

What's HAPPENING

Guide to Local Arts, Entertainment & Events

free

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Discover Skydiving!



WHO JUMPS OUT OF A PERFECTLY GOOD PLANE?
About 30,000 people each year, who make 2 million sport jumps, say officials with the U.S. Parachute Association. Jumping in Lane County, chutists here have been at the sport for more than 20 years.

Jumper-Jerry Kautz

by Rick Beasley

For the first-time jumper who leaves the step of a Cessna 170 at 4,000 feet over the neat patchwork of open grass fields and clustered rural junctions 10 miles north of Eugene, a new world will open up in seconds as a giant "Mighty Mac" square parachute spreads out.

More wing than parachute, the 200 square foot ram-air canopy that will lower the new jumper to earth is a far cry from the old round chutes still used by the military. The student literally flies the parachute with a pull on the left or right toggle resulting in a crisp turn. To slow the fast forward speed of the canopy (about 25 mph), the jumper brakes the chute in a stall-like maneuver about 15 feet off the

ground. Flying into the wind, the chutist touches earth so gently that she's able to make a "stand-up" landing — unheard of under a military surplus canopy.

Skydiving has been a highly-visible and popular sport in Lane County for the last two decades. But many wondered if the activity could survive the tragic death last year of Jim Wright, Sr., a highly-respected veteran of 5,000-plus jumps who was killed when he failed to open his chute at the popular drop zone (DZ) he operated eight miles east of Harrisburg.

While the fabled DZ, which sported a packing loft, hangar, showers and a hot tub, has been closed for good, Wright's son, Dave, continues to train new jumpers and provide a plane for 30 or 40 experienced chutists at near-

by Daniels Field. The turf runway and row of hangars run parallel to I-5 near the Narrisburg exit, although the actual jumpsite is two miles away. A DZ auto shuttles the jumpers back and forth.

While his father trained an estimated 10,000 jumpers, including well over a thousand U of O students, Dave Wright, 27, is merely keeping the sport alive until a permanent DZ location can be found. Still, he trains up to a half-dozen students every Saturday at Daniels Field, weather permitting. The \$100 first-jump course, which begins at 9:30 am, includes six hours of ground and classroom instruction that is focused largely on emergency procedures and safe flying techniques.

"We're training students on the lat-

est, safest gear available," says Wright, a licensed jumpmaster with over 500 skydives. "We're still having lots of fun, and we're looking for a strip and a building to be the site of our new Wright's Sky Ranch."

The death of an experienced jumper locally belies the extraordinary leap in safety in the sport over the last decade. Square parachutes and round reserves with extremely low malfunction rates, refined training techniques and a plethora of safety gear from wrist-mount altimeters and helmet beepers that alert the jumper to open the chute to container-mounted automatic opening devices have greatly reduced parachuting accidents. National figures indicate that 30,000 skydivers made about 2 million jumps

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30 July 1987