commit to finding lift quickly. If you don't find it in 30-60 s, be ready to cruise crosswind/downwind to a likely source.
 - **Once in lift:** Tight, efficient circling with slight bank adjustments; avoid "over-banking" which bleeds altitude.
 - **Avoid drifting too far:** Remember – F5J is scored on landing accuracy too. Plan to be in position for final glide with 2 minutes left.
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4. Flight Management

- **Hook and center early:** Once in a thermal, gently center and climb efficiently without overbanking.
 - **Know when to leave:** If lift weakens, move on before you sink too much.
 - **Wind drift control:** If strong winds are present, plan your thermal hunting so you can get back to the landing zone without rushing.
 - **10-minute target:** You want to land exactly at the end of your slot (10:00), preferably within 1 s after the horn for max points.
 - **Final glide:** Allow for altitude loss from turbulence and wind on the way back.
 - **Battery use:** Use the motor only once; conserve weight and avoid penalties.
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5. Landing Execution

- **Practice precision:** The landing tape points can decide placings in close competitions. The last 50 point often comes from spot landing accuracy.
 - **Plan your approach:** Don't just arrive high over the landing — manage height early so you enter final approach cleanly.
 - **Time your arrival:** In F5J, hitting the 10-minute mark is just as important as launch height. You want to touch down gently on the target mark as close to the 10:00 mark as possible.
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6. Tactical Adaptation

- **Early rounds:** Play it safer with slightly higher launches to avoid zero scores.
- **Later rounds:** If the leaderboard is close, you might risk lower launches to reduce penalties and gain edge.
- **Reading opponents:** If others are launching low and succeeding, you might need to match to stay competitive.
- **Planning:** Don't stick to a pre-set plan if conditions change.
- **In tricky air:** Shadow a skilled pilot in your group – they might find lift faster than you.
- **Drops:** If you bomb out early in one round, don't panic – F5J scoring drops the worst round.

Golden rule:

In F5J, you don't win by flying the longest — you win by *flying the longest from the lowest start height without missing time or landing points.*

F5J Tactical Decision Tree

Step 1 – Assess Before Launch

- Look for signs of lift:
 - ☒ Birds circling? Flags/wind socks shifting?
 - ☒ Dust devils or shimmering heat waves?
 - ☒ Cumulus forming or dissipating?
- Assess cycle timing:
 - If lift is on its way → Prepare for lower launch.
 - If cycle just peaked and air feels dead → Prepare for higher launch.

Step 2 – Decide Launch Height Strategy

IF strong signs of lift near launch area:

Target 60–100 m launch

ELSE IF mild cues, some lift patches:

Target 120–150 m launch

ELSE:

Target 160–190 m launch (play safe)

⚠ In finals or if you're ahead: favor *safer* launch.

⚡ If you need to catch up: take *riskier* low launches.

Step 3 – First 60 Seconds After Launch

- Goal: Find lift within 30–60 seconds after motor cut.
- If in lift:
 - Center quickly, tighten turns, slow the model slightly.
 - Monitor drift direction → stay in the core.
- If in sink:
 - Move *perpendicular to wind* toward likely triggers (tree lines, plowed fields, buildings).
 - Avoid chasing downwind thermals too far unless confident.

Step 4 – Mid Flight (Minutes 2–8)

IF altitude >150 m and still climbing:

Widen circles to conserve energy.

ELSE IF altitude <50 m and losing height fast:

Decide quickly – push out to new area or prepare for early

- Keep drift in mind—stay within comfortable glide distance.
- Avoid “overcooking” the turn; keep bank angle efficient.

Step 5 – Final Approach Decision (~Minute 8)

IF far from landing zone:

Start slow glide back, leave altitude buffer for turbulence

IF near zone and in lift:

Milk it until 9:45, then glide home.

- Adjust sink rate in final glide to arrive with 5–10 seconds buffer.