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Bill "MX" Halsey | D-25888

USPA PRO Rating, 11,000-plus jumps, 500-plus tunnel hours

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FREEFLYING: WHERE TO START?

by Christy West
with contributions by expert freeflyers

What do you think of when you think of freeflying? Freedom in the sky? No rules? No judgments? This concept of freeflying entices many skydivers to the discipline.

However, freeflying isn't just another way to play; it is a higher-speed discipline with challenges above and beyond those of the belly flying we learned as students. Many highly experienced freeflyers and coaches are becoming increasingly nervous about safety, because they have seen far too many incidents and injuries involving new freeflyers who don't have the foundational skills and awareness they need to stay safe.

Eight world-class freeflyers and coaches contributed their recommendations on how to start freeflying safely for this article, and they all agreed on four major concepts:

1. A new A license isn't a license to freefly on your own (yet).

2. To be a good, safe freeflyer, you must first be a competent, safe belly flyer.

3. As with your initial jump training, good coaching is essential for safety and efficient learning as you learn to freefly.

4. Wind tunnels are great for training freefly skills but terrible for training freefly skydiving.

Before we get into the experts' recommendations for training, let's first look at the additional risks of freeflying.

FREEFLYING RISKS

"It takes a certain amount of skill and experience to get a clear picture of the added risks associated with freeflying," says USPA Nationals Advanced Vertical Formation Skydiving Silver Medalist Nicholas Lott.

This speaks to something we see in many aspects of skydiving: It is a completely new sport to most people. You can't apply skills and knowledge from a related sport, for example, using your baseball skills on the company softball team. This is why good instruction for skydiving students and good coaching for advanced

skills is so important to safety. New skydivers (and those new to advanced disciplines) don't always know what they don't know. Thus, one of the biggest risks is ignorance of risks.

"Know what you are getting into or ask someone more experienced before throwing something out of the airplane," advises Aaron Necessary, former USPA Collegiate Freefly Champion and current head-down large-formation world record holder.

Most of the risks in freeflying stem from the higher freefall speeds—roughly 160-200 mph compared to typical belly speeds of around 120 mph—including:

1. Higher risk of instability in faster-fall positions.

2. Higher risk of losing altitude awareness.

3. More drift due to the backsliding common to beginning sit-flying, which increases the risk of encroaching on other groups.

4. Higher risk of freefall collisions and higher collision speeds because everything is happening more quickly.

5. Higher risk of premature deployments.

“Every time I hear people sorting out exit order in the loading area, I get the chills when I hear the words ‘solo freefly.’ I’ve had multiple close calls from other skydivers drifting above or below me in freefall. I’ve had a jumper leave before me, backslide beneath and past me, and open on the opposite side where the next group would have been. These circumstances have had fatal outcomes in the past, and we need to do all we can to prevent them.”

Nicholas Lott | D-29565

4,800-plus jumps



“Speed is where people get hurt; the faster the speed, the more chance of meeting someone going at a different speed and colliding with them,” says 12-time British National Freefly Champion Mike Carpenter. “If you can control your speed at all times and at each end of the spectrum, then you will be as safe as you can be.”

Happily, you can reduce these risks by gaining proper foundational skills and receiving training. Bill Halsey, who holds many head-down large-formation world records and VFS medals, says, “Skydiving is all about risk management.”

NEW A LICENSE: NOT A LICENSE TO FREEFLY

First of all, your A license does *allow* you to freefly. But all of our experts agree that freeflying *should not be the first thing you do* when you graduate.

“There’s so much more to freeflying that isn’t taught in AFF that needs to be learned!” states three-time USPA National Freestyle Champion and multi-discipline world record holder Melissa Nelson Lowe. “It’s about quality jumps and mentorship.”

People often ask how many jumps one should have before starting to freefly. This is one area where our experts don’t all agree, because individuals vary widely in their ability to fly and learn new things. They do agree, however, that jump numbers are not as important as laying a good foundation of skill, experience and awareness during lower-speed belly-flying jumps before progressing to faster-falling freefly dives.

