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Official Newspaper, City of Hood River and Hood River County



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A lifetime of Superman Dreams – 12 minutes of realizing them



Photo courtesy of Rick Higgins

By CHRISTIAN KNIGHT

News staff writer

August 13, 2005

All I have to do is hold my ground – literally.

Keep the wind from yanking me off this hill and slamming me back down on a dried cow pie like a toy fire truck the angry little boy no longer wants.

That's all I have to do.

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And while I am doing that, Rick Higgins, owner of SunSports Paragliding, will lift 42-square-meters of stitched nylon off this grassy mountainside just north of Bingen and place it in the sky.

We're going to run.

I'll run with narrow strides and Rick will run with wide strides so we don't hit each other's feet.

And then we're going to fly.

We could be up there for 30 minutes, gazing at the backsides of hawks as they circle high over oak groves.

We'll fly from Burdoin Mountain at 2,200 feet down to a flat patch of gravel on the shores of the Columbia at the Bingen Marina.

It'll be pure bliss. The way it has always been in my imagination.

I can't wait.

Of course I've already been waiting for three weeks.

Paragliding conditions for novice question-askers, like myself are finicky. And wind, in the Gorge, is gusty, volatile and sometimes a little unpredictable.

An ideal day for a windsurfer would be a suicidal one for a novice paraglider, much like kayaking down a flooded river or snowboarding through backcountry on winter's first warm, sunny day.

Neither Higgins nor I want that.

So we've been waiting patiently. Waiting for an evening or morning of light, steady winds – those that blow predictably and gently at 9 to 13 miles per hour.

And this day, Higgins had told me during a lunchtime phone conversation, might just be our day.

When I had met Higgins at the Bingen Marina later on, he had already measured the wind. It was on the gusty side of perfect, he had said. Any faster and he'd have to cancel.

"It's never a bad decision to not fly," Higgins tells me. "The mountain is always going to be there. And, if you wait for them, the conditions will too."

This philosophy has guided Higgins through 10 avid years of painless flying. He's logged 1,700 flights without an accident.

"To be good at this sport is to be safe," he likes to say.

Comparatively speaking, paragliding is a fairly safe sport, losing only four to five pilots a year to fatal accidents. (According to Accidents in North American Mountaineering's 2004 report, 118 people died while climbing or

mountaineering in 2003. Whitewater rafting and kayaking experienced between 2.2 and 8.7 fatalities per million participant days, according to a 2003 Wilderness and Environmental Medicine report. Driving, by contrast, resulted in 152 fatalities per million participant days.)

Origins –

Paragliding began in the early 1960s with a parachute and one man's assertion that he could steer it if he could increase the lift to drag ratio by cutting holes in its canopy.

The aviation world gives that credit to American parachutist Pierre Lemoigne in the 1960s. Others, consumed by the idea of motorless, propellerless flight, quickly transformed his concept into a new sport.

When a pair of French skydivers used these modified parachutes – called parasenders – to fly off the summit of and away from the base of an Alp mountain in the 1970s, the sport had already undergone two more major transformations.

That's when the sport hit a thermal of European consciousness.

But paragliding never really boomed in the U.S. until the 1990s, a decade in which the number of paragliding pilots more than tripled from 1,000 to 3,650.

Hitting a thermal —

Today, the United States Hang Gliding Association (USHGA) records almost 5,000 licensed pilots in the U.S, a fraction of the number of the nation's 2 to 3 million kayakers or 300,000 climbers.

For whatever reason – Higgins suspects the volatile winds coupled with few visible launching sites – paragliding hasn't lifted off here in the Gorge either.

Higgins is just one of six or seven Gorge-area pilots. And the Portland paragliding club has just 100 or so members.

The commitment paragliding requires might explain the drag on participation.

The gear costs \$5,000 to \$6,000 – half that if you buy it used – and the USHGA requires 25 flights and 10 to 14 days of instruction before it'll consider you a self-sufficient pilot.

The other reason might be the perception of danger.

"It's (lack of involvement) surprising because it's such a sports town," Higgins says. "In other places, guys who are kitesurfing are also paragliding because they complement each other really well. But here in the Gorge that's not really true."

