

Saratoga Skydive

by Chris Ladd
EDITORIAL EDITOR

Driving from Skidmore's Campus to Saratoga Skydiving headquarters at Heber Airpark in Gansvoort takes about 15 minutes at 50 miles per hour. Diving from a 45 year-old Cessna 9,700 feet above sea level, it takes 30 seconds to drop 5,000 feet at upwards of 120 miles per hour, and another four and a half minutes to slide to a stop on the grass beside the runway. After such thrill and speed, the four-cylinder drive home seems sluggish and ridiculous.

Heber Airpark lies just past a golf course. Weeds grow out of the runway, a thin strip of black-top running through a lush, green field. I'm not sure what I expected to find here—maybe a cross between an old air force base and a parking lot, but if it weren't for the windsock and the squat airplane hanger, I might've mistaken this place for an adjacent fairway.

Cathy Mingo, who helps owner Paul Kollias with the administrative part of the business, meets me at my car and tells me Paul is en route. He's going to get the plane.

She leads me inside the hanger to a long table pushed against the wall where two people are busy with waivers. They are Tracy Furman and Adam Russo of Albany and New Salem. Tracy has just graduated from SUNY Albany. Today is Adam's birthday; he's 23, and Tracy, who is 22, has brought him skydiving.

"She told me we were going golfing," Adam says. He didn't find out he would be leaping from an airplane today until the couple drove beyond the golf carts, at neighboring Airway Meadows Golf Course and passed a sign along Putnam Road for Saratoga Skydiving.

Adam is thrilled, and says this is something he's wanted to do for a long time. These two have been together since May of this year, and you get the



All set for a one way trip.
Photo by Chris Ware.

sense that their relationship will stick around.

Around this time, a red Cessna 182 lands outside on the runway, and after it coasts to a stop, Paul Kollias gets out and walks toward the hanger. He sports Aviator sunglasses, running shorts, and a t-shirt. His hair is windswept, with a few flecks of gray, and he wears a three-day beard. Paul sits down in the table's only empty chair.

These waivers are three pages long, front and back. They ask for over a dozen initials, check marks, and signatures between blocks of dense, eye-glazing text. They inform me that I am about to void my life insurance policy. It takes three attempts at this waiver until Paul finally accepts it, pointing out a missing signature on page three

or absent initial on page four. "I sure hope I packed the chute more carefully than you signed this form," Paul says, draws his lips back to show his bottom teeth, and sucks in a breath.

Paul jokes around a lot, and this is part of the weird dichotomy of our instructor. The jokes aren't always appropriate.

From the way he talks and carries himself, you get the feeling that Paul has jumped out of an airplane a thousand times, and if you asked him, he'd say it's more like seven thousand. He's a pro. At the same time, there's a looseness about his expressions and you're left with the sense that Paul has never worked in an office, that he has no semblance of political correctness.

If you asked him about this, he might say that he does more in a day

than most people do in a lifetime, and he's right. How many people drop 8,000 feet 500 times a year?

There are three phases to our jump day: waiver, training, jump. All three go fast, and if you go first you can be in and out in a few hours.

For our training, Paul leads us out from the hanger to the small plane he parked on the runway a few minutes before. This is what we're going to jump from. In my head, I'd pictured a massive sloth of a plane, a big fuselage lined with benches and a sliding cabin door.

The Cessna has one seat: for the pilot. The student sits facing backward on the floor next to this seat, and the instructor, that's Paul, faces front, and sits on the opposite end of the plane. It's a little cramped. As we practice

turning ourselves around, opening the door, sticking our feet outside and tucking our arms into our chests, the little plane moves around, side to side and up and down. Empty, this plane weighs about half as much as a Toyota Camry.

The three of us are jumping tandem today, which means we'll be strapped, one at a time, to Paul, our instructor. He will wear the parachute, control our freefall, pull the ripcord, and land in the field next to the runway. Once we jump from this plane, our life will be in his hands.

Back inside the hanger, we practice arching. This is an integral part of skydiving, and Paul illustrates this with a badminton birdie. The heaviest part of the birdie falls fastest. He slaps me in the rear to show the heaviest part of a skydiver.

One by one, we climb onto an oval pedestal covered in carpet and practice arching our backs while laying on our stomachs so that our feet and head stick up into the air. The pedestal looks a lot like a cat's scratching post.

"If you let me, we won't just fall. If you let me, we'll fly," Paul says as he molds our bodies to show proper technique.

Paul takes a harness, cap, and set of goggles from a cupboard, helps Adam into them, then slides himself into a blue one-piece jump-suit with a pad on the butt. This is the end of our training. The suit is to protect Paul's clothes from the 450-500 jumps he makes every year.