“If you skip steps, there will be gaps in your ability and you will be very limited

in what you can do,” says Halsey. “Take the time to learn each step properly, and you will be a safer and much more skilled flyer. Freeflying is being able to fly in all body positions, not just the fast ones.”

BELLY FOUNDATION FIRST

The experts agree that competent, aware belly flying is the foundation for all freefall skills. “Belly flying is foundational to all styles of flying,” says VFS competitor and head-down record holder Ryan Risberg. “Freeflying is an advanced application of these basic skills. If you are not aware of your body [and don’t have] heading control and altitude awareness at a basic level, you

will not be able to control yourself at higher speeds. You don’t have to be a world-class belly flyer, but the basics apply in all disciplines: Level. Slot. Dock.”

Following are the skills and qualities our experts say you should have in belly flying before starting to freefly, since these skills also apply to freefly formation skydiving. You should consistently:

- ▶ Pay attention during dirt dives.
- ▶ Understand exit order, separation and line of flight.
- ▶ Visualize properly during the ride to altitude.

“Trying to freefly before having competent belly skills is like trying to race a Ferrari before you can ride a bike. It’s easy to go fast; it’s the slowing down and control that can be the hard part. Learn how to control your speed, otherwise you will smash your Ferrari into brick walls, or worse, other people!”



Mike Carpenter | D-34137

USPA Coach and AFF Instructor,
PRO Rating, 10,000-plus jumps

FREEFLYING:

WHERE TO START?



ZACH LEWIS

Lawrence de Laubadere | D-31592

USPA Coach and AFF Instructor,
PRO Rating, 2,500-plus jumps

Ben Nelson | D-31708

USPA Coach and Tandem Instructor
4,000-plus jumps

- ▶ Understand the differences between freefly-safe and belly-safe equipment.
- ▶ Perform and receive proper gear checks.
- ▶ Use proper exit techniques (diving and floating) and understand the relative wind on exit.
- ▶ Perform smooth and safe approaches to the formation from any level.
- ▶ Recover quickly from unstable belly-to-earth flight.
- ▶ Be proficient at leg turns. (“If you can’t control your legs belly flying, you aren’t ready to freefly,” says Halsey.)
- ▶ Know how to fly your slot with or without grips.
- ▶ Be able to break off and track safely.
- ▶ Be able to fly a safe and predictable landing pattern and land safely and accurately.

“If you can’t do all that on a belly jump, you have no business attempting any kind of freefly jump,” Halsey states. If you have trouble getting into formations, flying your slot or breaking off on your belly, going half again as fast in a sit or head down isn’t going to make it any better!

Belly skills are only part of the foundation, however. Awareness of others (both in your group and adjacent groups) in the sky, in freefall and under canopy is a crucial requirement. Your awareness increases with every jump; in another 100 or 500 jumps, you’ll be shocked at what you’re seeing that

you don’t see now! Look for problems when they are small (such as increasing separation or increasing closing speeds between jumpers) or before they happen at all (like stopping a solo belly flyer from climbing out too soon after the previous group). More jumps equals more awareness and quicker, smaller fixes.

Lawrence de Laubadere, a competitor in many disciplines and a head-up and head-down large-formation world record holder, remarked that the time you spend in the sport will expose you to mistakes (yours and others’), varying advice, a wide range of jump types and other experiences that will make you a more informed and well-rounded—thereby safer—jumper. “You need an automated skill set when it comes to the basics of saving your life and being safe in a group context when skydiving,” he summarizes.

GET GOOD TRAINING

Once you’ve gained enough skill to fly any slot on belly jumps (not just with coaches!), it’s more efficient and safer—albeit more expensive—to get good freefly coaching to kick off your freefly career. And it’s cheaper in the long run.

“If you try it on your own, the only way you learn is through mistakes,” says Carpenter. “How many times can you crash that Ferrari?”

