

## Taking The Plunge

Skydiving: After The Fear Comes The Fun

By **Ben Johnson**

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The 15th paragraph of the release form reads: "I understand that the success of my jump depends upon the perfect functioning of the airplane from which I intend to jump, and the parachute system, but that neither the airplane nor the parachute system can be entirely depended upon to function perfectly, because each of them is subject to mechanical malfunction and operational error. I understand that parachute jumping will expose me to risk of personal injury and or death."

Initial, and ... check. There's a certain point on a four-page double-spaced release form where I stop reading. This is that point. I know I want to jump out of a plane, and I know why: because I have been compelled since I can remember to hurl myself off of high objects. It's a quiet voice in my head that, when I'm looking over a cliff or peering over the roof of a tall building, says "Jump. Fly. Do it."

Standing in the small trailer in Danielson that houses the Boston-Hartford Fun Skydiving Center, as a man I don't

know prepares to attach himself to me using only nylon webbing and professional experience, I feel like I might not be such a strange case here.

Most of the gregarious, experienced employees inside the trailer probably hear a similar voice.

Handing off my signed release form, I look at the wiry man who holds my harness.

"Hi, I'm Walt," he says.

Hmm. I had hoped that once I learned the name of the man who I would be falling 13,000 feet with, I'd feel less nervous. No such luck.

Walt Machalick, who is 49, slips the harness over me, legs into loops, arms into straps, and that's it. That's it? OK then.

We go outside into the clear, sweltering day, where NBC30's news reporter Brandon Rudat, who is also doing a story on skydiving, has already received all of his prep and is talking with some of the Fun Skydiving employees. Machalick leads me over to a wooden structure that's supposed to resemble the cabin and "door" of the small plane we're going to use to jump. Someone brings Machalick a parachute that he tells me will hold anything under 5,000 pounds. That makes me feel better, as does the incredibly descriptive explanation of the inner workings of a parachute that he gives on my request.

First there's the drogue — a tiny drag chute that the instructor

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- Jumper Chris Carter cannon-balls out the door of the Cessna at 4,000 feet, a fun dive to "cool-off" from the 90-plus degrees.



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- A skydiver and instructor parachute in tandem.



*WHAT: Boston-Hartford Fun Skydiving Center.*

*WHERE: 41 Airport Road, Danielson*

*HOW FAR: 41 miles one-way (from New London)*

*HOW TO GET THERE: Take Route 32 West to I-395 North. Take exit 91 off of 395, merging onto Route 6 West, and then take a right onto Maple Street, which becomes Upper Maple Road. Turn left onto Airport Road, and follow the signs for Skydiving.*

releases manually as soon as you stabilize your fall. It slows the tandem jumpers down so that the videographer jumpers can catch us on film.

“We're going to fall faster otherwise, because we're two bodies — we're more dense,” says Machalick. “This way they'll catch up with us.”

After the drogue gets released, you freefall for approximately 60 seconds, traveling about 8,500 feet towards the Earth. Then Machalick, who will be checking the altimeter on his hand to be sure we don't fall past the pull spot required by the safety standards of the U.S. Parachute Association, will manually pull our main parachute. If, for some reason, he doesn't, or the main chute malfunctions, a secondary chute that is attached to a different altimeter will automatically open by itself.

I try to remember that statistically, this is safer than golfing.

Machalick tells me that when you jump, you're supposed to make the shape of a banana with your body, arching your back and pointing your head and your feet towards space while your body races downward at around 120 mph. That way you don't resist the air that presses up against you as you fall, which makes it easier for your instructor to stabilize the way in which you are falling.

We hop in a pickup and drive a few hundred meters from the drop zone to the Danielson airport, where we get one more lesson on how to fall out of a large hole in a small plane. Machalick attaches his parachute and harness to mine with four huge carabineers — two at the shoulders and two at the hips. Machalick and I, Rudat and Fun Skydiving co-owner Leszek Stachyra squeeze our attached selves into the small Cessna plane with all the grace of a three-legged race. We're joined by two solo-jumping vidographers, who will document our trips down.

The plane takes off and we start a half-hour climb to the correct height and location. Machalick and I sit facing the tail but we're rubbing shoulders with the pilot. Jumpers plus pilot, we're seven heavy sardines in an extremely loud tin box.

For the first few thousand feet, the giant hole in the plane stays open and we giddily watch the ground fall away. Then the experienced jumpers each lend an arm to a sort of heavy-duty curtain with a plastic window that goes over the hole. Rudat, who has been a chatty newscaster up to this point, gets quiet, and a little green. I'm nervous, too but even more excited, and I ask Machalick about his jumping experience.

Machalick, who lives in Norwich, has been jumping for 27 years, and I will be intimately privy to his 4,003 logged jump. Early on, he did some of the extreme and often illegal BASE jumping — even taking a leap off the Newport bridge. Now he's just a “normal” jumper. For a day job, Machalick works as an engineer for Pioneer Aerospace, a company that designs, tests, and manufactures all kinds of parachutes. He tells me that the parachutes on the Mars Lander a few years ago were built at his company. For some reason, all of this information makes me feel a LOT better, and I tell him. He responds:

“I know everything that can happen or go wrong, and I still do it. There's just nothing like it.”

Machalick's love for what we're about to do is contagious, and even though the newscaster is looking increasingly regretful, I feel increasingly at ease — the calm before the storm — as we climb higher into the hazy atmosphere.

Josh Ludka, 28, is my videographer. He did his first jump, trained, and now works at Fun Skydiving.

