

Out of Bounds



Courtesy Photo

The Big Plunge

Skydivers present 'recreation' once only for the daring few.

Tossing one's self out of an airplane that is not on fire or otherwise in danger of falling out of the sky may seem like a sport only for the person who has been "touched," or has the IQ of, well, the person jumping right after them.

However, about 20 hardcore skydivers, the kind Dave Wright calls "true" skydivers, regularly step from the doors of perfectly good airplanes and into the hazy blue skies of the southern Willamette Valley. Wright, son of skydiving pioneer Jim Wright who taught a skydiving class at the University for better than 10 years, is an avid skydiver who has made more than 500 jumps since he first took up the sport in 1981.

Although most people probably think of skydiving as exotic and dangerous, Wright calls it simply recreation. He acknowledges that before the 1950s, people who jumped from cliffs or towers with fixed-frame canvas-covered parachutes, and much later from airplanes with a backpack full of silk strapped to

them, were daredevils. Wright says back then you might experience a malfunction in one out of every 200 jumps, but because of improvements in technology that has changed to something on the order of one malfunction out of every 10,000 jumps.

Surprisingly, the parachute far predates the airplane, and evidence indicates parachutes even predate the hot-air balloon, a popular mode of transportation for the 18th- and 19th-century daredevils who had a penchant for hurling themselves earthward from the upper atmosphere.

Sketchy details seem to indicate that as early as the 1100s a few hearty Chinese fellows may have been leaping from high crags with the aid of "rigid umbrella-like structures" for amusement.

The first solid evidence of a device that would allow a man to be safely lowered to earth is found in the sketches of Leonardo da Vinci around 1495, three years after Christopher Colum-

bus discovered America. No evidence exists that da Vinci ever built a working model of his pyramid-shaped parachute.

The first jump in Europe was made from a tower in Venice, Italy, sometime around the turn of the 17th century with a chute made of a wooden canvas-covered frame.

The first recorded parachuting fatality came in 1837 when Robert Cocking's 107-foot diameter, 200-pound inverted-cone parachute collapsed over Lea Green in Great Britain sending him to an untimely death.

The collapsible parachute was invented in 1785 by J.P. Blanchard and was made of silk. Before this all parachutes were held open by a rigid frame. In 1903 the Wright brothers made their monumental first powered flight at Kittyhawk, N.C., and the sport of skydiving was never the same.

One of the pioneers of the sport was a woman named Tiny Broadwick. She is credited in 1914 with the first jump in which the chute was not opened



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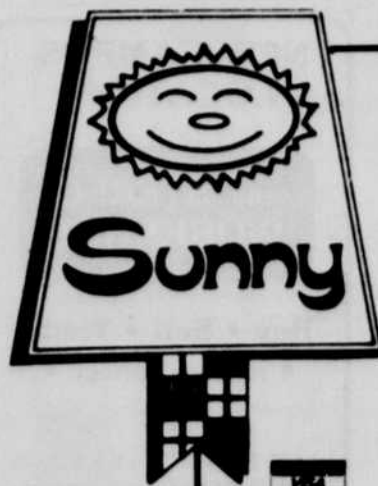
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