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Cover photograph by Athol Franz

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MX2 Formation Debut For **TEAM XTREME IN CHINA**

Text by Nigel Hopkins

In May of this year I took delivery of a new MX2 and soon had the plane in Europe. There was huge excitement as I was to embark on the first of a series of Red Bull Rookie Training camps in preparation for possible qualification as a Rookie Pilot.

This soon turned to disappointment as the camps never materialised and everything was cancelled at the last minute. I had to refocus on the Advanced World Aerobatic Championships (AWAC) and then prepare to ship the MX2 to South Africa.

How about sending it via China? Shortly before AWAC, Mark Hensman and I were invited to participate in the China International Airports' Fiesta in Laiwu, Shandong Province. As one of two formation teams and part of a seven pilot line-up in the four-minute freestyle contest, we of course jumped at the opportunity. Not only could we finally get the two MX2s together, but it was also a free ride home for my MX.

After a day and a half travelling from South Africa and many obstacles en route, we finally emptied the containers and assembled the planes alongside each other, hoping they would become comfortable together in anticipation of the formation flying. With the help of my father Derek, Mark Sampson and Bruce Saunders we had the planes flying three days before the event which gave us some time to practice the display. Although we both have many years of display flying experience it was the first time we were flying

together and of course in new planes. Mark led the formation as I moved around from number two to number three to line astern as wingman. The tremendous performance of the MX2 allowed us to start the performance from take-off, as the crowd, elevated from the runway on the massive grandstands, had the perfect view of the take-off from opposite ends of the 800m long runway. The plan to meet halfway for the start of the opposing manoeuvres worked very well despite some adjustments as the wind varied each day. The acceleration of the MX2 made this all very dramatic and also ensured minimal gaps in the display. We then joined up for the formation part of the sequence and to the delight of the crowd finished off with a heart in the sky.

The Chinese Government has invested a huge amount of money into aviation and the Aero Club on Lake Xueye near the city of Laiwu is arguably the most



picturesque venue for air sports. Once again the city of Laiwu played host to the China International Air Sports Fiesta. An unbelievable spectacle. Over 300 000 spectators and a few 100 million TV viewers watched the three-hour, daily festival of air sports, featuring hot air balloons, powered paragliders, helicopters, model aircraft, skydiving, formation aerobatics, parachute accuracy landings and freestyle aerobatics. There was something for everybody and the sky was generally full. Although the Fiesta had an airshow feel to it, all the different disciplines had competitions running. During the Fiesta a four-minute freestyle aerobatic contest took place, and despite the difficult conditions due to poor visibility and very few features upon which to focus over the lake, the Team Xtreme pilots finished high in the standings. I was fortunate to be placed second and Mark did tremendously well finishing fifth.

1st	Phillip Steinbach	Germany
2nd	Nigel Hopkins	South Africa
3rd	Castor Fantoba	Spain
4th	Zoltan Veres	Hungary
5th	Mark Hensman	South Africa
6th	Juan Verlade	Spain
7th	Daniel Ryfa	Sweden

The planes were disassembled and packed for shipping. They will travel 600km by road to Beijing and then by sea via Singapore to Cape Town. It is hoped that the two aircraft will make it to the season ending African Outdoor Group 'Ace of Base' Aerobatic contest in Vereeniging on 5 December this year. 🛩️



Nigel Hopkins



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