After Higgins measured the wind at the Bingen Marina, he directed me into the leather backseat of his Jeep Cherokee next to a 40-something-year-old man, who introduced himself

as Frank. For most of the drive up, the three of us didn't speak too much — usually a definitive signal in the adventure world that those who are about to participate in it don't want to talk because they have turned their mental energies away from conversation and toward something more primitive: survival. I look over at Frank and ask him if he's nervous for the flight.

"No," he says. "I'm not. My wife always gets nervous when I am going to fly. I always tell her since I'm at the bottom, there's a 60 percent chance I won't be flying. You go to the top of the hill to see the view. If you get to fly, that's a bonus."

"It could be blowing 30 miles at the top," Higgins explains from the driver seat. "Or it could be blowing zero. There's a gauge that we try to use but until we get there, you just don't know."

Of the 72 accident reports the USHGS received in 2002, 21 were related to strong winds or thermal turbulence.

Twenty minutes later, I'm here: standing in between cow pies as frantic grasshoppers spring from yellow blade to yellow blade.

I am watching the five or six other pilots, who have journeyed here from Utah, Portland, California and from down the road, prepare their gliders.

To me the air feels slack, like a nice day for a bike ride. But Higgins is studying it — listening to the wind as it rustles through the trees, feeling it as it moves up the west side of Burdoin Mountain, searching for it along the glassy, green texture of the Columbia 2,000 feet below.

Higgins turns and holds his thumb in the glowing sunlight.

We are going to fly. My wait is over.

"Right now," he smiles, "the conditions are perfect."

Other pilots are busy unraveling their kites and clipping themselves into their harnesses.

One by one, they lift their gliders into the sky and wait — wait for that gust to tell them to run off the mountain, where, a little wind combined with 20-years of engineered fabric will cradle them from the ground.

They sail toward the river, enveloped in quietness.

Higgins motions me over and very casually explains my responsibility in this whole adventure.

Hold my ground.

Run with narrow strides off the mountain and toward the Columbia when he says "Go."

Push myself into this oversized child's seat of a harness.

Enjoy the ride.

Until he gives me the 'whoop' I have to stand here and wait.

He lifts the kite into the air seconds later.

I can feel it trying to shake me from the earth.

But I don't let it.

He pauses for a moment then says "Now. Go for it."

I run, with small, unrealistic steps. And without expelling much effort, the wind lifts me from the hill over the treetops.

The trees' leaves blur from distinction, then the branches drift into the background.

Within seconds the oak grove below us looks more like weeds in a garden.

"Do you see those hawks?" Higgins asks casually.

I turn my head – careful should an erratic movement collapse the glider and send us spiraling to the earth – and watch the hawks beneath us.

We fly, shrouded in quiet.

And then the entire paraglider shifts.

"It's okay," Higgins says. "It's just a thermal."

But I don't believe him.

My feet reach for something onto which to step. I look down, so far down.

My eyes turn to the glider, an oversized kite with lots of strings. No motor. No propeller.

For the next few minutes, my brain reviews the physics of what is keeping me alive as some sort of intellectual assurance intended to soothe my confounded and thumping heart.

Something about lift and pressure, I remember.

That's what Higgins had told me.

If we don't catch any thermals – aerial versions of elevators – we'll be dropping gently at 200 feet per minute. Each of those strings, I remember Higgins saying earlier, can hold up to 200 pounds of weight. So many are connecting me to the glider, I have lost count of them.

But the information is not enough to soothe my panicking heartbeat. I don't understand why we aren't spiraling into the oak grove below us.

Then I remember the flight instructor behind me. Of anybody

in Oregon with whom to go paragliding for the first time, Higgins might be that guy.

He's calm, calculating and seems to have an unspoken, intrinsic understanding of the air.

Plus, he's a former Oregon distance record holder. Three times over. Last time he broke the record, he flew 83 miles over eastern Oregon's desert in four hours.

He won the Lakeview Freeflight Festival Competition four years in a row. And in his 10 years of flying, I am probably one of thousands of passengers he's taken along for the ride. This guy is solid, I think.

I relax. And enjoy the views of the Columbia and the kiteboarders dancing on it a few hundred feet below us. And hope this ride lasts forever.

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