

"Fun jumpers" take the leap from 3 miles up

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"Fun jumpers" get their thrills plunging in free fall from 1 to as much as 3 miles above the ground at a brisk pace: 120 miles per hour. This group (from foreground) — Rusty Sullivan, David Fogleman Olathe and Jay Fabing — find their aerial entertainment through Skydive KC in Butler, Missouri. Photo: Tribune News Service

BUTLER, Mo. — Come in a Mercedes Benz, come in a beater, nobody cares.

If you make jumping out of an airplane a regular thing, that's good enough for the bunch on the ground at the small airport in the Bates County seat of Butler, Missouri.

Weekend mornings, the gravel lot fills up with everyone from lawyers to window washers, retired folks to college students, many if not most of them from the Kansas City, Mo., area.

All ages, all walks and once here, they are the same. They come for that one minute when nothing else matters, the one minute when life makes perfect sense.

These "fun jumpers" climb aboard Skydive Kansas City's Beechcraft King Air and ascend in blue sky high enough to see Truman Lake 30 miles to the east. Then out the door they go more than 14,000 feet above green farmland.

The one minute? That's how long it takes to free-fall from roughly three miles to one mile at 120 miles per hour with salvation packed on their back.

“This consumes you,” said Aaron Jensen, 39, an information technology guy from Peculiar, Mo., with 1,100 jumps. “Nothing like it in the world.”

Golf? Please.

Only skydivers know why others do it because it's why they do it. Only they know when to nod when the stories are told. They are family. Things that happen up there — and that's a lot of things — are like old things in the attic they've all seen.

They jump. They hang out in the packing hut between jumps, longer in rain. They crank the music and party at the RV campground on Saturday nights. Someone hits the fence on landing that day — beers all around, on them.

Theirs is a bond forged in adrenaline, neighbors on a two-mile road.

“These are my brothers and sisters,” said Jay Fabing, a para-educator from Gardner, Mo. “I trust them with my life up there.”

The bucket list people, the ones who pay \$200 for a one-time tandem jump, pay the bills at Skydive KC.

“But the fun jumpers bring the buzz,” said Skydive KC owner Chris Hall. “They swoop in with the cool suits and little fast parachutes — they put on a show, and that's inspiring to students and first-timers.”

Enter John Duckworth.

He's 31, a window washer from Kansas City who had never even been on a plane until his first tandem jump. He was sitting on a picnic table looking at his phone outside the main building at Skydive KC when something flashed above him.

“I didn't even know he was there,” Duckworth said. “It looked like he came in too hot, but then slowed and landed on his feet like it was nothing.

“I knew right then I wanted to be part of this forever.”

Other drop zones in the area provide much the same services and camaraderie as Skydive KC.

Falcon Skydiving is at Noah's Ark Airport in Kansas City, North, and Missouri River Valley Skydiving is in Henrietta, Mo.

On a recent Saturday morning, rain had stopped, but clouds hung thick over Skydive KC's drop zone in Butler, an hour south of Kansas City.

The King Air sat fueled, ready and wet. First-timers checked in for tandem jumps. Then waited. Gulp.

Out in the fun jumpers' packing hut, they checked gear and talked. But not a lot about regular jobs.

“Everybody comes here for different reasons,” said David Lang, 24, who coaches indoor skydiving at iFLY in Overland Park, Mo. “But everybody's the same when we get here.”

Some read, one slept. Somebody ran into Butler to get goodies from Koehn Bakery, a local favorite.

Everybody watched the sky. Inside the main building, Hall, the owner, monitored the weather on his laptop.

“I think we’re looking at 1 (p.m.),” he said.

Hall, 44, has jumped out of an airplane about 5,500 times. He opened the Butler business in June 1998, something he’d wanted to do ever since watching his dad, a door gunner in Vietnam, jump at a small field in Paola, Kansas.

“It was harder to jump back then,” he said. “Not a lot of places to do it. My parents didn’t want me to do it, but I jumped as soon as I turned 18 and pretty much haven’t stopped since.

“If there’s not a wedding or a funeral, I’m here every weekend.”

Skydive KC has seen steady growth over the years. The King Air, which holds 16, goes up about 25 times a weekend, reaching altitude in nine minutes with a lot of tandem first-timers. Then there are students.

Fun jumpers fill out the loads. This never gets old to them, and they never stop learning. They bring their own gear and pay \$26 per jump. Skydiving is not a cheap pastime. Getting certified costs about \$3,000. Parachutes run twice that, or more.

