

A new *Skydivers Over Sixty* 39-way world freefall record

by Russ Manhold

Skydivers Over Sixty (SOS) held their 10th Annual SOS Record Series Big-Way Camp and Reunion September 15-17, 2006 at Skydive Elsinore.

The goal was to eclipse the previous 33-way SOS world freefall formation record, established March 19, 2005 at Florida Skydiving Center in Lake Wales.

By Thursday, September 14th, more than fifty SOS members and their families gathered in the quaint town of Lake Elsinore, population 38,045. The namesake body of water, Lake Elsinore, smaller now than in past years, sprawls northwest-to-southeast at 1,250 feet elevation in a valley just east of the Santa Ana Mountains.

Mother Nature delivered near perfect skydiving conditions with sunny days, moderate winds, and temperatures in the low to mid 80's.

USPA National Director Jan Meyer, holder of four FAI World Records in large formation skydiving and two national championships in 4-way and 8-way, agreed again in 2006 to design and organize the SOS world record dives at Skydive Elsinore. Meyer, a physicist and software engineer by trade, deftly merged formation slots with SOS names, faces and individual skills. Remarkably, she memorized the names of all fifty-three participants.

Tony Domenico, base co-captain for the recent world record 400-way in Thailand, agreed to coach the SOS base group. Plans to launch an 8-way base from the Sky Van were scrapped in favor of a more workable 6-way launch.

Parachuting pioneer Bill Jones was designated Base Captain. The rock-solid base included three of the eight septuagenarians registered for the event.

Tom Falzone, world-class competitor and coach for U.S. Military Academy cadets at West Point, returned again to coach the 2006 SOS event at Skydive Elsinore. Falzone's easy going demeanor is contagious, producing results in every age group. Working mostly with the standby team, Falzone orchestrated each practice jump and evaluated results, providing valuable feedback to SOS world record organizers Meyer and Domenico.

Larry Elmore, a retired naval aviator, former airline Captain, and 400-way team member, enjoys instructing in Marchetti SF-260's with Air Combat USA. Elmore, arguably USA's preeminent SOS load organizer, shares his expertise each year between Skydive Elsinore and Florida Skydiving Center.

William Calhoun III, aka Billy 3, coordinated the 2006 SOS event at Skydive Elsinore without a hitch. A resident of Novato, California, Calhoun effectively managed a long-distance relationship with DZ managers, organizers and coaches during months preceding the event. A natural salesman, Calhoun persuaded Perris Valley Skydiving and Skydive Elsinore managers to jointly cooperate in supporting the SOS world record event.

Ray Cottingham, legendary freefall videographer and perennial SOS supporter, alternated his camera perspective between the Sky Van and Twin Otters. On the short list of really nice guys, Cottingham always found time to chat with the SOS folks.

Don Simonds, always quiet and unassuming, again provided his extraordinary freefall photography skills for the 2006 SOS event. Simonds has a knack for capturing the special camera perspective that makes an average freefall image very unique indeed.

John Hamilton and Karl Gulledge, managers of Skydive Elsinore, worked tirelessly to provide outstanding service for the 2006 SOS event. Hamilton provided oversight of DZ operations while Gulledge spearheaded Twin Otter flight ops.

Rob Castor, Chief Pilot at Perris Skydiving Center, shuttled the Sky Van daily between Perris and Elsinore to support the 2006 SOS event.

Jim Wilkins, veteran Southern California skydiving pilot, provided his usual excellent support, flying Elsinore's Twin Otter in perfect formation with the Sky Van.

Thursday morning, September 14th, arrived with cool temps and overcast conditions surrounding Lake Elsinore. This provided valuable time for coaches and organizers to evaluate slot assignments and define the world record group and standby team. By 11 AM, the clouds lifted and the Sky Van, accompanied by a single Twin Otter, lifted gracefully from the dirt runway, sending plumes of brown dust drifting above Lake Elsinore's expanding shoreline.

Thursday, a practice day, was dedicated to refining exits from each aircraft, especially the 6-way base pullout from the Sky Van. Bill Jones and his band of fast-falling belly fliers did not disappoint. The 6-way base pullout, and each to follow (except one funnel), set the pace for a world record weekend. Following each practice jump, Jan Meyer and Tony Domenico reviewed video with organizers and participants, repeating the phrase "Stadium approach, on your radial, stop before grips, fly the slot." The day ended after three near-perfect practice jumps, followed by a fourth jump that funneled wildly, involving multiple freefall collisions, one so severe that Texas jumper Conrad Hobbs sustained a dislocated right shoulder. Miraculously, Hobbs managed to deploy his main

chute using his left hand. Albeit painful, Hobbs made a controlled landing, followed by a quick ride to the hospital where physicians coaxed his dislocated shoulder back into position.

