

# From Static Line to Ripcord: The Evolution of Sport Parachuting

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(Maxwell L. Howell Address)

It is probably safe to assume that most contemporary Western sports have undergone a similar process of evolution. These ludic activities, many of which were rooted in the folk-culture, were codified and institutionalized by an urban-industrial, leisured elite. As the games grew in popularity, the amateur ideals of these upper-middle class sportsmen were buffeted by the rapidly expanding ranks of professional athletes and a concomitant “win-ethic.” The resultant conflict frequently led to the splintering of a sport along philosophical lines, as well as multiple governing bodies, divergent rules and regulations, and bemused athletes and amused fans.

The objective of this study was to trace the evolution of sport parachuting, an activity whose growth pattern is the antithesis of that just outlined. From the first authenticated jump in 1797 until 1930, parachutists throughout the world were, almost without exception, carnival stuntmen or service personnel — a situation that was to continue in North America until after the Second World War. The many fool-hardy exploits of these early exhibitionists who leaped from balloons and barnstorming planes and the often embroidered tales of airmen served to negatively stereotype the public image of parachuting and to hamper its acceptance as a legitimate sport.

Yet, paradoxically, it was the very experiences of these professionals that paved the way for the sportsman skydiver. Rigorous testing programs on the part of the military and the always experimental “dare-devil” feats of the stuntmen provided valuable aerodynamic and safety information. Returning World War Two veterans, seeking to jump for enjoyment, brought with them their expertise, organizational abilities, enthusiasm, and an aura of respectability. Finally, in many countries an organization of professional parachutists already existed to oversee and to regulate the activities of the neophyte sporting clubs.

It was thus a professional milieu that nurtured the sport of skydiving. However, close cooperation between weekend amateurs and full-time professionals has resulted in a complete absence of any amateur/professional dichotomization or legislation. This stance, supported by the sport’s international governing body, the Commission Internationale de Parachutisme, has contributed in large measure to the growth and current popularity of sport parachuting.



Bob Barney, Mike Salter, and Max Howell discuss the highs of parachuting following Salter’s address.