Reporter plunges into skydiving

By Lynn Silhasek

It doesn't sound much like a sport, does it—jumping from a plane 3,000 feet above any tennis court, golf course, or pool side.

"Why don't you try some nice safe sport, like hockey?" protested friends, who thought my enrolling in the Lincoln Sport Parachute Club (LSPC) skydiving class was more suicide than sport.

And when a skydiver, his leg in a cast up to the knee, hobbled through our classroom, I began to have second thoughts about making a jump.

"Let's not ask him how that happened," said a classmate.

Skydiving requires skill

But as club training officer Marv Helman explained the necessary equipment for skydiving, I wondered where the sport was in standing on a three-foot jumpstep more than half a mile above the ground, sweating in coveralls, combat boots and crash helmet, praying that the parachute in the 40-lb. pack harnessed to your back will open after you jump.

But "there's more to it than falling fat, dumb, and happy out of an airplane," Helman said.

Skydiving aerobatics and hook ups (skydivers joining in formations while falling) require the same accuracy, style, and precision needed in other sports, according to Helman. Even those of us in the class, as beginners, would be expected to steer the parachute toward a target.

Divers enthusiastic

Both beginners and veterans are the sport's enthusiasts. More than 60 people are LSPC members, according to Helman. They range from the novices with $65 "rags" (converted military paratroop equipment) to the professionals with $700 paraplanes (square-canopied parachutes that perform like gliders). On their coveralls they sew everything from the Superman "S", to the eight-man star patch, awarded to a skydiver who helps form an eight-man hook up star pattern that is held for six seconds.

When the winds are under 18 m.p.h. (10 for beginners), the skydivers jump from noon until dark, packing chutes, waiting their turn to climb the skies in the planes at Lincoln's Arrow Airport. For the beginners on static line jumps, where a 15-foot line attached to the pack breaks off and opens the chute, 3,000 feet is the jumping-off point. Those who freefall (pull their own ripcord) "punch-off" at 3,500 feet and upward.

Motivations

What is it in the sport that persuades people to spend their evenings and weekends taking these 2½-3½-minute rides down to where they started from? The answers are as varied as the people who make the jumps.

Skydiving provides people with the chance to "get away from their own problems," Helman said.

"People are looking for adventure and about the only thing left for them is outer space," he said. "Skydiving's one of the few frontiers left that a person can explore as an individual.

"It's completely different from any other kind of sport," said Brian Etmund, 25, a carpenter who has made almost 500 jumps and holds an expert skydiving license. "When you jump, you're all alone up there."

"It's something I've been waiting to do for about 30 years and I finally got around to it," said Vern Hansen, 44, a Dorsey Laboratories employee. According to Hansen, he received the money to enroll in the skydiving class as a Father's Day present. He has made five jumps so far.

"They all think I'm crazy at work," he said.

Serenity in sport

"Before you jump, you've got the mental hassle, you're uptight, and the plane is making all of this noise," said Vance Stone, 30, a musician with 30 jumps. "Then you punch off, and it's you, and the canopy—and serenity."

"We've got some guys in the club who can't climb 20-foot ladders," Stone added. "But they freefall with no problem."

Some of the "guys" who jump are women.

"That parachute isn't going to discriminate, if you've got the guts to jump," said Stone.

June Reimer, 26, a nurse at Bryan Hospital, has made 54 jumps.

"It was just something I always wanted to do," she said.

"That first time when the canopy opened and I came down, I thought 'wow this is great'!" She now owns her own equipment. "It's gotten into my blood."

Jim Hesson, a club member, started parachuting in Green Beret training. A University of Nebraska-Lincoln physical education instructor, he taught the club's skydiving course through the university during a 1974 summer session. Other club jumpers include servicemen, policemen and a chemical engineer, according to Helman.

Sport different

Most of the jumpers make 50-75 jumps a year on the average, although some have made as many as 200, he said.

What keeps them jumping, said Helman, who has made 600 jumps and holds an expert license, is that "you're experiencing feelings you've never experienced on this earth." For example, on freefall jumps, the body travels speeds of 120 m.p.h. if the skydiver waits 12 seconds to pull the ripcord, he said.

That's the closest you can come to weightlessness on earth," Helman said.

Anyone who would want to travel at that speed, falling 176 feet per second, must have landed on his head one too many times, many people probably reason.

But "jumpers aren't suicidal," Stone said. "Only dummies die. A jumper knows that if he blows it, he's going to end up with a chunk of real estate in his mouth."

Hazards involved

But the sport does have its hazards. On one jump, Stone, after pulling the rip cord, looked up to check whether his chute had opened properly, normal skydiving procedure. What he saw was "a piece of garbage," a Mae West, where parachute lines had crossed over the canopy, dividing it into two lumps. Recognizing the situation, he immediately "cut away from" (discarded) his main chute and pulled his reserve parachute to land safely.

