

Where No Skydiver (or Marketeer) Has Gone Before

Written by Alex Baer

Sunday, 21 October 2012 17:00

Chalk up another win to tee-shirt philosophy, with an added twist.

Many have long said, "Just because you can, doesn't mean you should." The current version of such qualitative evaluations in life might be, "Just because you can, why on Earth would you want to?"

Upholding that basic concept, especially with that newest wrinkle, may be a sign of intelligent life down here after all, but I'm not blistering the flooring in a panicked hurry to get out and place bets.

Call me a recliner spud if you like, but I don't get the fuss over skydiver Felix Baumgartner. OK, so he was the first skydiver to break the speed of sound. All righty then. Congratulations are due: *Huzzah, huzzah.* ☐ *I throw confetti in your general direction.* ☐ *Please pretend it's ticker tape at your own private parade.* ☐ *Best wishes.* ☐ *Live long and prosper. And so on.*

Now, do you mind if I get back to this book? It's getting pretty good, right in through here. Sorry -- I don't mean to, uh, *taint* anyone's *Cheerios*, but let's look at this for a sec. Stripped to its basics, this is a guy who leaned forward out of a capsule in a pseudo-spacesuit, rode gravity to the ground, and triggered a parachute at the appropriate time.

I don't remember a cure for cancer being in there anywhere, nor a rediscovery of ancient alchemy, or even the indisputable finding of life on another planet. *He fell, he deployed a parachute.* ☐ *Ta-Dah!*

Now, I'll grant you, people have died trying to beat these height records in jumps, so I really do understand this stuff can be dangerous. But, like bungee-jumping off a bridge into a dry, rock-strewn river bed below, I refer you back to the tee-shirt philosophy and a simple question: *But, um -- why?*

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It's not done to boost information in fields of science desperate for answers: the early space program took care of that. That leaves two categories that I can imagine at this point -- all right, three, if you want to count *Fame*.

There's the thrill-seeking, adrenalin-junkie angle, I guess. But, it seems to me you'd need to have an adrenalin jones the depth of the Marianas Trench accumulating within you to risk a thing like that long fall.

In all fairness, I do have to say in Baumgartner's defense that I have never personally had an adrenalin monkey on my back the size of King Kong, so I have no idea what one does under such situations. Maybe there are step-down drugs, a 12-step program, and support groups available for people with Kong-sized needs like that, but I don't know.

However: If there's any summations on the other side of this life to help make sense of the time we'd just lived, I'd like my passing to have counted for something, if at all possible.

I mean, I'd be fairly uncomfortable being in a line, across from people talking about the last thing they remembered -- saying things like, "I was trying to get some children out of a burning building," and so on, when I'm in another line of people saying things like, "I dunno -- I guess it was a stupid dare," or "Banana peel and staircase while helping someone downstairs," or even worse, "I leaned forward wrong."

Call me overly particular, but I'd find it much more meaningful to hear myself say, "It was a last-ditch attempt to stop the chemical reaction so near the orphanage," instead of, "Deployment failure," and then, red-faced, trying to change the subject.

I guess that leaves Money as the third choice. I imagine the stream of endorsements could really pile up with a stunt like this, even if Americans have a three-second attention... *what were we talking about?*

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Oh, right.

Nike would have to get into the act, with the whole full-suit, full-court press -- not to mention the *Lip of Space Swoosh Booties* that have flashing lights, sirens, and three-color smoke generators in each heel, all controllable via wrist pad. Each boot has its own RF buoy frequency for later retrieval, should one or more become sucked off during a plunge.

Virgin Galactic will be wanting a James-Bond-style video ad that updates the boring stunt of a skydiver landing in a plane seat in mid-flight, instead featuring a plummeting skydiver maneuvering through thin air to intercept and board a suborbital flight -- paying for it with the Mesospheric Card, of course. *Who jumps without one?*

Others may already be lining up -- Depends, for example, may already have industrial-strength, re-entry diapers on the drawing board, complete with externally-triggered, pre-heated blue gel, to help provide extra, *uh*, cushioning, to be deployed in event of a rough landing coming up quick while headed down even faster.