“A coach can help you identify things that will ultimately lead to bad habits,” explains Lott. “If you learn things the wrong way to begin with, it will take you twice as long to unlearn it. Without another person on your skydive, how do you know if you’re falling straight down? How will you know if your body position is correct? How can

FREEFLY-FRIENDLY GEAR

If you have freefly aspirations, your gear needs to be ready to handle freefly speeds in all orientations without flaps opening up or handles, risers or bridles pulling loose. Premature deployments are uncomfortable at best at any freefall speed (let alone freefly speeds), and they can pose major risks to any skydivers freefalling above the jumper.

De Laubadere recommends a rig with strong pin protection and riser flaps, and further suggests wearing at least one audible altimeter (if not two) and one visual altimeter.

Detailed information on assuring that your rig is safe at freefly speeds is available in “Is My Rig Freefly Friendly?” by Mike Gruwell in the March issue of Parachutist.

“The tunnel is a very small portion of what skydiving is.”



Melissa Nelson Lowe | D-20224

10,000-plus jumps

you practice proper breakoffs or moves? You'll get far more out of a few jumps with an experienced coach than you'll get from a 10-jump day of solo 'sit-trying.'"

Lott adds that if you simply go out and do a bunch of solo freefly jumps, these things will happen:

1. You'll spend a bunch of money.
2. You'll develop a lot of bad habits.
3. You'll try to jump with a group, and you won't be able to get there.
4. You'll feel dumb that you did so many solos and thought you knew how to fly.
5. You'll feel humbled and ready to learn. Then you'll find a coach to fix you.

"There's a scene in the movie 'The Empire Strikes Back' that sums this up pretty well," says Ben Nelson, who holds many world, national and state head-down records (and is a "Star Wars" fanboy). "Young Luke Skywalker travels to Dagobah to seek training with Jedi Master Yoda. Yoda recognizes that Luke has developed bad habits and is therefore not confident in his abilities. Yoda tells Luke that he must now unlearn what he has learned. Sure, Luke ultimately becomes one of the galaxy's most powerful Jedis, but his road could have been much easier and he could have become much more powerful if he had started by developing good habits up front."

Jumping with a slightly more experienced friend instead of a coach may not be the way to go at first, either. "A good coach knows how to coach individuals the way

they need to be taught," says Halsey. "Every student's different, and the way each student's taught is different, as well. What worked for them may not work for you."

Freefly training is very much a progression of skills. "Your recovery position for back-flying is belly flying; your recovery position for sit-flying is back-flying; your recovery position for head-down [flying] is sit-flying," says de Laubadere.

"Only after head-down [flying] comes angle-flying," adds Lowe.

TUNNEL TRAINING: ONLY PART OF THE PICTURE

"Tunnels are such an important tool for modern freeflyers!" says Halsey. "You can learn in minutes what it used to take hundreds of jumps to learn. Having said that, tunnels don't teach you aerial awareness. Everything in the tunnel happens in 14-16 feet; you need to know what's happening in the thousands of feet that surround you in the sky."

While de Laubadere and Risberg note that tunnel flying is one of the cheapest, safest ways to learn freefly skills, de Laubadere adds that it can't teach some of the most important safety aspects of skydiving, including:

- ▶ Exits.
- ▶ Diving or floating after a moving base.
- ▶ Covering large distances and controlling your speed while doing so.
- ▶ Altitude awareness.

- ▶ Breakoff and tracking.
- ▶ Flying with a rig.
- ▶ Flying your parachute.

"Tunnel flying and skydiving have a lot in common, but amazing tunnel flyers don't automatically make amazing skydivers, and vice versa," says Lott.

While you chase your freefly dreams, remember that these safety points and foundational skills will pave the shortest path to your becoming a freefly beast. "Make the right decisions to keep yourself and those around you safe," summarizes Lott. "Being conservative is the new cool."



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christy West, D-21464, is an active competitive formation skydiver and coach with FS team Spaceland Lite and a national FS judge. She is the marketing director for Skydive Spaceland in Rosharon, Texas, just south of Houston.