Sometimes the calls are closer. The parachute might not open at all, a total malfunction. A Mae West is a partial malfunction.

Both kinds of malfunctions, which describe a failure of the parachute system, stem from several possible causes, such as improper packing of the chute, or instability of the jumper in the air, according to Helman. He estimated that a malfunction has occurred on only one out of 1500 LSPC student jumps over the past five years. If a malfunction should occur, however, the skydiver can take corrective action and land safely, he said.

Equipment checked

But on the Fourth of July when I made the jump, I was having too much trouble putting on the harness to be worried about how to cut away from it if something went wrong.

"Wait a minute. You want these tighter," said one skydiver who came to my assistance. He yanked the leg straps, getting plenty of slack.

He did the same to the harness cape wells straps, riveting the packed chute to my back. The cape wells, devices with which a skydiver cuts away from a malfunction, had to rest just below the collar bone, one on each side of the head.

"If you had 'em any higher, when the chute would open, they'd be way above your head," the skydiver said. "If you had a malfunction, you'd be fighting to get at them."

Preparations in plane

Bob Briggs, the chemical engineer in the club, took over instructions. As our jumpmaster, he would go up in the plane with us and determine at what location we would jump. On the grounded plane, he demonstrated the position we were to assume when jumping off; body spread-eagle, back arched. Look up at the plane after the jump to hold the position and insure proper opening of the chute, he said.

The plane we would jump from didn't look like it could reach the speed of nearly 80 m.p.h. it would reach before we jumped. A three-passenger Cessna 182, it would hold the pilot, the jumpmaster, and two students.

"Ladies first, huh?" Briggs asked. As another student climbed into the back seat, I wedged myself into the front, with the pilot on one side and the open doorway on the other. Crouched on the plane floor, the helmet and pack weighing down my head and back, I could see only as far ahead as the control panel, a foot away.

Gaining altitude

Radio communications were coming in to the pilot, but they were soon drowned out by the engine roar, as the plane taxied roughly down the gravel runway, took off and gained altitude.

It's funny how the lawns and fields I saw through the doorway begin to look like quilt squares when you're up in an airplane, just like the storybooks said they would. If you can stand to look at them.

But as the plane turned sharply, I began to "get a lot of G's". As I understood it, it's a condition where the insides of your body have a tendency to continue in the same direction in which the plane was first going. As I felt it, it was nauseous.

Exit point

So I kept my eyes on the control panel dials and listened to information on our position coming over the radio. Briggs occasionally shouted to the pilot over the noise of the wind to change position to reach the exit point.

As we approached the point, Briggs shouted to me "feet out!" I slowly turned to my right until I faced the doorway, stuck my feet out on the jumpstep, and looked out over the great outdoors of Lincoln. My sense of direction was gone, I discovered, and the airport along with it. All of the squares were identical. I couldn't distinguish any one of them as the target.

"Get out!" Briggs yelled. Grasping the strut, the structure connecting the wings to the body, I stepped out of the plane. The wind pulled at and billowed my coveralls, as I inched toward the end of the jumpstep. Over the exit point, the pilot cut the engine.

"Go!" shouted Briggs. "But where's the target?" I yelled back—and jumped.

Alone in sky

For four seconds, I was falling helplessly, blinded by the blue I was descending into, stretching my limbs until the harness straps bit into my shoulders and legs, squinting up at the plane that was gliding silently away, leaving me alone.

The tug at my back of the static line breaking jarred me back into thinking. In one thunder clap-like sound, the chute inflated, dragging me upward, stopping my fall. I looked up to see yards of nylon mushroomed above my head. The normal "TU" pattern in the panels was there. No blown panels, no Mae West. No malfunction. Just me, the canopy—and complete quiet.

I grabbed the steering toggles and looked down to se where I was headed. If I didn't start maneuvering my chute, I'd be in four feet of water in 2½ minutes. So I started to do all kinds of steering, pulling one toggle, then the other, then both, never facing any one direction for any length of time.

Landing

I hung there, forgetting to establish a line of ground objects leading up to the target and keep my toes at a 90-degree angle to it. I didn't even look for the target. What I did do was to look down at that water, think how in the hell am I going to get out of here, and "hold" (face directly) into the wind. That assured me a landing short of the target.

I did clear the water, landing on the bank of the pond. But I landed hard. Forgetting to aviod looking at the ground, I saw it coming up, stiffened, and broke the ankles-knees-locked-together position. One side took the full force of hitting the ground. My style was sloppy, but I was back on something solid again.

Field packing my chute, I carried it the half a mile back to the runway, expecting "welcome-to-the club" praises for having made my first jump. But I found out I had been shown up.

"Did you see the streakers?" a skydiver asked me. When I was jumping, two males had streaked the fields near the target. "You didn't? What were you doing up there?"

I'm still asking myself that question.

Photo by Harry Baumert.

Lynn Silhasek questions the logic of ever attempting to parachute as she rests after her first landing.