



Skydive Gananoque!



e-News

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"The Flying Adventures of Minna Mettinen-Kekalainen"



Joined by instructors Angus Smith (black jump suit) and Rick Powell (in green), and Fuzzy Dave on Camera, Minna enjoys her first solo assisted skydive over Gan!

On **April 19th, 2008** Minna Mettinen-Kekalainen, along with Angus Smith and Fuzzy Dave Hatherley traveled out to Gananoque Sport Parachuting Centre (GSPC), on their way back from tunnel training in New Hampshire to complete Minna's first non-tandem skydive!

This was a highly "special event" as it contained unusually circumstances surrounding your typical PFF skydive.

A strongly determined woman introduced to our wonderful sport of skydiving—Minna was lucky to encounter the likes of Angus Smith, an experienced long time Gan jumper who loves a good challenge!

Angus Smith recounts the story of meeting Minna and beginning the journey of her wonderful flying adventure:

"My first encounter with Minna was at the Parachute School of Toronto (Baldwin, Ontario) in August of 2007, and at that time she came out to do a tandem skydive. Minna is the first person with a disability, that I have encountered, who was **ABSOLUTELY** determined to be able to skydive on her own. Minna has been in a wheel chair for a few years, due to the onset of ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease). She has lost complete control and feeling in her legs and also has dexterity and control issues with some of the finger on both hands. Minna does however have very good control over her arms, torso and hips, and is quite strong due to her competitive rowing and kayaking training and activities that she actively participates in.



Minna takes a good look over at Angus during freefall before initiating her pull



At pull altitude, Minna reaches back to deploy the pilot chute with some guidance by Angus

Shortly after the first tandem jump, we decided on a plan to help her reach her goal. The two major roadblocks that we had to overcome was the control of her legs in freefall and achieving a suitably safe landing technique. As a fact finding exercise, we employed the use of the internet, and corresponded with many people (thanks to everyone who all gave us terrific information). We eventually found Peter Hewitt in South Africa, who went through a similar experience. Peter started his skydiving career as a fully able-bodied person, but due to an unfortunate landing accident, is now in a wheel chair. Peter and his AFF instructor (Eric 'Tonto' Stephenson) devised some equipment and techniques which we were able to borrow from. I thank them both for their assistance, and to Tonto— who we sadly lost a few months back due to a landing accident, BLUE SKIES my friend!"

Winter Rigging Project

To prepare for Minna's solo assisted skydive; Angus started to contact the talents of some good friends to assist in the construction of her custom-made equipment....

"It was over the winter months, with the generous help of rigger and instructor Will McCarthy of GSPC, that we constructed 'Minna's Flying Pants', said Angus. "They were based on the design of Peter Hewitt's pants which have built-in straps to raise her legs for landing, and a built in crotch panel (similar to birdman suits) for assisting her with leg control. Minna and I also reworked some standard fixed knee braces, which were similar to Peter's custom built braces, to hold her legs in a neutral position (approx. 90 degrees).



With her legs conveniently tucked into her custom built "flying pants", Minna approaches the landing area under canopy!

Prior to constructing our 'adaptive' equipment, we had completed multiple tandem jumps at PST (Parachute School of Toronto) at the end of last season, to teach Minna the exits, stable body position and canopy control skills, (Thanks to Adam Mabee's generosity who made the jumps very affordable!).

Off to the Wind Tunnel

The next stage was to plan a trip to the wind tunnel to verify if Minna could be stable in freefall, so I contacted SkyVenture's CEO, Alan Metni, who made a generous offer of free tunnel time for Minna and set us up with Rob and Laura Greer—owners of the New Hampshire location—who then offered 1/2 hour of free tunnel time (thanks!!).

Plans were now underway with the assistance of a good friend and fellow jumper/ instructor Fuzzy Dave (who also generously offered some of his time and skill to help in this endeavor) to begin mapping out our training procedures for the wind tunnel, tandem jumps and AFF jumps. Our tunnel time in April proved to be very useful, as we discovered that Minna was basically stable WITHOUT the use of the knee braces or the crotch panel. At a lower airspeed in the tunnel, both

of Minna's legs remained equally extended, without moving. We also noticed on one of Fuzzy Dave's videos of a tandem that was done at Gananoque the weekend before the tunnel trip, that Minna's legs were again stable and equal, maintaining a bent position (slightly extended) that was determined by the wind speed. Although our tunnel time was cut short (due to unforeseen circumstances), I gathered enough information to realize that freefall stability would be possible, so the decision was made to head to Gananoque for Minna's 1st AFF jump!!

Into the skies over Gan

The first AFF jump went very smoothly (*except for a small pilot chute release issue*), with the assistance of Gan instructor and Tandem Master, Rick Powell (the "Rock") as secondary instructor, and Fuzzy Dave on camera. The video this time showed that Minna's legs went into a slightly retracted position, at her fall rate, which resulted in a backslide. **Her landing, with the skilful direction of DZO Tom McCarthy on the radio, was EXCEPTIONAL!!**



Photo By: Fuzzy Dave

Happily back on the ground and joined by her daughter Michelle and Angus, Minna is all smiles before being lifted back into her wheelchair which sits in the background.

braces' to enhance her leg position on the next jump. Minna's landing on the 2nd jump was also well executed, this time with Adam Mabee on the radio... although a bit on the WET side! **I'm not sure if landing in a big puddle constitutes a water jump??**

The next jumps are planned for late May at PST, and with lots of practice, some equipment changes and a bit of luck, we could see Minna freefalling on her own, without instructor assistance.

Fingers crossed and a BIG thank you to everyone that has helped along the way!!!!!! Said Angus.

In closing....I have to say that after watching Minna's video and the excitement in her face, we were so very proud of her accomplishment. Everyone at the DZ got together to watch the video, and when it was over Minna shared some truly heartfelt words; expressing her sincere appreciation to everyone she has met in the skydiving community who welcomed her and easily accepted her disability. Her daughter Michelle also shared with us that the whole skydiving experience has definitely changed their lives and most importantly her mother's 'spirit' — for the better!

Not only is Minna very likely the first ever paraplegic in Canada to attempt solo freefall status, but she is definitely the only female in this condition to take on such an incredible adventure!

All our best Minna...You Go Girl!!!

Blue skies!

Deb Lovegrove

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Minna lines up over the target area for her first ever solo landing under canopy at Gananoque.

Minna's 2nd AFF jump

Minna's second jump was done at PST on the following weekend, however this time it was with a single instructor; Angus and Fuzzy on camera. As Angus describes, "A touch more eventful— we discovered that the backslide condition had moments of intensity and we will definitely need to use some 'soft

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