Skydiving: a leap into the horizon

by Jan Crerar of the Peak

Beginners are a common sight at Horizon Aerosports in Vancouver. The school has been in operation since 1972, and owner Jerry Harper estimates his staff train 1,400 students each year. It seems likely a significant number of the world's one million sports parachutists know of the Horizon centre.

Across Canada, 1,000 students enrol in the Canadian Sport Parachuting Association's first-jump courses each year. About one-third stay in the sport, according to the CSPA, which has eight training centres.

photo Martin Beales

While the sport itself is a relatively recent development, the parachute is a centuries-old obsession. In the 15th century, Leonardo da Vinci made sketches of a simple parachute, no doubt a prudent afterthought to his airship plans. The first successful descent was made from a balloon in 1797 by Garnerin, a French aeronaut. History mercifully obscures earlier attempts.

By the turn of the century, more-or-less reliable chutes had been developed, and were employed by both sides during World War I. Some strategists argued against issuing parachutes to pilots, claiming airmen might cravenly abandon their aircraft at the slightest hint of danger. However, such wholesale abandonment did not occur, and many lives were saved.

Parachute stunts were popular attractions at airshows during the 1930's. Most of the earlier chutes, though, were bulky and unworkable, and some showed an alarming tendency to catch on the fuselage of the plane. The danger provided a spicy alternative to the usual barnstorming, but was a little hard on jumpers.

World War II spurred a revolution in parachute technology. Improved reliability and control enabled paratroopers to drop into previously inaccessible areas, often behind enemy lines. And by the war's end, thousands were familiar with parachutes and were eager to explore their recreational capabilities. Sport parachuting was born.

Parachutes quickly underwent some major changes in design. Most military users, like today's novices, employed a static line to deploy the canopy. When the chutist jumped, a line connecting the pack to the aircraft jerked the chute out of its pack. Two seconds later, all going well, the parachute opened.

Sports parachutists soon abandoned the security of the static line for the freedom of manual control. By using a ripcord to time the deployment of the canopy, the modern jumper is able to extend the time between leaving the plane and opening the chute. These seconds, spent hurtling toward the ground at almost 100 miles per hour, are enthusiastically referred to by jumpers as "freefall."

During freefall, parachutists (now dubbed skydivers) are able to perform a wide variety of manoeuvers — turns, rolls, loops, and changes in direction and rate of fall. Competitions take place all over the world, in which jumpers perform preselected routines and are judged on style, speed, and expertise. In accuracy contests, participants are required to land on a target less than a meter in diameter. Water and night jumps also have their devotees.

A new and growing variation of the sport is relative work, performed by groups of jumpers working together. In freefall or under canopy, 'chutists like to form circles or other patterns, or vary fall speed to achieve complex aerial manoeuvres. With the development of safer, delicately controlled canopies, relative work can even involve "stacking", with one jumper actually standing on the open canopy of the parachutist below. Members of the Horizon Club have been pioneers in the development of this new phase, and are among the world's best relative artists.

All forms of parachuting require enormous amounts of practice in order to achieve proficiency, let alone excellence. Actual airtime is measured in seconds, and it may take years to obtain the experience necessary for competition or complex stunting.

And experience does not come cheap. At Horizon, a beginner course involving four hours on-the-ground instruction and one jump costs about $125. Subsequent jumps cost $25. Good parachutes can run about $3,000, with jumpsuits, helmets, footwear, and altimeters extra.

Obviously, those who wish to take up the sport on a regular basis must be prepared to sacrifice large chunks of time and money. What kind of person is willing to do this? At Horizon, many of the experienced jumpers were young. There was a fair proportion of women. Many I spoke to had literally based their lives on the sport — their work financed it, they lived near the center, and their friends, for the most part, were other jumpers. Several, including Harper, were champions at the international level. All were very intensely involved in the sport.

Jerry Harper is more prosaic. "I just enjoy it more than anything else."

According to the pros, newcomers often have other motives. Many, they say, are young and rather uninformed. They are used to those who take one jump and never return. Often, it seems to be a "test of manhood" or courage, and one jump is all that's needed or desired.

But the experts insist parachuting involves much more than just one static line jump. Those who return find a changing, flexible sport in which there is room for every type of individual.

But what actually pulled them into parachuting and kept them coming back? For some, like Barb Davies, it was the mastery of self. "Jumping makes you special, unique. You can master your own thoughts."

Dave Bloxham agreed. "I was so scared the first time, I wanted to try it again and conquer the fear," he said. "And I was hooked."

Many jumpers found the fear and the beauty of freefall addictive. "It's a thrill, a buzz," said Jacques Provost. "Every jump is different, and every one is a new chance for perfection."

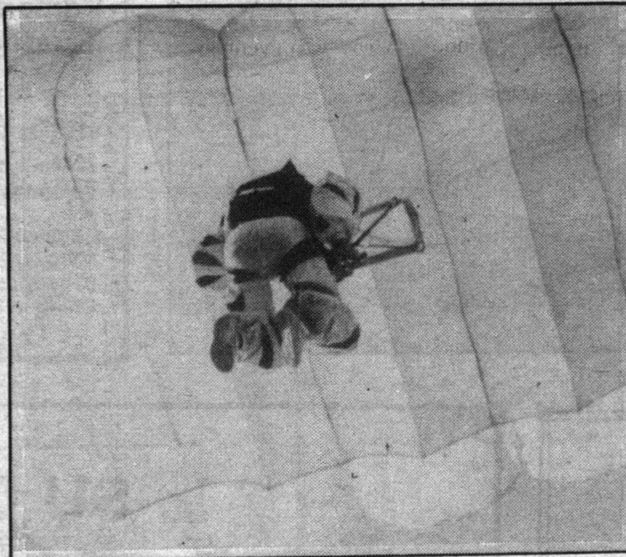
I am terrified.

In fact, as I stare at the green fields and miniscule buildings far below, I realize I have never been so scared. My mind has slowed to a crawl. I do not hear the drone of the plane's engine or feel the weight of my pack. Cold air howls at the open side of the Cessna. In moments, due to a rational decision made with both feet safely on the ground, I'll be falling, screaming, through that cold air. And now, the firm ground is 2,800 feet below.

One by one, the jumpers ahead of me position themselves at the door and...disappear. The jumpmaster hauls in the static lines. Some bewildered part of me wonders why the people aren't still attached. Too soon, a hand reaches for my static line — it's my turn. I gingerly edge over to the gaping exit, a cautious and very uncoordinated crab. So much for the glamor of skydiving.

Suddenly, half of me is outside the plane. My body must have crept out there of its own accord — God knows I would never deliberately do anything so crazy. My hands, carefully trained, attach themselves to the appropriate bits of aircraft. I face the jumpmaster, who looks intent and traitorously relaxed.

I wait . . .



. . . At last, the signal comes — "Go!"

Despite every instinct, my hands push off from the fuselage. My body arches. As I count, the rush of air past my eyes and mouth feels frighteningly powerful. Inside, I am screaming "Please let my parachute open, oh please!!"

Something brushes past my helmet. A gentle tug at my shoulders, and suddenly the air no longer howls. I look up and, blessed sight, a huge parachute ripples gently above. It is calm, peaceful, and so isolated. I relax.

Too soon, the ground looms at my feet. Regretfully, I prepare myself, and land with surprising softness in the green grass.

Judging by the idiot grin on my face, some part of me must glory in the open sky, the floating sensation, and even the fear. I feel energetic and very much alive as I gather my canopy and my wits.

I'll be back.