

The Making of a World Record

by Amy Markert

[Cheryl Stearns](#) of Raeford, NC has landed her name in the parachuting world record books once again! On November 9, 1995 she completed 24 hours of continuous skydiving, with a total of 352 jumps! That equates to one jump every 4.09 minutes for 24 hours!!

The previously standing world records, officially recognized by the United States Parachute Association (USPA) and the Federation Aeronautique Internationale (FAI) were: for women - 255 jumps set by Cheryl Stearns in 1987 at Lodi, CA and for men - 331 jumps set by Jay Stokes earlier this year at Raeford, NC.

But Cheryl was not content with just one record entry this time around. She wanted to add a new dimension, a greater challenge to this record attempt. She incorporated one of her championship skydiving talents into the 24 hour scenario--she made each one of her jumps a Precision Accuracy Landing on a 5 centimeter target, and established these new world records:

-Most number of dead centers (0.00 m- Bulls eye) in a 24 hour period- 188

-Most number of Dead Centers Daytime- 104

-Most number of Dead Centers Night - 84

Most remarkable and significant facts and figures:

-A total of 279 out of 352 (79.3%) jumps were scored at 5 centimeters or less!

-A total of 301 out of 352 (85.5%) jumps were on the electronic scoring pad (16 cm or less)!

-She scored dead centers on her 332 jump (the jump that broke Stokes record) and on her record setting 352nd jump!

-In the 24 hour period that Stearns performed this record breaking feat, there were more hours of darkness than daylight. Add the bone chilling low temperatures during the night hours and it is a real wonder she was able to complete so many jumps and to land with such accuracy.

-The wind conditions throughout the night and much of the following day were far from ideal, with winds estimated at 35 kts(40mph) at altitude, and several layers of

varying wind speed and direction(the dreaded dog legs) creating especially difficult accuracy conditions.

A veteran skydiver (D-4020, POPS 4795) Cheryl has held 29 world parachuting records, countless championship titles and has been awarded the most prestigious international aerospports award, the Diplome Leonardo da Vinci, for her unique achievements in skydiving. So what drove her to brave the below freezing temperatures on a windy autumn day, to assault the record books again? Her love of the sport and the sheer challenge of it!

The lure of a challenge, the love of the sport and faith in Stearns' abilities also attracted a host of supporters to back Cheryl's world record attempt. And Cheryl is quick to acknowledge that although her name will be in the record books, she did not do this alone. She attributes her success to the efforts of a fine team, made up of over 150 friends and fellow skydivers, whom Cheryl is most grateful to.

The record attempt took place at her hometown drop zone, Raeford Parachute Center, in NC, where many of the same players had gathered in July of this year to join Cheryl in celebrating her 40th birthday and her 10,000th parachute jump. The Raeford parachute Center is owned by Gene Paul Thacker, Cheryl's first parachuting coach and her aviation mentor.

Planning and preparation began months in advance, and centered around technical and logistical challenges, Cheryl's planning goal was to make 400 jumps in 24 hours, that equates to an average of one jump every 3.6 minutes. Her experience as a pilot (She currently flies Boeing 733-300/400's for USAir and has logged 11,000 flying hours.) and as a jumper (her new jump total is 10,651) told her that this was possible, but would depend upon a myriad of conditions being just right. Some of these conditions were beyond control -- chiefly, the weather. But some of the conditions could at least be favorably influenced (if not controlled). These included: (1) the equipment, (2) the aircraft and pilots and (3) the ground support.

The Equipment

Stearns took on much of the planning and logistical arrangements herself, but also enlisted the skills of Cheryl Whitford, a long time friend of Stearns' and another Raeford resident. Whitford, like Stearns, is a skydiver, and also is a senior rigger. Stearns relied on Whitford to spearhead the equipment preparation and many of the support issues.

Stearns and Whitford had collaborated on the 1987 record attempt and drew on that experience to plan their strategy. They decided that a total of 12 complete rigs would

be required so that the parachute packers could keep pace with the jumping and to allow for any equipment repairs or rigging that might become necessary during the 24 hour period. Some of the gear belonged to Stearns. The rest was graciously loaned by other jumpers and manufacturers.

Stearns chose the North American Aerodynamics Para-Foil, 252 square feet, as the canopy for the record. This canopy helped Stearns win the US Women's National Championship 17 times. The characteristics that make this a good Accuracy canopy also make it a canopy that requires some effort and strength to spiral (steer). Effort and strength were two commodities Stearns knew she would need to carefully ration if she was going to last 24 hours of holding deep brakes on Accuracy approaches. She would need to spiral for quick descents because she did not have time for a normal canopy ride. Stearns hoped to meet a turnaround goal of 3.6 minutes per jump with a minimum opening altitude of 2000 feet above the ground (AGL), as prescribed by the United States Parachute Association's (USPA) Basic Safety Regulations (BSR).

