



Cameraman Steve Scott, left, films Dale Stewart during a practice run before the TeXXas 20-Way skydiving meet held in Bryan. Associated Press

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By **CHUCK SQUATRIGLIA**  
Bryan-College Station Eagle

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# 20-way skydivers judged in Aggieland freefalls

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**BRYAN** — A DC-3 rumbles across the sky at an altitude of 13,000 feet. A person jumps out of the plane, quickly followed by 19 more. Together, they plummet 11,000 feet in about 50 seconds.

In that 50 seconds, at an average speed of 125 miles per hour, they join together in three or four different geometric shapes before disbanding and opening their parachutes at 2,000 feet and floating to the ground.

It's called 20-way skydiving, and about 250 people worldwide met at Coulter Field in Bryan last weekend to do it during the 1990 TeXXas 20-Way Meet and World Freestyle Competition.

Twenty-way skydiving involves teams of 20 people who must join together into three or four assigned maneuvers — stars, numbers and other shapes in 50 seconds. They are judged on skill and speed.

The maneuvers are rehearsed on the ground during "dirt dives." It is essential divers decide what they will do while on the ground, because communication is impossible in the air, said Steve Haskett, owner and manager of Aggies Over Texas, which organized the event.

Freestyle skydiving is ballet and gymnastics performed in the air while freefalling at speeds of up to 200 miles per hour. Skydivers perform whatever gymnastic maneuvers they wish, and are judged on skill and creativity.

"It's difficult to do well," said Mary Hankins, manager of Aggies Over Texas. "It's not hard to do it badly." The company offers skydiving lessons and provides equipment and airplanes for diving.

In both 20-way and freestyle, a cameraman falls with the team, recording the jump on videotape for the judges. Because the maneuvers occur between 2,000 and 11,000 feet above the ground and are over in less

than a minute, judges depend on the cameraman to record the dive. Things happen too fast — and too high up — for judges to see what happens, Hankins said.

The photographer's role is especially important in freestyle because the quality of the tape can influence the number of points a diver receives, Hankins said. In other words, a bad cameraman can ruin a perfect jump, and vice versa.

There's more to skydiving than just falling out of an airplane. Divers control their fall by using their body as a propeller, Hankins said.

But what kind of people jump out of a functioning airplane and willingly fall 11,000 feet before opening a parachute? According to those who do it, perfectly normal ones.

"None of us are crazy," said Jeff Parker, a warrant officer in the Army. "None of us have death wishes. It's all very safe."

Parker, a helicopter pilot stationed at Fort Hood, has been skydiving since February. He said his interest started when he was a member of the Army's 82nd Airborne Division. In seven months, he's jumped 80 times, he said.

But why would a sane person willingly plummet 11,000 feet?

"Freefall is an escape from reality," Parker said. "It's thrilling. You get such a rush of adrenaline from it."

The feeling can be addictive, said Tee Brydon, a 49-year-old Tucson resident who was the 1963 women's world champion skydiver.

Brydon has been jumping for about 15 of the past 30 years. She jumped regularly in the 1960s, but took time off from the sport to raise her family and pursue a career.

"Even after time away, after I jumped out of the plane, it was like going home. I belong there," she said.

Parker expressed his love for the sport more bluntly. "It's better than sex."

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