

POPS Lakewood meet

Jul 1977

Lakewood, NJ



Jerry Thompson, center, of Hewlett, directing preparations for POPS jumps July 1977 The New York Times, William E. Sawyer

By ROBERT HANLEY

They All Jump At the Chance

MIKE ESTRATION is a 33-year-old engineer from Caram who favors bushy mutton-chop sideburns and diving out of airplanes. His friends Jerry Thompson, a 46-year-old restaurateur from Hewlett, and Larry Corderia, a 41-year-old crane operator from Wantagh, are beardless. But they have the same habit when airborne.

The ages of the three men and their penchant for plunging headfirst from airplanes at 10,000 and 11,000 feet qualify them for membership in POPS—an acronym for a group of daredevils aged 40 and over that means, with some indulgence for phonetic spelling, Parachutists Over Forty Society.

While weekend athletics for most men in the 40-plus age bracket amount to a couple of rounds of tennis or bicycling around an 18-hole golf course in 100 steps, higher members of POPS spend many Saturdays and Sundays in late spring, summer and early fall dropping through the sky in pursuit of one another at speeds of between 150 and 170 miles an hour.

Happens for them is an "eight-man star." In such an achievement, eight skydivers reassemble together within 25 seconds or so of speeding free-fall, link up their hands into a perfect circle and float face-down toward the ground for a few seconds before breaking up the formation as lead ropes toward them, pulling the cords to open their parachutes at 2,500 feet or so.

"If you don't jump, you're losing a lot out of life," said Mr. Estration. He

started doing it "just out of boredom" 14 years ago when he was 35 years old. Friends who skydived urged him to try it. "I thought they were all crazy, but they all said it was the best thing that ever happened to them."

After one jump, Mr. Estration agreed. Since then, he has made 1,200 jumps.

About 300 POPS—about one-third of the nationwide organization's total membership—live in the metropolitan New York and Rockland County.

On a recent Sunday, 18 New York-area Pops and five others who flew in from California and Michigan gathered at the Lakewood, N.J., Sport Parachutes Center—an expanse of scrub pine, ankle-deep sand and two runways in south-central New Jersey that is something of a home away from home for hundreds of skydivers of all ages.

They come in groups of five and six in vans and campers, some with wives or friends, and sleep in the vehicles or in pop tents pitched among the pines near the "bowl," the huge circle of soft beige sand that is the landing target for the skydivers.

The day is spent mostly on the ground, packing parachutes, outlining the free-fall strategy for the upcoming attempt

for a specific formation, walking through drills on how the formation will assemble in the sky, and gulping sandwiches, pizza slices and sodas as everybody prepares, often for an hour or more, for the two- or three-minute trip from airplane to ground.

The Pops at Lakewood this recent Sunday included Mr. Thompson, who owns the Bounty Inn in Hewlett and organized the day's jumps; Mr. Estration, who works as an engineer at the Grinnell Aerospace Corporation; Mr. Corderia; Frank Bender, a 56-year-old elder at the National Biscuit Company in Fair Lawn, N.J.; Lee Gullfoyle, a 43-year-old police officer from Long Branch, N.J.; Bob Novak, a 48-year-old bricklayer in Rockland County; and George Sharpe, a 62-year-old engineer from Union, N.J., who frequently runs in the Boston Marathon.

Their goal this day: an 11-man star that would break the long-standing record of an eight-man star for the 10-year-old POPS organization.

Physical strength is not a prerequisite for formation of a successful star, but intense concentration, patience, endurance and an extremely delicate arm and leg movements, are crucial.

An errant arm or leg movement of

only an inch or two can hurl a skydiver into the star's "base" of six men who have already linked up by hand and stabilized as they fall—bodies parallel to the ground—waiting for others to guide themselves in between members of the base and link up. Someone hurtling or stumbling near the formation forces everybody else to get away to avoid collisions and serious injuries.

A few of the Pops acknowledge pre-flight "butterflies." Everybody objects to any fear. And they insist there is no sensation of falling or speed as they zip downward, with the force of their speed and the wind twisting their mouths into grotesque expressions.

The falling sensation is missing, they insist, because there is no sense of the ground rushing up at them as they plummet toward 2,500 feet—the altitude at which they must generate open their chutes as they can steer themselves by their chutes' risers toward the landing zone.

Although some of the Pops were paratroopers in World War II and could never shake the love of jumping, most of them heard about the sport from friends or colleagues at work. The Pops tried their first jumps in their late 30's or early 40's, after several periods of instruction on parachute theory and free-fall maneuverability—how extended arms and legs slow a diver, how tucked extremities plummet him, and how lowering the right arm a fraction of an inch turns him to the right and lowering the left arm moves him toward the left.

Parachute jumps are not free-fall ones. At the

Continued on Following Page

By ROBERT HANLEY

GORGE SHARPE is 62 years old, runs in the Boston Marathon and dives out of airplanes. His age and his penchant for plunging headfirst from planes at 10,000 and 11,000 feet qualifies him for membership in POPS, an acronym for a group of daredevils aged 40 and over that means, with some indulgence for phonetic spelling, Parachutists Over Forty Society.