Friday morning, September 15th, the weather was much the same as Thursday, i.e., cool temps and overcast conditions. Hobbs, sporting an arm sling, was there to encourage his fellow SOS teammates. At 8 AM, Jan Meyer and Larry Elmore called for a 39-way dirt dive. Tony Domenico provided last minute coaching for the 6-way base and Sky Van jumpers.

USPA Lifetime Achievement Award recipient Al Krueger was designated Twin Otter Captain.

The grass in the landing area, still wet with morning dew, soaked everyone's booties as the 39-way formation took shape. The 2006 SOS formation, more streamlined than previous years, featured a 6-way base with three sets of two-way zippers, and six whackers, each attached to legs of zippers.

By 11 AM Friday, the skies cleared and the first 39-way attempt was airborne. The Sky Van and Twin Otter climbed quickly in the cool morning air, arriving on jump run at 12,500 feet AGL. The field elevation of 1,250 feet MSL prevented clearance from ATC to higher altitudes on Friday, a problem that was rectified as the weekend continued.

The first SOS record attempt jump went better than expected. Jumpers matched fall rates, slots got sorted out, and traffic was minimal. The 6-way base, again rock solid and on heading, performed as expected. Whackers broke at 5,000, zippers at 4,500, while the base sucked it down to 4,000 before break-off.

After the jump, coaches and organizers reviewed videotape with participants. As the tape rolled, the group collectively acknowledged it's 6-way base pullout with vocal accolades. Meyer and Elmore orchestrated a few personnel changes and reminded everyone "Stadium approach, on your radial, stop before grips, fly the slot."

The second jump, in a planned series of eleven jumps, went much the same as the first. Al Krueger's Twin Otter jumpers cleared the door before the last jumper exited the Sky Van. Life was good, but not great. A few more tweaks and the group was ready for jump number three.

Some folks say the third time is a charm. So it was with jump number three. The 39-way built quickly and smoothly, establishing a new SOS world record. Nobody expected the record to be broken on the first day. The usual hooting and hollering was heard as 41 skydivers descended under canopy to an enthusiastic crowd below.

After the customary group shot it was back to work, this time for a 44-way attempt. Meyer and Elmore tapped the standby team, adding additional slots on each whacker. The 44-way dive on Friday turned out to be a non-event.

Saturday morning, September 16th, Meyer and Elmore continued with a 44-way formation. Each jump experienced problems with basic skydiving skills. For many, the thrill of victory dissipated when the 39-way record materialized early in the weekend. For others, the level of performance anxiety manifested itself in less-than-perfect execution. Several folks over amped, falling below the formation. Others failed to concentrate on the base, their heads oscillating left and right, searching for slots and grips. Some never found their radials. Many forgot to push forward with legs.

Saturday's four jumps were not without incident. One canopy deployment featured long-time Elsinore regular Eike Hohenadl with a tension knot that burned and severed one steering line, inflicting a deep gash in Eike's little finger. World famous rigger Dave DeWolf opened with a severe line twist that refused to go away. After fighting the malfunction for several seconds, DeWolf cut away and deployed his reserve. Witnesses said the reserve ride was less than 10 seconds.

Saturday evening, Skydive Elsinore hosted a sumptuous Mexican buffet "al fresco" at the DZ. Conrad Hobbs, still wearing an arm sling, conspired with Billy 3 to tap a keg at 5:30 PM. The beer flowed freely as 4-way teams, competing in Skydive Elsinore's final SSL event for 2006, gathered to accept awards. It was refreshing, seeing so many handsome young athletes, intermixed with the old timers. SOS folks were dazzled after learning of a tie in AAA competition between Perris Fury and Elsinore Gravity, both finishing with 130 points and 18.6 average. It was especially heartwarming when the younger jumpers shared the day's events with SOS participants, laced with stories of how it was in the old days. It was apparent a common bond united everyone there that evening... the love of skydiving.

Sunday morning, September 17th, dirt dives commenced at 7 AM. The weather was sunny and clear. Jan Meyer successfully negotiated for another loaner Twin Otter from Perris Skydiving Center, thus providing three aircraft for the final three SOS record attempts.

