

Flying High

Skydiving soars in popularity after post 9/11 lull

STEPPING OUT OF A MOVING AIRPLANE thousands of feet above the ground is not the most rational act. Yet each year tens of thousands of people take the fateful plunge right here in the familiar skies of the western suburbs.

Doug Smith, president of Hinckley-based Chicagoland Skydiving Center, says his facility averages about 40,000 skydives a year, an estimated 5,000 of which are by first-time jumpers. “Business is way up over the past two years,” Smith says. “We saw

a lull after 9/11 that lasted a couple of years, but people want to skydive more than ever.”

Experiencing skydiving — at least just once — is actually not too complicated.

The physical requirements are that participants must be at least 18 years old and weigh less than 240 pounds.

Smith says Chicagoland Skydiving has taken people as old as 95.

The center provides all the equipment and first-timers require only 20 to 30 minutes of classroom training before going up with a certified instructor for a tandem dive in which the novice is attached to the instructor, who handles all the mechanics. All the passenger has to do is enjoy the ride. The cost for a tandem dive is about \$200, plus an additional \$90 for those who want a DVD of the experience. Reduced rates are available for groups.

Smith acknowledges the majority of first-time jumpers choose not to return to the sky, but not because they didn’t enjoy the flight down. “Many factors weigh into people’s decisions not to jump again. Some people say they don’t want to ‘push their luck’ or they

have kids and this isn’t fair to them if they get hurt,” Smith says. “Bottom line, 75 percent of the people who land say, ‘Let’s do it again!’ But only 10 percent actually do it.”

However, those who do choose to skydive again often become hooked on the sport. “For many, it’s an out-of-body experience they can’t explain,” Smith says. “At first, it’s the rush and the fear factor, but over time it becomes about flying your body and honing your air skills. Skydiving is not just falling. We are truly experiencing human flight.”

That’s what attracts Steve and JaNette Lefkowitz to the sport. The couple makes up one half of Chicagoland Skydiving Center’s 4-way Rhythm team. Rhythm teams participate in competitions in which they are assigned to make various formations, such as a circle or a net, within a set amount of time. The CSC team finished third nationally in its division last year and hopes to win the title this year.

“It’s the mental challenge that is really appealing to us,” Steve says. “Being part of a team is also fun and gives us a reason to practice.” That practice can involve doing 12 to 14 jumps in one day. “We’ll start at 8 a.m. and keep going back up until sunset,” Steve says.

Steve and JaNette have each attempted more than 1,000 jumps, each one completed safely. “We’ve both had a couple malfunctions where we didn’t land with the main parachute and had to go to the reserve parachute,” Steve says. “It’s just the kind of thing that happens every few hundred jumps.”

If that sounds a bit scary, Smith points out that statistics show skydiving is safer than driving a car. “Yes, it is an extreme sport,” he says, “but just like any other activity, if you treat it with respect, it is a very safe activity.”

— *Greg Canfield*

TAKING A DIVE

Chicagoland Skydiving Center

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