While weekend athletics for most men in the 40-plus age bracket amounts to a panting jog around the block, a slow-footed set or two of tennis, or hacking around an 18-hole golf course in 100 or higher, members of POPS spend many Saturdays and Sundays in late spring, summer and early fall dropping through the sky in pursuit of each other at speeds of 120 to 170 miles an hour.

Happiness for them is an "eight-man star." In such an achievement, eight skydivers maneuver together within 25 seconds or so of a free fall and link up by their hands to form a circle; then they float downward for a few seconds before breaking away and pulling the rip cords to open their parachutes at 2,500 feet or so.

"You gotta think young," says Mr. Sharpe, a trim man with a ready smile, a short, gray crew cut and no paunch, whose 58-year-old wife "puts up with" his avocation.

Mr. Sharpe, who lives in Union and works as a chief project engineer at the Colgate Palmolive Company in Jersey City, started marathon running and skydiving 12 years ago, when he was 50. "I did it all to lose weight," he said.

Since joining POPS shortly after that, he has made 1,757 "jumps," as the skydivers call their plunges.

About 300 POPS—about one-third of the nationwide organization's total membership—live in the greater metropolitan New York area, including New Jersey, Long Island and Rockland County.

On a recent Sunday, 18 New York-area POPS and five others who flew in from California and Michigan gathered at the Lakewood Sport Parachuting Center, an expanse of scrub pine, ankle-deep sand and two runways in rural Ocean County that is something of a home away from home for hundreds of skydivers of all ages.

They arrive in groups of five and six in vans and campers, some with wives and girlfriends, and sleep in the vehicles or in pup tents pitched among the pines near the "howl," the huge circle of soft beige sand that is the landing target for the skydivers.

The day is spent mostly on the ground,

packing parachutes, outlining the free-fall strategy for the upcoming quest for formation, walking through drills on how the formation will assemble in the sky and gulping sandwiches, pizza slices and sodas as everybody prepares, often for an hour or more, for the two- or three-minute trip from plane to ground.

The POPS at Lakewood one recent Sunday included Jerry Thompson, 44, of the Bounty Inn in Hewlett, L.I., the organizer of the day's jumps; Mike Estratzen, 52, of Coram, L.I., who sports a bushy white mustache and thick sideburns and works as an engineer at the Grumman Aerospace Company; Larry Corderia, 41, a crane operator from Wantagh, L.I.; Frank Bender, 50, an oiler at the National Biscuit Company in Fair Lawn; Lee Guilfoyle, 43, a policeman from Long Branch, and Bob Novak, 46, a bricklayer in Rockland County.

Mr. Sharpe's good friend from Jersey
Continued on Page 8



George Sharpe of Union: 'You gotta think young.'

Lakewood Center

Continued from Page 1

City, Ray Nickerson, a 57-year-old father of seven children and a carpenter who has been skydiving for 13 years, was there, too. But he couldn't jump. His left leg was still tender from the double compound fracture he suffered when his ankle twisted as he hit the ground in a jump last year.

Their goal this day: An 11-man star that would break the record of an eight-man star for the 10-year-old POPS organization.

Physical strength is not a prerequisite to the formation of a successful star, but intense concentration, patience, endurance, split-second maneuverability and extremely delicate arm and leg movements are crucial. This is because an errant arm or leg movement of only an inch or two can hurtle a skydiver into the star's "base" of six men who have already linked up and stabilized as they float parallel to the ground while waiting for others to guide themselves into linkup.

Somebody hurtling or tumbling near the formation forces everybody else to pull away to avoid collisions and serious injuries.

A few of the POPS acknowledge pre-flight "butterflies" or anxiety in the pits of their stomach. But nobody admits to any fear. And they insist that there is no sensation of falling or speed as they zip downward, with the force of their speed and the wind twisting their mouths into grotesque expressions.

The falling sensation is missing, they insist, because there's no sense of the ground falling up at them as they plummet toward 2,100 feet, the altitude at which they must generally open their chutes so they can steer themselves by

th risers toward the landing zone.

Although some of the POPS were parachute troopers in World War II and could never shake the love of jumping, most of them heard about the sport from friends or colleagues at work and tried their first jump in their late 30's or early 40's. This was after several periods of instruction on parachute theory and on free-fall maneuverability-how extended arms and legs slow a diver, how tucked extremities plummet him and how lowering the right arm a fraction of an inch turns him to the right (and lowering the left arm turns him to the left).

To the man, they told friends inviting them to jump that they were crazy. But, they insist, once they grudgingly tried a first jump, the exhilaration forced them to make a second and third one, and they were soon hooked on the sport. It's an excellent way to relax and forget the pressures of the business and work week, they say.

"The mind gets free of everything," said Mr. Efstation, the engineer from Grumman. "When you're in free-fall and watching everyone get together, it's great. It's the best thing that ever happened to anybody. It's an exhilarating sport, it makes you feel and think really sharp. It's really indescribable."

"I couldn't wait to get to 40 to join POPS," said Mr. Corderia, who was accepted by the group a year ago. "These people are super people, nice people; we have dinner and drinks together. It's a fun thing. I'm lucky my wife enjoys it."

Mr. Corderia's wife, Carmen, was excited enough to spend her 37th birthday at the Lakewood center, talking in vans with other women while the men were up and visiting with their boyfriends and husbands as they lat