Meyer and Elmore shuffled more personnel, bringing in Frances "Frankie" Bryant from the standby team. Bryant, the only female participant, hails from Scappoose, Oregon. Her son, B.J. Helfer, a World Team 2004 member with over 6,000 jumps, hopes Mom follows in his footsteps.

Meyer, always cool and collected, quickly divided the 44-way dirt dive into three groups; Sky Van with left and right trail Twin Otters. By 7:30 AM, excitement was running high as 46 jumpers boarded the three jump aircraft. Then Murphy's Law

prevailed. The right trail Twin Otter could start only one engine. The #1 engine igniter had failed. Faster than you could say "Bill Ottley!", Meyer unloaded both Twin Otters, revised the dirt dive, reloading everyone into the remaining operational Twin Otter.

By Sunday, ATC was routinely granting higher exit altitudes. It's difficult to describe the beauty over Southern California when the skies are clear. Lake Elsinore looks like pond between two mountain ranges. Over a hundred thousand homes carpet the canyons and foothills below. The Pacific Ocean is clearly visible. Los Angeles and Long Beach are linked via dozens of busy freeways. San Diego lies farther to the south.

The first of three jumps Sunday morning produced marginal results. Although the formation built nicely, two jumpers went low, thus negating any chance for a new World Record.

The second of three jumps was a 43-way attempt because several participants had commercial flights to catch. Again, replacement jumpers were brought in from the standby group. This dive failed early when a zipper slot funneled, taking out the base.

The last of three jumps Sunday saw more changes. The formation, now a 40-way, seemed attainable by all. Everything went well until one whacker self-destructed. The SOS record attempts were over for 2006.

During the 4-day SOS event, a film crew from the Retirement Living Network documented every aspect of seniors who skydive. Their finished product, "The Art of Living", is slated to air later this year on TV. Pat Moorhead, SOS #1, provided much of the commentary. Almost every SOS participant was interviewed on videotape.

The SOS event started and finished with a few words about Max Mueller, a good friend and exceptional skydiver, who died last January during a tandem skydiving accident in Hawaii. Max, age 69 with over 10,000 jumps, was a native German who lived on Oahu half the year. A big cheer was given for Max before the SOS record attempts commenced on Friday. On the last jump Sunday, Colonel John R. Bates, USMC (retired) honored Max by wearing his jumpsuit. At the end of the day Sunday, Eike Hohenadl, a long time friend of Max, stated to all that Max was somewhere, looking down on the SOS crowd, expressing his approval. Eike then, in a style typical of Max, produced a magnificent alpine yodel.

For John Bates, Mike Britting, Frances "Frankie" Bryant, William "Billy 3" Calhoun, Mark Carpenter, Jim Cook, Jim Culhane, John DeSantis, Dave DeWolf, Larry Elmore, Myles Elsing, Jim Fee, Dave Ferrazza, Jay Fragoso, George Frey, Scotty Gallan, Larry Galusha, Dick Gray, John Hawley, Conrad Hobbs, Eike Hohenadl, Flip Hollstein, Sky Huminsky, Bill Jones, Bob Jones, Roger Kersey, Al

Krueger, Barry Lastinger, David Layne, Russ Manhold, Mike "Mighty Dog" McGuire, John Meek, Ed Miller, Pat Moorehead, Norm Olson, Larry Pearlman, Bob Pruitt, Steve Rafferty, "Camper Bill" Rappa, David Sands, Chuck Slezak, Robert "D.B." Smith, Mike Spurgeon, Bob Stahl, Joe Taylor, Larry Thomas, Dee Trees, Adolpho Unda, Jim Wallace, John White, George White, Dave Williams and Randy Wise the 10th Annual SOS Record Series Big-Way Camp and Reunion at Skydive Elsinore had ended.

SOS participants ranged in age from 60 to 75, averaging age 63. Total jumps for the 53 registered participants exceeded 190,000. Experience of individual participants ranged from 600 to over 15,000 jumps, averaging 3,800 jumps.

The sole female SOS participant was Francis "Frankie" Bryant who lives on a houseboat in Scappoose, Oregon.

California led the USA participation with twenty-one SOS jumpers; Florida was second with five. Others traveled from Alaska, Hawaii, Canada, Peru, and Austria.

The SOS world record series moves to Florida where, March 15-18, 2007, Skydivers Over Sixty will gather at Florida Skydiving Center in Lake Wales for the next round of record attempts. It's only a matter of time before "boomers" have the numbers and skills to create the first SOS 60-way. FMI on the Florida event, contact Russ Manhold (FlyCustoms@bellsouth.net) or DZ manager Betty Hill (info@FloridaSkydiving.com).

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