“I got addicted to it right away,” Ludka yells over the plane engine. “I'm a musician, and when I'm up on stage playing, and everything's good, I get that same feeling falling out of a plane, you know? Just ... peace.”

I want to believe Ludka, but I'm still pretty unsure of exactly how this is all going to *feel*.

*WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW before jumping out of a perfectly good airplane: You don't have to wear any special clothing, just what's comfortable for the weather you're jumping in. No boots with hooks on them. You might want to bring some gum, which helps with the slight discomfort your ears will feel while falling several thousand feet. Your jump will cost between \$165 and \$210, depending. There are discounts for groups, college students, military personnel, and Danielson residents. You must be over 18 years old, under 220 pounds, and in reasonably good physical condition to jump.*

*NITTY GRITTY INFO: Anyone interested should definitely visit [www.funskydiving.com](http://www.funskydiving.com), which has comprehensive information about jumping and instructor qualifications, testimonials, and skydiving videos. Otherwise call 1-800-928-5867.*

*TRAVEL TIDBITS: Danielson's Boston-Hartford Fun Skydiving Center has some unique offers, like one-on-one USPA certification training, and a personalized video of your jump that comes with captured stills of your jump, from the preparation to the landing (\$79). Fun Skydiving is also currently designing its own 3D training software for certification that uses state-of-the art technology.*

*WEB REFER: Video > Go online to watch Ben Johnson jump out of a plane.*



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We get to about 12,500 feet, and the heavy curtain goes up. The second videographer, who is wearing a jump suit with little wings on it that makes him look like a flying squirrel, sticks his camera-helmeted head out of the hole to find the perfect jump spot. As Rudat and I shiver from a mix of 40-degree air and jitters, Machalick and Stachyra do a third and final thorough check of all our straps, carabineers, and chutes, reaching around our bodies methodically and professionally. We put on our goggles.

The flying squirrel jumper climbs out of the hole and holds onto the side of the plane, and before I know it Rudat and Stachyra are out, flying squirrel going with them. Their bodies tumble and disappear against the distant landscape, and Machalick taps my shoulders.

“You ready!?”

“He he ... um ...”

We scootch our butts across the floor of the plane as Ludka climbs out the hole to jump with us. My legs dangle outside, my butt practically slipping off the edge as Machalick taps signals to me: Head back (so I can't look down), hands on shoulder straps (so I don't flail), and legs bent (be a banana).

Finally, I fully understand the intellectual and physical significance of what is about to happen, and I am petrified. We lean forward, back, and hurl ourselves out of the plane, approximately 3 seconds behind my stomach, which long ago left the building — stopping my heart on the way out.

Immediately we do two somersaults and for the first time I learn what it is to be too frightened to scream. It's like that moment you jump off the high dive at the neighborhood pool and hang in the air, except here, the hang time is prolonged. My adrenal gland is having a panic attack.

Suddenly we're stable, thanks to Machalick's deft movements, and we're falling stomach-first. The terror has passed — I am euphoric. I scream with delight and awe, but no one can hear me over the rushing wind. My body has gone limp, and my mind is detached. I don't even know where to look. Breathing is surprisingly easy, but my ears pop and my skin ripples. Ludka, just a few feet way, smiles from underneath his camera helmet.

I'm having so much fun that I've totally forgotten that we even need a parachute, but Machalick suddenly pulls it and we're jerked from horizontal to vertical. Ludka continues to fall, because as a single person he doesn't have to open his chute until later. The rushing air becomes silent.

“All right,” Machalick says. “Ben, we've got a successfully deployed parachute over our heads. How do you feel?”

Incredible.

Machalick shows me how to steer by pulling the straps hanging from the parachute, and we make a couple of exciting spirals, down and to the right, down and to the left. In a matter of seconds we lose another 900 feet in altitude. A few minutes later, we're sliding at about 15 mph onto the thick grass of the drop zone, vertically and laterally miles away from where we jumped out. I lift my legs and Machalick sets us down like two babies on a bed of marshmallows.

Waiting to meet us are several Fun Skydiving employees, including co-owner Mauricio Galante, 35, a 15-year veteran of the Brazilian Navy who lives in Windham. Gallante was a special ops paratrooper for five years and owned two jump schools in Brazil before moving to Connecticut and buying the Fun Skydiving Center in Danielson. Like everyone at Fun Skydiving, he is wiry, experienced, and friendly.

“We do this for love,” he says. “We try to be as safe as possible and give good vibes for people who are willing to discover new things. I've done over 3,000 tandem jumps myself, and every, every, every experience is totally different for me because I'm doing it with someone else. It's a shared life experience.”

During the season of Fun Skydiving — April 1 to Nov. 1 — Gallante says that the school hosts around 1,000 first-time jumpers. About two out of every 100 of those return to go through the school's seven-jump certification program. Many of his employees say that skydiving is addictive, giving you a rush of adrenaline and then a buzz of contentedness for 36 hours afterwards. I already feel what Gallante is talking about.

“Your body is going through homeostasis,” he says. “You're going to sleep like a rock tonight — better than you've ever slept in your life.”

Later, I will find out that he's right.

Skydiving regularly isn't for everyone, but skydiving once should be. I now know that my mind can overcome my fear instinct. But more importantly, the ground feels different now. It's no longer something I'm stuck to. No longer my universe. It holds nothing over my head. I know I can escape it, because I have, and I will again. I definitely, *definitely*, will. Again. ■