



## Frequent *Fliers*

When they first built the trapeze rig in their backyard, Patty and Steven Tobi initially felt intimidated out there by themselves in the shadows of the Bighorns – then they started inviting others to join and the WyFly Flying Trapeze Club was born. **BY JEN KOCHER**

**T**here are two kinds of people in the world. Those who dream of flying and those who don't. Patty Tobi is the flying kind.

Standing in her backyard in Big Horn, she shaded her eyes as she looked up at Mindy Peterson standing on the edge of a platform about 30 feet up in the air. With a harness around her waist, Peterson looked down for a good minute before letting go, swooping into the air on the trapeze bar with a whoop of delight. It was her first time flying, and Patty knows just how she feels.

After setting up her own rig, Patty has been slowly recruiting members to join her new WyFly Flying Trapeze Club. Word has started to spread through local gymnastics' circles in Sheridan County, and Peterson and others are coming out to give it a try, both out of curiosity and for the thrill of trying something new and exotic. Peterson, who is just about to turn 40, hasn't tumbled in about 25 years, but said it sounded fun and she didn't want anything holding her back – including her fear of heights. On the ground, “coach” Dave, an instructor out of Canada who is also a full-time professional trapeze artist, has

been here for the weekend to help the newbies take flight. On cue, Peterson heaved her knees up on the bar, swinging with both arms in the air. When Dave yelled “hup,” trapeze lingo for letting go, she dropped the bar and did a back somersault into the net. She pulled it off nearly perfectly to a round of applause from the half dozen others gathered on the ground waiting their turn.

Patty smiled as Peterson, who appeared a bit breathless and tongue-tied, as she crab walked across the net and tried to find the words to describe the experience.

“You feel so light,” Peterson said, with a



faraway smile, “like you are really flying.”

As Patty knows, it’s easy to get hooked. It’s also not something you can just readily go do, like a climbing wall or gym. When her husband suggested they build one in their backyard, she thought he was a little crazy and it took them months to set up and learn how to run. Knowing this, she’s eager to make it accessible to others who might want to give it a try, which is why she

and her husband Steven hosted an open house for anyone interested in flying.

So far, in the time that she’s been recruiting, their once small underground trapeze club is growing. Newbie Michaela Trumbull tried it for the first time three days ago and is already back for more. Like several of the other club members, the 26-year-old comes from the gymnastic world and is still very active. Adding trapeze to her repertoire

is one more way to use her skills and fulfill a life-long desire to try it. Like the others, who knew it was something you can just go up and do on a random Sunday afternoon?

“I’d always wanted to try trapeze, but short of joining the circus, I had no idea how one goes about actually doing it,” she said. And though she’d heard rumblings about the rig at Patty’s, until now it had seemed something of an underground cult or just a rumor. Now that she’s tried it, she can’t get enough.

**PATTY GETS IT.** She started flying in her late 40s after, in fact, signing up for a trapeze circus school. At that point, she’d never even done a somersault and has no idea what prompted her to sign up for the week-long class in upstate New York. She’d literally been dreaming about flying for most of her life, soaring off cliffs and over rooftops with her eyes closed from the safety and comfort of her bed. Over the years, she’d actually gotten braver and had been willing to try more difficult endeavors. She wanted to know what else she could get her body to do. Why flying trapeze? It was a mystery even to her but now seems to be fated.

An anesthesiologist by trade, she tends to



be booky, and before heading off to trapeze camp, she spent months learning all she could about trapeze acts, famous flyers and flying families. Tony Steele's name came up a lot as one who revolutionized the art by being the first to pull off a triple-and-a-half flip in 1962, a Guinness World Record. Steele held that honor for two decades before being out-mastered by a 17-year-old member of the Flying Vazquez Circus family's quadruple, which in the circus world is as close as one gets to royalty. Steele's story, too, is the stuff of legends, having left home at age 15 to join the circus, where as an outsider he had to work his way up from Gazonic status (the equivalent of a carnie) to becoming one of the best trapeze artists the circus world has ever known.

Once in New York, Patty, therefore, nearly fell over when one of the instructors introduced himself as Tony Steele. The class was a mix of experienced flyers and other athletes – including a professional figure skater – and newbies like herself.

When Steele asked each of them what they hoped to accomplish during the week, some spoke of mastering double tucks and other tricks while Patty had no idea what to say. She wanted to fly into a net. He paused. She had a *week*. What

else would like to do? She shrugged. Fly and be caught? She had no idea what was out there waiting for her.

She struggled to find the words to explain what that first dive off the platform felt like.

**EXHILERATING, INTENSE, AMAZING.** The gut-churning fear of climbing the enormous ladder to get to the platform. The trust in allowing someone to

hold you by the belt as you stared down 30 feet to the ground, the skin-crawling fear as you took that first step into the abyss, which immediately was replaced with an intoxicating feeling of lightness as gravity did its thing. The words fall short of the experience, which for her was much like it felt in her dreams, when time and time again she fell forward and soared over mountains with the birds.



It was even better than she'd imagined, and she wanted to tap in to Steele's vast knowledge.

