

Diving the friendly skies

By: [Julia Shiplett](#) / The Daily Cardinal

As the sun rose and I sleepily steered my car north, I asked myself a simple question: Why did I want to get into a tiny plane with three strangers only to jump out of it at 3,500 feet again—by myself nonetheless? But I did not have time to answer. I needed to get to my skydiving course at the Seven Hills Skydivers clubhouse, so I finished my coffee and gunned it down Highway 151.

Seven Hills Skydivers is a non-profit, all-volunteer club run by its members consisting of licensed jumpers or individuals in the process of becoming licensed. Annual membership dues and income generated by teaching courses keep the club running. This tight-knit group that considers itself a big, extended family, instructs classes, assists with jumps and manages the dropzone. They have one major commitment—spreading the passion of skydiving to the people of Madison and nearby areas. Many of them have more than 1,000 jumps under their belts or are working toward that number.

Their clubhouse, at 7530 Hwy 73 in Marshall, Wis., where classes are taught, is just about as eclectic as its members with signs like, “Altitude is your friend” adorning the walls and the constant smell of pizza wafting throughout. Saturdays are busy around the clubhouse when instructor-assisted deployment courses are taught.

Doing it yourself

An IAD jump is when one exits the aircraft with the help of an instructor, often called a jumpmaster, who throws the students’ pilot chutes out for them. The pilot chute then activates the opening of the main parachute once it catches air, and the skydiver is in total control afterward by steering and landing their own canopy with the guidance of a radio contact. Because divers’ pilot chutes are thrown out for them, there are only a few moments of free fall before the canopy opens. But the trip down, usually lasting between three to five minutes, is an experience of complete independence. The other kind of jump offered for beginners is called tandem, where a jumper is harnessed to an instructor who controls deploying, steering and landing the parachute.

Dick Meseberg, a skydiver of 23 years who jumped three times on his very first day, said choosing between the two methods depends on what one is after. “Some want to experience the full experience of skydiving,” so IAD is best, he said. “IAD puts a little more pressure on you because you have more responsibility. ... But I’ve seen the same smile on both people [who did the two kinds of jumps],” said Dottie Davenport, another club member who promised herself she would skydive when she turned 40.

No. 1 priority

The first portion of the day was dedicated to procedures of safety, aircraft exits, landings and cases of emergency. This included signing standard paperwork that comes with engaging in any extreme sport. One of the class instructors, Bob

“Goldie” Payne, a little man with long, gray hair covered by a baseball cap, pounded away at the importance of safety but continued to remind us to have fun.

“Don’t have too much fun though or you’ll have to pay double,” he said with a smirk.

When someone in the class brought up the concern of running into something, Goldie responded: “The only way you got to those trees was because you flew yourself there.” Although leaping thousands of feet from a plane may seem to contradict the idea of safety, it is the club’s first priority.

“The sport itself is actually very safe. If your equipment is in tune, it’s the person that’s the wildcard,” Meseberg said.

Human error and bad reactions are the biggest risk, he said. According to the U.S. Parachute Association, there were 21 reported skydiving fatalities in the country last year.

Club member and jumpmaster Rich Kuckkahn, who has never been injured or had to use his reserve parachute in his 19 years of skydiving, agrees. “I always tell my students it’s like driving a car—wheels don’t fall off or the car doesn’t just blow up. It’s mental error. They’ve made bad decisions with a perfectly good parachute over their head.”

Ironically, Davenport sees breaking her back from a major turn low to the ground two years ago as a blessing: “I always had back problems and went to the hospital for it.” She says she would not have done so if it were not for her injury. Now she recalls her grandchildren saying, “Grandma’s a skydiver!”

One major element of ensuring safety is close monitoring of the weather, and that is when patience is mandatory for the sport. At Seven Hills, wind speeds may be no greater than 14 mph for beginning students and must be at a stable speed for at least 45 minutes prior to jumping. Along with abiding by all Federal Aviation Administration laws in terms of equipment and aircraft maintenance, the club follows USPA rules prohibiting jumps through or right next to clouds.

Despite the sunshine and relatively clear sky, the winds had not died down enough by the late afternoon. I was forced to drive home in frustration but with a tinge of relief as the nervous knot in my stomach faded away. I returned another Saturday in hopes that luck would be on my side and the specific weather conditions would be met. They were and the wait was worth it.

The experience

After gearing up and reviewing safety procedures in a practice harness, Kuckkahn, two other jumpers and I walked toward the aircraft. During the ride, the realization of what was actually about to happen set in as I anxiously felt us get higher in the air and saw the dropzone get farther away. After 10 minutes I glanced at the altimeter strapped to my hand—4500 feet. My stomach churned and I had to remind myself to breathe.

Suddenly the door swung open and it was my turn. The logical feeling of fear was gone once the blasting air and roaring wind dominated my senses. But as my body left the plane and my canopy quickly opened, I was flooded with an unparalleled sense of peace I had never felt before. I watched the setting sun cast a golden sheen on the distant fields and roads below my feet. Experienced jumpers are familiar with this tranquility. “No tractor, no motor. It’s just silence, silence you can’t replicate,” said Meseberg of the canopy ride. On the drive home, adrenaline still flowing through me, I understood why I wanted to skydive: to experience something most others have not and to show myself I am capable of more than I usually think. It is this mix of thrill, sense of accomplishment and serenity the club hopes to keep alive and expand. “If we keep people around who just want to support the sport and it’s not about money,” said Meseberg, “the club will survive.”