

POPS

Big way record attempt

Dec 1996

Perris, CA

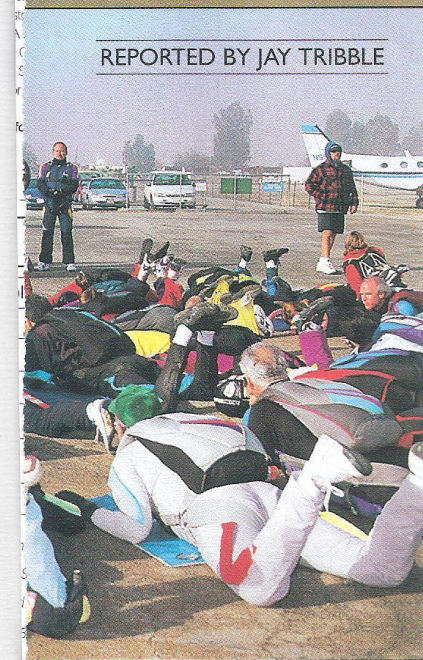


Eloy, Arizona, 1995:
 Parachutists Over Phorty
 Society members build the
 first 75-way freefall formation
 consisting of 40-year-olds and up.
 Just one year later, the group meets
 again in Perris, California. This time,
 they're looking for triple digits.

For Southern California, the
 weather outlook for the December 7-8
 weekend could have been better. It
 wasn't bad enough, however, to keep
 veteran skydivers of POPS from
 converging on Perris Valley
 Skydiving, near Los Angeles, with a
 mission: break the POPS record.

Above: POPS members launch a base from the tailgate of the Skyvan for one of several record attempts. At right: POPS "get dirty" at the direction of co-organizer Dave LeClerq. Top right: Just one skydiver short of their goal, POPS members fly a smooth 95-way over Perris Valley. Photographs by Brad Hood.





REPORTED BY JAY TRIBBLE

To man the attempt at a new POPS record, co-organizers Carey Peck and Dave LeClerq enlisted 114 POPS members. D-1 license-holder Lew Sanborn, 66, returned to Southern California, where over 35 years ago, he helped define the art of relative work, or freefall formation skydiving. Dozens came from the Southwest and, of course, from California, including Perris regulars like Denny Gainor, 58 and D-138, who have jumped there since the early '70s.

But the pool of skydivers was hardly limited to native California jumpers. Australian Terry Hewett, 42, arrived early, and Joeke De Jong, 48, flew from Zeist in the Netherlands.

Early Start

They planned to start with 95 skydivers, then graduate to 100. Practice in even smaller formations started early as jumpers arrived on Tuesday before the weekend and the official start of the record attempts. That's one big advantage of hosting these attempts at a full-time turbine-powered drop zone.

By Tuesday afternoon, John Newman, not yet 40 himself, began coaching 12- and 14-way POPS groups. John Prickett, assigned as plane captain for the attempts,

took over on Wednesday and began coordinating 20-ways with Peck for the early arrivals. The POPS made away with the \$10 tickets awarded to the first load of the day, allowing many to log a sixth jump before sunset.

A Pacific front swept across the West Coast, bringing low clouds on Thursday. Still, some people made two or three jumps, the last loads exiting under an 8,000-foot deck. By mid-afternoon, a light drizzle forced the jumpers to pack it in for the day.

The skies cleared by Friday morning, and a world record was on every POP's mind. Dave LeClerq checked in, along with plane captains Rick Martin and Jan Meyer, who is organizing a women's world record attempt at Eloy next month. Old folks being slaves to a bargain, the POPS members gobbled up more \$10 tickets for the first plane load at 9 a.m. Peck and Prickett filled the next few Twin Otters with 20-ways, and by noon, Peck and LeClerq aired the first formation loads. Two 42-ways completed and a third attempt missed by one.

At the Perris Bomb Shelter bar that night, the remainder of the POPS arrived to find high hopes among their comrades. The place lit up with old acquaintances reliving many memories.



BRAD HOOD

POPs approach the building formation, trying to work out traffic problems and reach their slots.