Spam will undoubtedly roll out a limited *Right Stuff* edition celebrating an earlier American notion of what constituted one version of *Spam in a Can* -- astronaut-meat-in-a-capsule.

Spa

Maybe Marvel or DC Comics will ante up, producing *The Purple Plummeter* comics and action figures, just in time for the all-important gift-raking, wish-listing, and wedding gift registry seasons.

How about a combination of the ol' Silly String in a can folks teaming up with the cheese-in-a-can people? You can almost hear the tag-line gears engaging: *Make fun, nutritious designs all the way down with String Cheese Spray nozzle attachments! Collect all 53 nozzles!*

But, I would personally enjoy a SuperBall sponsorship. You might remember these were highly

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compressed, very active balls of synthetic polymer and so on. Dropped from shoulder level, they'd bounce almost all the way back up to point of release. A determined kid could make one bound over a three-story apartment house, if you really *creamed* the thing into the concrete driveway.

You see where this is going, of course. Step out of your capsule over the target hardstand, releasing the SuperBall anytime after the speed of sound is achieved -- then, bank out of the way, and see how far back up the SuperBall will rocket and streak. Perhaps we'll get a new mini-moon out of the deal, providing it doesn't collide with all the space junk up there and change its trajectory and orbit.

That's providing the SuperBall doesn't have the urge to merge with the hardstand upon impact, in a fit of irresistible need to become one, bonding forever with the molecules of the concrete pad.

Meanwhile, you have to expect some set-backs in such pioneering areas of marketing. Banana Boat, for example, is having a tough year, saying they will withdraw its proposed SPF 900,000 spray gel sunscreen, moonburn, and anti-wind-chapping product, saying that some test users have experienced up to a 50% loss in physical height, an insatiable longing for clam dip, and the inability to correctly say the letter "S" in everyday speech.

More on that one as the story develops, and as the lawyers all carve out their talking points down here on terra firma.

And so it all goes, of course, in Product Land. If there's a fast buck to be made, you can bet your bottom (or forward-leaning) dollar the market will be inundated overnight. Of course, there are probably rewards other than money in such an event -- but these seem to all loop back under the heading of *Fame* in some way -- as in taking pride at entering the record books in some way.

Any way.

Although, I suppose it is theoretically possible to take some satisfaction in a job well done in this field, as anywhere. *"That was one of the best lean-forwards and chute-triggers I've done all season," he told himself, pumping the air, suddenly breaking into an end-zone boogaloo.*

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But, you know...

If this is just an adrenalin fix -- what in hell do you do for a booster shot in between fall-forwards? Ride out on the wing, strapped down on a nonstop from New York to Hong Kong? Don a steampunked-looking diving suit, complete with riveted-iron helmet, and get towed across the Atlantic, 2,000 feet down, by a fast-running surface ship? Become a Republican propaganda de-programmer?

If there is more to this -- *activity? sport? pastime? hobby? □ diversion?* -- than I'm seeing? If so, I genuinely apologize and repeat:

I don't see it.

Not that I need to, of course. You folks keep on leaning forward, and enjoy. I'll keep piloting the recliner.

Although, come to think of it -- I *could* rig up some balloons on all four corners...

Skydiver: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-19943590>

SuperBall: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Super_Ball

Banana Boat: http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/banana-boat-maker-recalls-sunscreen-brands-after-handful-of-reports-of-users-catching-on-fire/2012/10/19/7318c8e2-1a1b-11e2-ad4a-e5a958b60a1e_story.html?hpid=z3

Lawn Chair Piloting: <http://www.cnn.com/2012/07/14/us/oregon-lawn-chair-balloon/index.html>

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http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/48186180/ns/us_news-life/t/thunderstorms-halt-lawn-chair-balloons-flight/#.UIRX266qL3A

"Lawnchair Larry" Walters: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Larry_Walters