"I started stalking him," she laughed. "I'd be there waiting when he came out of the bathroom with questions."

By the end of the first day, she was hooked, albeit sore. The weightlessness of flying felt effortless, Patty explained. By the third day, however, she couldn't even lift her arms high enough over her head to wash her hair. Not that it stopped her.

"I went home obsessed and absorbed," she said.

The only problem for a person in Wyoming who inadvertently gets hooked on the trapeze is that you have to go real far to find a rig set up for flying. Short of a Club Med vacation, where in recent years the exclusive vacation company has partnered with *Cirque du Soleil* to offer "creative" programs like trapeze lessons, it's really not accessible.

On a trip to Denver in 2012, Patty was told about the Imperial Flyers, a trapeze club in Westminster that was founded in 1928, and according to the group's webpage, is "probably the oldest continuously-operating flying trapeze club in the world." She gave them a call, and they

invited her out to practice with them on their rig. On another trip to the West Coast, she found her way to Emerald City Trapeze Arts, a circus school in Seattle. She continued to fly back and forth from Sheridan to Seattle three to four times a year just to practice with them until it dawned on her that traversing across the country several times a year to get her flying fix was starting to become a bit ridiculous.

She told her husband Steven that it was getting out of hand and she needed to just let it go. Why? Steven wondered. Her birthday was coming up, and maybe getting a rig for the backyard wasn't entirely out of the question.

"We can't do that," she'd told him. "That's impossible."

But it wasn't, as Steven pointed out, and with the help of many people in the flying trapeze world, they bought the equipment and went about setting up the safety lines, nets and custom-building a 130 x 60-foot rig. It took a lot of hands-on training, instruction and workshops for she and Steven to get up to speed, just figuring out how to work the safety harnesses and ropes, let alone do any flying.

For the first two weeks, the couple felt intimidated out there by themselves in the

## Trapeze Lingo:

### Listo/Lista/Pret - Ready:

Used by the flyer and/or catcher to signify that they are holding the fly bar (for a flyer) or have built enough height in their swing for a catch (for a catcher) and ready to go.

**Ready:** Used by the catcher to tell the flyer that they should leave the board momentarily. The flyer bends their knees and if executing a one-handed take-off, dips the bar so they can raise it higher when they jump off the board.

**Hup:** Signal to leave the board and/or the fly bar. Sometimes used by the catcher to tell the flyer to let go after a catch when landing in the net.

**Catch Bar:** The trapeze that the catcher swings on.

**Fly Bar:** The bar the flyer uses.

**Apron:** The net in front of the catch bar. (The back apron is the net in back of the board.)

**Return:** When the flyer, after a successful catch, manages to return to the fly bar, and often all the way back to the board. In professional shows, the flyers rarely come down from the board.

**Force Out:** Kicking the legs out at the peak of the flyer's swing to gain height.

**Seven:** The last part of a force-out swing. Flyer brings legs in front of them so they will not hit the board.

**Cut (as in Cut Catch):** The flyer is caught in a legs catch and swings out into the apron. On the next swing into the apron, the flyer thrusts their body up, and the catcher lets go of the flyer's legs and grabs their hands.

Source: *The Trapeze Net*



shadows of the Bighorns and the pain in their joints and muscles was a bit discouraging. She told Steven she feared they'd made a huge mistake, but he remained undeterred. The trick was bringing in more people to join them, so slowly word got out and some local people, primarily from the gymnastics world, came out to join, and about two years ago, the WyFly Flying Trapeze club was born.

Today, the club has around two dozen active members and is growing, which to Patty and Steven, just makes it more fun.

That day, in the steely gray, unseasonably cool morning, Steven swung upside down with knees locked into cradle position, arms ready to catch the next flyer. After doing a few practice swings to get the hang of things, the handful of newbies were already itching to fly across to the catcher.

On the platform, with toes on the edge and harness tied safely around her waist, Gillette gymnastic coach Megan Wiard was counting down the seconds until she grabbed the trapeze bar ready to fly.

On the opposite side, Steven matched his pendulum swings in preparation of catching Megan. The catcher on the flying trapeze doesn't

always get the glory, but the job comes with a lot of responsibility and is more methodical than one might think. As he swung upside down with arms in the air, he was adjusting the time of his swing in an attempt to match Megan's pace and get her lined up in a position to grab her hands. Every person is different, and as catcher, Steven has to know their pace.

This mindfulness is what he likes so much about the sport, as does Patty.

"It takes so much focus," Patty said. "It might only take six seconds to do a trick, but in that time, there are so many different steps that require your full attention."

For her, too, it's ultimately that feeling of weightlessness that has her hooked. You feel so strong, she said, and it's just super fun, even for non-adrenaline junkies like herself. It's not about the thrill as it is about the experience.

"You just have to try it," she said with a smile.

By: *Jem* C. Kocher

Photos: Yale M. Preston dba iaintjack Productions

*If you are in the minority who dream about flying, check out the WyFly Facebook page and message the club for details about how you might give it a try.*