Cheryl Whitford, Dave DeWolf and Craig "Pork" Van Camp designed and installed a pulley system to each of the canopies. The "De-Pork Pulley System" consisted of an extra line finger trapped to the outside A-lines of the canopies, looped through two very small rings, one attached to the connector link and one attached to the cascade lines. This line terminated with a soft toggle handle velcroed to the front risers. Stearns could spiral the canopies quickly and effortlessly with this steering system. Stearns made numerous tests jumps on all of the rigs, to help perfect the pulley system and to adjust the brake settings on each canopy- a critical detail for Accuracy landings.

To keep those 12 rigs ready to jump, a host of riggers and packers were needed throughout the 24 hour period. Whitford, scheduled all of the volunteers, recruited approximately 22 folks to do the packing. At any given time, at least 6 people were flaking/folding canopies, stuffing them into bags, stowing lines and closing packs. There were qualifies Senior and Master riggers scheduled around the clock as well. This dedicated bunch worked steadily through the finger numbing 26 degree cold windy night. Like Stearns, they just kept cranking them out!!! Sore knees and sore fingers abounded, and so did the laughs and the camaraderie. Their high quality work was evident. Although Stearns endured a few hard openings, and almost cut away one temporary bag lock, there were NO MALFUNCTIONS and no cut aways throughout the entire 24 hour period. BRAVO TO THE PACKING CREW! Bob Williamson of the DO DROP INN, Mount Pleasant, NC a rigger and around the clock packer himself, donated prize money to recognize the "hardest working" packer for the event. Whitford choose a young local jumper, Andrew Christian, to receive the prize money and the honors. Christian donated his own personal equipment and worked cheerfully and tirelessly around the clock, packing parachutes.

The Planes and Pilots

The airplanes and the skill of the pilots were also crucial factors in attaining a new world record. Again some of the best in the business were there to make it happen. Dave Johnson of Chuckey, TN, a jumper and a commercial pilot for USAir, brought his Cessna 185, and set his own record for the fastest turn around time of the record attempt" two minutes and forty seconds, from exit to exit of two consecutive jumps!! Bobby Frierson of Denmark, SC brought his Cessna 182 and flew dozens of sorties. Raeford Aviation pilots Randy Matthes, Randy Cadette and Randy Kern volunteered their services, flying Raeford Aviation's Cessna 182s. Russ Downing also lent a hand, and two other pilots, Lonnie Willer and Woodie McKay were available on standby. And none of the airplanes would have kept flying without the mechanical skills of Raeford Aviation's James Good.

The Ground Support

A myriad of other ground support duties were essential to setting the new record. Sherry Schrimsher, President of USPA, acted as Chief Judge for a distinguished panel of 8 judges (all volunteers), including Bruce Wicks, Roger Gardner, Kirk Knight, Jim Nipper and current US Army Parachute Team (USAPT) Golden Knight competitors, Tommy Welgos, Bill Jackson and Chris Moore.

There were many other current and former USAPT members providing support around the clock. As with all skydiving activities, the Golden Knights applied their professionalism, teamwork, and skill to support excellence in the sport. Stearns is also a former member of that elite group.

John Eiff drove from Florida to provide his air tuffet for the target/landing area. After 352 accuracy landings, Stearns was especially grateful for this impact absorbing cushion.

Even General Wayne A Downing, Commander in Chief, US Special Operations Command, MacDill AFB, FL dropped by during the event to lend his encouragement. Stearns is an Army reservist assigned to his command.

A total of over 150 volunteers worked between eight and twenty-four hours each, to perform all essential duties. These volunteers came from the local area, NC and SC, and from FL, AZ, VA, PA, CT, MS, TX and NJ! Duties included: recording results, controlling aircraft, helping Stearns clear the accuracy pit and change gear between jumps, a skydiving pit crew, shagging canopies/rigs between the landing and packing areas, fixing food to feed all the volunteers, lights, cameras, judging, packing, flying,

etc. etc just to name the major activities. Hundreds of other details were attended to by this assembly of dedicated and skilled volunteers.

And as the sun began setting behind the tall Carolina pines, 24 hours after the start of this remarkable skydiving event, Cheryl Stearns made her final approach to the target area and scored a "dead center" on her record breaking 352nd skydive, concluding this world record the way she does everything--with style. Cheryl was presented with a bottle of champagne and a dozen red roses as she smiled broadly, ignoring the fatigue. Sherry Schrimsher and Gene Thacker proposed a toast to Stearns' achievement and her lifetime of skydiving accomplishments, to which a large assembly of volunteers and well-wishers enthusiastically responded "Hear! Hear!". In turn, Stearns offered a toast to the crowd, thanking them for their support. "This record belongs to all of you too-- I couldn't have done it without you!"



Stearns repeatedly praised the championship "team Effort" of all of the volunteers and the generosity of her sponsors. She recognized all of those mentioned earlier in this article, and especially the following: Jackie and Ben Haddon, The City of Raeford, North American Aerodynamics, Johnny Higgins and Bryn McLeod, Jeff Steinkamp, The House of Raeford, Mrs. Jeanne Marcher, Skydive Dallas and American Chiropractic Care, Richard A McKinley DC.

Cheryl Stearns is a tribute to the United States skydiving community and represents the indomitable spirit of adventure that keeps us in the forefront of this wonderful sport. Congratulations Cheryl!
You just keep goin' girl!!!

About the Author

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