POPs

Continued

Leisurely Morning

Square One Parachute Sales and Service, located on the DZ, treated everyone to breakfast on Saturday morning. Dense fog shrouded the valley until after 10 a.m., providing lots of planning time for the first of the big-ways.

The initial stab at a 95-way came close, but the video team—Bill Beaver, director, with Raoul Gravell and Brad Hood—turned in tapes setting John Dobleman's bench in action. Saturday's fourth attempt looked a little better. But that was it for the day, due to the late start.

While the organizers reviewed the day's performance, the jumpers speculated around the bar. As it often goes with big-way attempts, the divers complained that the base was not solid enough to take hits, and the base complained about divers docking too hard. Wherever the fault lay, waves tore the formations apart.

Cranking Up the Pace

On Sunday morning, Rigging Innovations, a Perris-based rig manufacturer, bought breakfast. Everyone collected one T-shirt from canopy maker Precision Aerodynamics and one from Perris Valley Skydiving.

To ensure six jumps on Sunday, Peck had everyone up and ready to jump by 7:30 a.m. With the weather cooperating, the first formation flight of four Twin Otters and a Skyvan turned on jump run by 9 a.m.

Every attempt on Sunday came close. But here and there, traffic problems caused someone to go low or a line not to form in time. By mid-afternoon, with only two jumps left, the heat was on Peck and LeClerq. A 100-way was not to be, but certainly a record was still possible.

The next jump resulted in one grip only inches from a planned 96-way. But on the last dive, between fatigue and perhaps a little less confidence among the group, the attempt ended with a hard dock destroying a couple of weedwhackers, the curved radial spokes on the outside.

Monday Morning

So what if this camp fell a bit short? Peck and LeClerq assembled 95 POPs members in one formation, a gain of 20 over Eloy's 1995 record. The old-timers left Perris on Sunday

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POPs

Continued

commanding the respect of younger blot builders everywhere. They showed that these days, turning 40—or even 60—doesn't mean turning in your swoop suit.

Maybe a three-day event would help iron out the kinks. After all, a 100-way is nothing to sneeze at and presents a challenge for any group of weekend skydivers. Alicia Anderson Moorehead, U.S. Top POP, says another 600 USPA-licensed members become eligible for POPs next year. That should provide plenty of new talent for the 1997 POPs record series.

The 40-plus-year-old jumpers unanimously agreed that they had a great time and would be back for slots on the first POPs 100-way, almost a sure thing for '97.

About the Author

Jay Tribble, D-12722, made his first of over 800 jumps on his 50th birthday almost ten years ago. A frequent traveler, he often reports on events for *Parachutist*, but mostly jumps near his home in Houston.

Perris Valley: A Family Story

In 1979, Ben Conatser was a commercial airline pilot, and his wife Diane flew for fun. College sweethearts, they thought it would be fun to put down roots on a little dirt-strip airport and 85 surrounding acres near Perris, California. With no idea that it was being used for skydiving on the weekends, the Conatsers planned to perhaps develop the land into some residential airport lots. They never dreamed of building one of the world's largest skydiving centers.

Perris jumpers haven't seen them on the drop zone very often in the past few years. Their daughter Melanie, who competed in 8-way at last October's U.S. Nationals of Formation Skydiving in Gardiner, New York, manages the skydiving end of the business. Their son Pat oversees their formidable fleet of five turboprop airplanes, as well as a complete aircraft maintenance facility.

After an extensive and still-in-progress building campaign, including the construction of a restaurant, bar and pool, Perris won the bid to host this year's U.S. National Championships of Formation Skydiving and Canopy Formations, October 4-19.

Despite opening and running a world famous DZ, jumping wasn't really a Conatser family affair. Pat made a few dozen jumps in the '80s, but Mom and Dad had never jumped—until lately. Diane tried her first tandem last Labor Day, and Ben followed suit a few months later. Now, Ben and Pat are working through the student program, and Diane expects to continue this spring. "Dad's goal is to do a 2-way with his daughter," beams Melanie.

—JAY TRIBBLE

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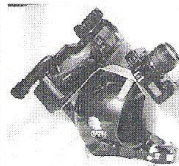
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