“This gets to be an \$8,000 hobby pretty fast,” Hall said.

Skydivers would say it's worth every nickel.

“Where else do you get to live in the moment?” asked Derek Wallen, who came to Butler from Omaha, Nebraska, for a special team jump practice. “Our lives are about jobs, wives, kids, the house, money.

“It is only here, jumping, when we truly live in the moment. Nothing else matters up there. Nothing.”

That’s why Jennifer Fisher loves it. She’s 49, a hospital patient experience coordinator.

She shook her head at the rambling title.

“I listen to complaints,” Fisher said. “After a week of that, I need this place. Six years ago, I won a free tandem jump in a fundraiser. Now I have 400 jumps.”

Back on the ground after her 100th, she was put back to back with a guy who just did his 500th.

“They covered us with pie and mustard and salsa,” she said laughing at the memory. “I love this place.

“You want a common denominator — I’d say fun jumpers tend to be Type A personalities.

“Yeah, I think we’re all walking a line.”

By noon, cracks of blue sky appeared in the clouds.

That sent four guys, including Fabing, the para-educator, outside for practice in the grass behind the hut. This team has jumped together for years. The walk-through of their in-air routine looked like a square dance.

“It worked,” one commented when finished.

“It always works on the ground,” chuckled David Wayne, a United Postal Service supervisor.

Inside the main building, Brian Poston, 64, a retired band teacher from Kansas City who shoots videos for Skydive KC, said the biggest misconception about skydivers is that they are reckless.

He shook his head.

“Very detail-oriented, very meticulous,” said Poston, who has more than 4,100 jumps.

“They have to be. They’re not daredevils. Beach bums, more like it.”

They can be a nomadic bunch. There are a lot of drop zones around the country. Folks will always feed and put up a fellow skydiver.

Hall said he has seen lives changed. People going through a rough patch have found solid footing in free fall.

That’s the case with Duckworth. He said he’d gone through a dark place earlier this year -- girl trouble, money trouble.

“I’m still just a student, but this place has changed my life,” he said.

Early afternoon, the team of four headed to the runway. They stopped at a parked car along the way and talked to regular pilot Les Gorden, who was sidelined with a broken arm.

A retired Delta pilot, Gorden owns the plane — about \$350,000 worth of plane by the way. He’s never jumped, but has spent a lot of time around fun jumpers.

“They hoot and holler a lot, but they’re good kids,” he said. “They’ll do anything for you.”

Fifteen or so minutes later and back on the ground, David Wayne shrugged when asked if the jump went as well as practice on the ground.

“When it goes right — great,” he said. “And when it doesn’t, you make fun of the guy who messed up.”

He laughed. He’ll be back. They all will. Fun jumpers always come back -- for the one minute when nothing else matters, the one minute when everything makes sense — and makes up a lifetime.

Quiz

- 1 The author develops the idea that fun jumpers have a special bond in each of the following ways EXCEPT:
- (A) by showing how they spend time between jumps
 - (B) by explaining the intensity of sharing the experience
 - (C) by explaining the high costs of skydiving
 - (D) by sharing their stories of discovering the hobby
- 2 Which of the following BEST represents the approach that MOST fun jumpers take toward jumping?
- (A) They are not as excited as they were the first time they jumped.
 - (B) They are frightened but they keep on jumping anyway.
 - (C) They are reckless and just want to jump as many times as possible.
 - (D) They are very careful and pay close attention to what they are doing.
- 3 Read the sentence from the article.

That's how long it takes to free-fall from roughly three miles to one mile at 120 miles per hour with salvation packed on their back.

What is communicated by the word "salvation" in the sentence?

- (A) the idea that skydiving is a regular activity with very few actual risks
- (B) the sense that nothing can save them if they make one small mistake
- (C) the dual ideas of the riskiness and deep importance of skydiving to fun jumpers
- (D) the two senses of boredom and fear that skydivers feel when they jump out of the plane

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Which selection from the article demonstrates the meaning of "camaraderie" as used in the sentence below?

Other drop zones in the area provide much the same services and camaraderie as Skydive KC.

- (A) "This consumes you," said Aaron Jensen, 39, an information technology guy from Peculiar, Mo., with 1,100 jumps.
- (B) "These are my brothers and sisters," said Jay Fabing, a para-educator from Gardner, Mo.
- (C) "But the fun jumpers bring the buzz," said Skydive KC owner Chris Hall.
- (D) "Everybody comes here for different reasons," said David Lang, 24, who coaches indoor skydiving at iFLY in Overland Park, Mo.