

TOP STORIES

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Skydivers to drop into Rhythm & Booms

GENA KITTNER gkittner@madison.com

Around 7 tonight, four Wisconsin skydivers plan to exit a Cessna at 7,500 feet and sail gracefully into a safety zone among a sea of spectators in Warner Park.

The skydivers - members of the Seven Hills Skydivers Club - are a traditional, much-awaited warm-up act to the annual Rhythm & Booms fireworks display.

This year's spectacle will serve a dual purpose by celebrating Madison's 150th anniversary and Independence Day. For the anniversary celebration, the section of the park at the corner of Troy and Northport drives will be named Sesquicentennial Park for the day. The area will feature a stage for multicultural performances and will have a variety of ethnic foods available. Admission to the park is free.

Skydiving into Warner Park is a challenge for the jumpers because they have to land in a small safety zone, said Rich Kuckkahn, a skydiving instructor and club member. "Accuracy has to be a premium. The people who do it are very experienced."

The four jumpers tonight have more than 50 years of skydiving experience between them.

"You've got to think about it because it's a lot different," said Bill Grace, one of the skydivers from Madison. "You want to err on the side of caution," he said. For example, the skydivers won't fly over the crowd.

The skydivers will all exit the aircraft at the same time - hanging on to each other - then spread out and open their parachutes at different altitudes, said Greg Porter, a club member. "The crowd gets a big charge out of it."

The club has been a nonprofit organization for 44 years and has performed demonstration jumps for about a dozen of Rhythm & Booms' 14 years.

"I think it's primarily a vicarious thrill for people," said Terry Kelly, president of Madison Fireworks Fund, who agrees the skydivers are an annual hit with the crowd.

The club has been a loyal supporter of Rhythm & Booms, donating much of the cost of its performance, he said. "They do it for the love of it."

The club, which has about 85 members, is an all-volunteer, member-owned organization. It works to promote skydiving and introduce people to the sport by training students and performing demonstration jumps.

The club, named after the road where it originated, trains around 300 students every year, with the majority coming from Dane County. "We jump as often as we can," Kuckkahn said.

Most of the students are from 20 to 40, but Kuckkahn said he's had people in their 80s jump as well. The minimum age to skydive is 18. Club members donate time for student training and tandem jumps. It usually costs around \$150 to \$175 to make a first jump, he said.

Kuckkahn said skydiving experienced a real upsurge in the 1990s, but he said he's seen a slight decline in interest in the last six years, possibly because it's expensive and time-consuming compared to other adventure sports such as rock climbing or mountain biking.

While the idea of skydiving may terrify some, Don Woods of Beaver Dam, who will be one of the jumpers tonight, says he does it for "relaxation."

"It gets your mind off of everything else in the world," he said.

Rain, winds of more than 15 mph or clouds below 4,000 feet, could ground the skydivers tonight. The forecast for today calls for a chance of scattered thunderstorms.



JOHN MANIACI - State Journal

Jim Rasmussen, a member of the Seven Hills Skydivers Club, heads for the landing target trailing an American flag during a practice jump Thursday at the club's drop zone near Marshall.