

Shut up and jump

By Randy Howard

Reality check. I am sitting on a picnic table under a camouflage canopy, reading over a waiver supplied by the Duquesne Skydiving Club. Across the way is a mock setup of an airplane.

I decided to do my second column on tandem skydiving, hoping to also put one of my worst fears to rest. Hopefully, I would live to write about it.

The form, essentially, asks who will bring the life-size spatula to the landing strip in the event of mechanical breakdown. I write my mother's name on the line and take another (perhaps my last?) swig of ginger ale.

A man with curly brown hair and glasses stands by his pickup truck ready to greet two other jumpers and me. This is Bob Raecke. He's affectionately known as "Señor" in these parts, and after 18 years of jumping out of planes — over 4,100 times — it's fair to say that longevity merits such an exalted title. As he speaks to us, I'm thinking my life is pretty much in this guy's hands; perhaps I shouldn't do anything to annoy him.

"I have to tell you that I'm a chain smoker," Señor says, beginning his preparatory spiel on the day's jump. "If it bothers you just walk away. I won't be offended."

I take a puff off my asthma inhaler.

Inside the simulated plane, he clears away the toys left behind by children. He explains that the essence of the tandem jump requires the tandem passenger to be strapped to the back of the tandem master. The jump will happen at an elevation of 9,000 feet. When the hatch to the plane opens, both of us must crawl towards the front of the plane, which will enable us to step out onto the platform easily. Upon responding to his signal, we free-fall until we get to 5,500 feet, at which point the passenger (me) pulls the rip cord.

Señor asks which of us wants to go first. I volunteer.

"Why do you do it?" a little girl asks Señor in the basement of the club, fumbling with the buckle on his harness.

"Because I get bored with life. I need something to pump me up and coffee isn't doing the trick," he says.

In no time, I am sporting a funky navy blue jumpsuit, a crash helmet that has turned my head into an eight ball, and an altimeter on my chest. Señor's nonchalant chit-chat keeps me at ease — all part of the plan. As we stroll out towards the plane, I give a congenial wave to the video guy, Jimmy "Free-Fall" Stahl.

In addition to the pilot, the rust-col-



The view at 9,000 feet is impressive, even on a cloudy day

Photo by Jim Stahl

ored Cessna 182 has space for four jumpers. With the final instructions, the engine fires up and soon after we are on our way down the runway.

Mike "Slammer" Schultz accompanies us on our ascent. He says he earned that name and a host of scars on his thigh after a rough landing one day.

the exact location we took off from.

At approximately 7,000 feet, Slammer opens the hatch to the plane and steps out onto the platform. The engine is throttling low, and there is less wind resistance. Slammer smiles at the video camera, and, with the words "see ya," drops from the plane like a pea flung

fear of not stepping through the threshold moment delivers me, weak-kneed to clutch the crossbar on the wing. I don't remember the voice asking if I am ready.

Some call it sensory overload, and some call it adrenaline rush. Frankly, I didn't know what was happening to me when we took the step backwards, placing our lives in the hands of gravity and nylon. We were tumbling through the whitest of noise, arms flailing, seeing nothing and everything at the same time. It seemed there was a struggle between my counterpart and I, although I eventually attained the arch which brought our fall into form. Seconds before I was to pull the chord, Free-Fall Stahl appeared like a vision before me, smiling and giving me a thumbs up. I was blown away by the absurdity of it all.

Pulling the shoot was followed by a moment of peace I have never known in my life. It began as I looked over the endless terrain and lasted until I was sitting comfortably back at the club.

"When you realize how controlled and graceful it is, you realize it's not a daredevil sport," says Slammer, munching on a bag of chips.

I'm left thinking about all the crazy things we do in life to get a rush, and I wonder how far we need to take it before we are satisfied. With both feet back on the ground, I welcome the next challenge. ♦

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Several thousand feet above the earth Señor and I make small-talk.

"Have you ever skydived in the rain?" I ask.

"Yeah," he says, smiling. "It's not fun though. Raindrops are pointed on top."

As the Cessna lurches forward, skipping on air pockets, Señor tells me the view is not a cheap commodity and that I should enjoy it. The land looks like a green checkerboard with veins and small mirrors and tufts of green fur.

At 2,000 feet, the hatch is opened and a streamer is thrown to the wind to measure direction. Ideally, we hope to land in

from the edge of a child's plate.

The plane's engine picks up again, and as it banks hard right, I feel like I'm falling out of the door space. My altimeter reads 9,000 feet, and Señor asks me if I'm ready to go.

"I'm a lucky man today," I say, detached from a world where anyone may be listening.

I hear a voice behind me directing me to get up by the door. The engine drones. The plane undulates on the wind currents and the voice says to step out onto the platform. My better sense says no, and I want to cower from the open space. Perhaps the