Adam climbs into the plane, Paul follows and closes the door, and the little red Cessna takes flight. They'll spiral upward for about 20 minutes, then fall for five, 30 seconds of which will be freefall, with no parachute.

"The first time you jump, you're going to forget part of your freefall," Cathy says. "You may even forget your

training." The three of us, Cathy, Tracy and I, watch the sky. After a long time, Cathy points to a speck no larger than the period at the end of this sentence. This is Adam and Paul. When they land, they slide into the ground much faster than Tracy and I expected. Most skydiving injuries, Paul tells us, are broken ankles. In his nine years in the business, Paul has seen just four of these, a pretty good record. Adam lands safely.

On the ground, Paul critiques Adam's jump, says his knees and hips could have been behind him a little more. "It's like learning a new environment," he says. "Scuba divers have to do it; skydivers have to do it."

Adam gives his girlfriend a kiss, half thanks, half relief. "She gets a kiss?" Paul says. "I pulled the ripcord."

It's Tracy's turn now, and we all lean on a wooden fence that runs parallel to the airfield and wait. Somebody tells us the Cessna is overhead. We look up, and identify the speck we call a plane, and then another that we interpret as Tracy and Paul. But then the dot splits into two, and goes in separate directions.

"There's two people, why do I see two people?" Adam is scared. Tracy is not wearing a parachute; she is attached to Paul, or we thought she was. As the specks get closer, we see that they're birds. The color returns to Adam's face. "I saw two of them, I started to get worried," he says.

After they land, the plane refuels. Paul tightens up the straps on my harness. Cathy pre-fitted me while Tracy was climbing in the Cessna, but Paul checks everything himself. Paul is good at what he does, completely in his element, and as far as skydiving is concerned, I trust him completely. I didn't even flinch when he cinched up the buckles by my groin.

We squeeze into the plane and take off; I don't feel it when our landing gear leaves the ground. I look out the window as we climb. Paul covers his ears with his hands and motions for me to do the same for a few minutes. The engine is especially loud as we first gain altitude. The pilot is wearing a parachute, and for some reason, that seems disturbing.

Paul leans over me and points to a spot on the dashboard altimeter. "We're gonna go up to about here for this one," Paul says, not to me, but to the



Phew! Adam and Paul touch down.
photo by Chris Ware

pilot. The pilot looks a little surprised, points to the same spot, and says, "Here?" They're shouting over the engine. I get the feeling I'm going much higher than either Adam or Tracy. Paul nods an affirmative, and the pilot flashes him a thumbs up.

The view up here is amazing; green forest stretching to the horizon. Lake George sits like an emerald blue puddle off the right side of the plane. After five minutes or so, I put on my cap and start to adjust my goggles. Paul shouts over the roar of the plane. It's too early; we're only at 4,000 feet, and we're going to 10,000. He tells me to relax. There is only one thought in my head right now: I'm going to jump out of this plane.

When we get close to the jump site, I turn around on my knees on Paul's signal, and he puts my goggles on for me. I scrunch back toward him, and I feel him clip himself to my harness. Then he opens the door.

Nothing, until now, has been scary or unbelievable. I've never fully realized the difference between looking out and looking down, but there is nothing normal about an open door on an airplane in flight. For the first time since I got here three hours ago, I'm terrified.

I bury my eyes in the floor of the airplane. Paul is saying something. It's time. I stick my foot out the door of the plane and onto a small metal plate that sticks out from one of the struts, toes pointing backwards. The wind is cold on my leg. There's a count, a sort

of swaying 'one, two, three,' and then just air.

We're going fast, really fast, tumbling headfirst and spinning end over end. I can see the horizon whiz by one, two, three times. Then we flatten out. Paul is hitting my legs with his hand, and I push them back between his. I think I feel him tap my shoulder, the signal to put out my hands, and I do. All this happens in a sort of loud, high-speed, scared confusion, like a hand cranked film, and I'm never sure what to do or where to put my body. We spin a full circle horizontally, and I realize I'm screaming, but I don't remember opening my mouth.

I feel a lift in my chest and a pull in my stomach as we slow, and all at once I'm once again perpendicular with my horizon.

We hang in midair and the wind runs over my bare arms. On the way down, Paul lets me work the parachute, pulling one or another of the two toggles to turn, spin, or stall. When we land on the grass, I trip at this sudden appearance of earth. I'm not prepared to use my feet.

When Paul unclips himself from me, I shake his hand, step out of my borrowed harness, and hand Cathy my cap and goggles. My whole body has the tight, cool feeling left over from the wind.

I drive away from Heber Airpark sort of numb, and it's only after I run my first stop sign that I realize I'm alive. It's something that hasn't occurred to me in a while.