

OUT of THIN AIR

Club
member
skydives
Mount
Everest

By John Kinmonth



Carrie Holmes is not an adrenaline junkie. Despite being the only U.S. female member of an international skydiving contingent that recently made the first-ever jump near the summit of Mount Everest, the 30-year-old Bellevue Club member and project manager insists that thrill-seeking is an extremely small part of why she skydives.

“Most people who jump on a regular basis don’t do it for an adrenaline rush,” she says. Instead,

Carrie points to the technical aspects and quirky camaraderie of skydiving as motivators.

“The skydiving community is a very interesting group of people,” she says. “Honestly, that’s what keeps me in it.”

Until the summer of 2005, Carrie had never stepped out the door of a plane in flight, but all that changed when she and a longtime friend decided to try it.

“It was definitely on a whim,” she says. Like most first-timers, Carrie started with a tandem jump where a licensed instructor is strapped to the jumper’s back at all times. However, unlike many first-timers, she came back for more.

“I never thought at that point that I would become a skydiver,” she says. “I just wanted to challenge myself and climb out of an airplane on my own, and then I was hooked.”

Three years and countless jumps later, Carrie decided to become a part of freefalling history when she joined an Everest skydiving expedition this past fall.

FALLING FROM THE TOP OF THE WORLD

While reading a copy of Parachutist magazine in December 2007, Carrie came across an article describing the Everest jump.

“The gut reaction was I want to do this,” she says. “It was one of the decisions you make immediately.”

Joining an international team of skydivers from Britain, New Zealand, Australia and Nepal, Carrie spent months preparing for the three-week adventure. Due to the high altitude of both the jump and the landing zone, the group would need to make a 10-day acclimatization trek, ascending on foot to the mountain meadow serving as the drop zone.

Carrie did the bulk of her training for the ordeal at the Club, where she utilized stair-stepping machines and advanced Kinesis classes with personal trainer Josh Morse to strengthen her core and leg muscles.

Flying into Katmandu, the mountainous capital of Nepal, on Sept. 21, the group spent time familiarizing itself with some of the special equipment necessary for the high-altitude jump, including oxygen masks, custom-designed extreme cold jumpsuits and larger-than-normal parachutes for the thinner air. After some sightseeing, the group hit the trail where they hiked with Sherpas and yaks, staying in rudimentary cabins in mountain villages scattered along the route.

“We would trek all day,” she says. “The key is to go slow.”

Once at the drop zone, they made familiarization jumps at “lower” altitudes like 18,000 feet to further acclimate to the environment and the equipment before the main event. Carrie enjoyed this opportunity to get a close-up view of the tallest mountain in the world.

“That jump was awesome,” she says. “It definitely had good views.”

As for the main jumps, several skydiving benchmarks were to be set by the group—one for skydiving near Everest and another for highest landing zone (approximately 13,000 feet).

Because the weather patterns around Everest are highly volatile, it took several days before Carrie could get her shot at joining skydiving’s history books. When she finally boarded the high-altitude Pilatus Porter aircraft, Carrie likened the sensation to many of her other jumps.

“I get nervous gearing up and right when we’re taking off, and then I calm down,” she says. “Once the door opens, I’m always calm.”

But the similarities to a typical jump

for Carrie at Snohomish’s Harvey Field end there.

“First of all, it’s cold at 30,000 feet, and you can’t move as much,” she says. As an advanced skydiver, Carrie enjoys perfecting aerial maneuvers such as free falling in formation with other divers, but on this jump the extra gear coupled with the extreme cold prohibited much in the way of creativity. However, Carrie was the first on the trip to execute a “two-way”—where she and another solo jumper held hands during freefall.

After breaking formation with the other jumper during the historic freefall, she deployed her chute and began to drift toward the drop zone.

It was at that point that Carrie realized she had a problem.

COMING DOWN

“A cloud had come up the valley and covered the whole drop zone and the town below,” she says. Although the weather was clear as Carrie stepped out of the plane, conditions had changed rapidly by the time she pulled her chute. She and the other jumpers were now facing a perilously blind landing in notoriously dangerous terrain.

“I never really freaked out, but it did take me a couple seconds to understand what was going on,” she says.

Trying to make the best of a bad situation, Carrie began scanning the unfamiliar ground far below for a suitable spot to attempt a landing.

“There aren’t a lot of outs in the mountainous, rocky terrain,” she says. Still descending, Carrie decided on a likely emergency spot on the other side of a ridge and drifted toward it.

“I chose the best option and landed on uneven terrain,” she says.

On impact, Carrie suffered a severe compound fracture in her ankle, as well as spinal and head trauma.

“I actually don’t remember landing,” she says. The other jumpers with her were also forced to land in risky spots, but managed to escape serious injury.

After being carried by several expedition members and Sherpas on a backboard down to the drop zone, Carrie had to wait for the weather to sufficiently clear before she was flown to a hospital in Katmandu. The whole process took 12 hours by the time she was checked into the hospital.

Spending the next 15 days in the Nepalese hospital, Carrie underwent surgery that included a skin graft to cover her ankle wound.

“I was definitely scared when I

got to the hospital because it seemed chaotic, but I had really good doctors and good care,” she says. “They also had nurses with me who spoke English.” Her father, longtime Bellevue Club member Robert Holmes, arrived in Katmandu to help six days after the injury.

“Once he got there, things got a lot better,” she says.

During her hospital stay, Carrie got to see a different side of the Nepalese culture. For example, after hearing about Carrie’s predicament, the housekeeper at the hotel where her father was staying brought fruit to Carrie’s hospital room. Also, upon learning that Carrie would finally be transported back to the United States, many of the nurses gave her gifts.

“I think it’s genuine care, concern and compassion,” she says.

Now, Carrie is back in Bellevue recovering from her injuries and focusing on her commercial project management firm, Axis Planning & Development. She is also working to develop Positive Liberty, an organization dedicated to empowering women to push the limits of their own boundaries.

While she won’t be able to jump again until her body is fully healed, Carrie plans to resume skydiving.

Despite her injuries, she sees the Everest adventure as a success: “I made lasting friendships with people all over the world.”



Favorite Movie:

“Forgetting Sarah Marshall”

Hero/Greatest Influence:

My dad

Best Advice:

Things work out if you follow your passion.

Favorite Food:

Sushi

Favorite Activity at the Club:

Advanced Kinesis on Friday is my favorite class—Josh Morse is awesome.