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January 15, 2006

## Eagle season on Bellyache

**Andrew Harley**  
May 8, 2003

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The answers I finally came up with included "because it was there," "The planet Krypton is fictional" and "my roommate Richie Burgland and his friend, Ed Armstrong."

These insightful answers ultimately led to a roundabout answer to my first question: "Because it's probably a lot of fun."

### Vail Valley Paragliding

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Greg, who works as a ski instructor at Golden Peak in the winter, has been paragliding for 13 years, and Dave, who flies year-round, has been at it for three-and-a-half years.

Dave and Greg took photographer Melinda Kruse and I for a flight off Bellyache Ridge.

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- 2003 Vail Daily Reader Poll



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Bellyache is 1,500 feet above the valley, which is high enough to keep the average flight between 10 minutes and half an hour.

However, Greg's favorite flights cross the country in the fall. They require ten thermals - columns of rising warm air - and last four to five hours.

Dave has reached an altitude of 16,500 feet after launching off of Bellyache. He flew to Vail and landed in Ford Park.

"I was like "shit!" I have to be at work at 4 p.m." Dave said.

### No jumping

A common misconception harbored by people who have never paraglided is that the takeoff includes some type of jump off a cliff or high point.

Jump is an inaccurate word to describe the launch of a paraglider because it carries the connotation of falling at some point.

Most experienced paragliders prefer the term "huck off."

Anyone capable of jogging can paraglide, in fact, its classification as an extreme sport is questionable.

"Age is irrelevant," said Greg. "There's very little limitation to getting people flying."

Most extreme sports involve adrenaline rushes caused by the relative danger of the activity.

Anticipation of a jump, trick to be performed or rapid to be rafted is part of what sets extreme sports apart from, say, flying an airplane or riding a rollercoaster.

There are extreme forms of paragliding, but regarding its general practice, the most dangerous factor is the weather.

"Flying is easy, almost nothing can go wrong," Dave said. "Flying in the wrong conditions is when things go wrong."

"Twisting an ankle is the worst injury I've encountered," Dave added.

Air Jackson/Joe Jackson/My left shoe

The mud on Bellyache clung to the bottoms of my laceless Merrells like a pool of hungry crocodiles. I soon realized my choice in footwear was as well-advised as a high-country camper with a cotton sleeping bag.

But I couldn't worry about that, I needed to memorize the steps for take off.

- 1) Wait for Dave to count to three.
- 2) Lean forward into the wind.
- 3) Run like hell.
- 4) Do not fall over backward.
- 5) If a fall occurs, get up quickly - this is not a soccer match; there are no referees to call penalties on the wind or protuberances.
- 6) Do not stop running until safely airborne.

Dave counted to three in a highly dramatic, slow whisper. The wind beat against us as we ran toward the valley down the slippery slope.

Although Joe Jackson was a childhood hero of mine, as were most baseball players with lifetime batting averages above .330, it was not the time to imitate the prolific left-handed hitter. But the mud on my sneakers grew as heavy as a bundle of Babe Ruth's bats/a soggy baseball/a Roger Clemens fastball/the burden of the Black Sox.

The mud swallowed my left shoe, and I made the mistake of landing on my shoeless foot - sting - when Dave and I touched down twenty minutes later.

Certification

Greg and Dave later informed me that I was not the first person to lose a shoe to mud during takeoff. They know a certified paraglider who lost his prosthetic leg.

In order to become certified with the United States Hang Gliders Association, one needs a minimum of 25 observed flights.

The first couple of flights are mere bunny hops, involving only a few seconds of flying.

By the end of training, one must be able to perform specified technical maneuvers in the air. One should also purchase all the necessary equipment by the end of training.

"It's pretty cool to have a portable aircraft on your back," Greg said.

"You can travel the world with it," Dave said.

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