



PHOTO COURTESY KENNY PUGH

Katie Hawkins is one of only a handful of women skydivers to become a tandem master.

# EXTREME SPORTS WOMEN

BY  
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Life is either something that happens to you, or happens for you. More often than not, it's a little of both. The telling difference is whether you're feeling a little edgy, or living on the edge. Four women living among us thrive on the edge everyday. Their sports are extreme, thrilling and exceedingly mental.

"In a professional competition everyone is a top performer," says 34-year-old Sgt. 1st Class Joetta Dement, a competitive shotgun shooter with the U.S. Army Marksmanship Unit

at Fort Benning. "It's the individual who can mentally put it together on that day that will win."

That pretty much sounds like a day in the life of all of us. Performance is the hallmark of success and mentally keeping it together is the toughest challenge of the hour.

None of us succeed in holding it together all the time. But, sometimes losing your grip is a good thing too. Katie Hawkins was crushed when her marriage failed four years ago. Confused



and heart-broken, she headed for the airfield and brazenly jumped from a plane.

"I was absolutely terrified, absolutely fine and absolutely hooked from the very first moment in the air," says the 26-year-old, who is now one of only a handful of women in the world to become a tandem master. With over 2,000 jumps successfully completed, she is also a certified accelerated free fall instructor and a free fall videographer. Katie works at the Atlanta Sky Dive Center and competes in swooping on the side; she recently placed ninth in a field of all men.

"In my grief, I was freed to do what I always wanted to do. In one rebellious act, I found my future, my passion. It's who I am," Katie says. Her son Connor is now 5 years old and considers his mom's sky diving buddies as his family.

Hawkins did find love again, this time with a fellow skydiver. He died in a sky diving accident a few days after he proposed to Katie. In her grief, she jumped again. "I jumped the very same day he died. It was a way to be close to him. It is a way to be close to him everyday," she says.

South African-born Nicki Sutherland says her route to extreme sports was a little more mundane. She was just trying to get some exercise. After a couple of close calls with motorists, she took her bike off road. She began bicycling at Flat Rock Park in 2000 and soon met other cyclists there.

"In 2004, a guy I had been riding with invited me to a mountain bike race. I went and was hooked from the very first moment," says Nicki. "Now I race nearly every Sunday and I swear during each race that I will never do it again, but I always do it again because nothing tops that feeling of achievement, of accomplishment."

Nicki arrived in Columbus on a tennis scholarship from Columbus State University. In real life she works at Aflac as a data base administrator. "It's true, I'm a geek in real life," she laughs. In the world of mountain biking she ranks 31st in the nation and seventh in the state in the 19 and older group of both men and women. Ranked among women only, she holds third position in Georgia.

Nicki Sutherland started mountain biking in 2004. Today, she ranks 31st in the nation and seventh in the state in the 19 and older group of both men and women who participate in the competitive sport.

Mountain biking is a dangerous sport filled with unexpected obstacles like trees, fallen logs, huge rocks, steep hills, sudden drops and the occasional hostile animal. Racing means the biker has to face it all faster.

"Still, it's a relatively low-impact sport and I'd rather fall on dirt than tar any day," Nicki says. She wears pads and a helmet while biking and encourages new riders to do the same. "It just takes the fun out of it if you are all scraped up all the time."

Joetta's teammate, Sgt. 1st Class Terri DeWitt, who is 43, has a high impact on her sport and her nation. She recently secured a slot for the United States in the next Olympics. People think the United States is automatically allowed to compete in the Olympics, but in fact, the slot must be earned.

The pressure on Terri, Joetta and other team members is unrelenting. To remain in the unit, each must continuously win in a string of professional competitions. Terri won the 2006 National Championship in June and immediately moved on to the next showdown. Joetta just gave birth to a son but was back at work in time to make the 2006 World Championship team.

Both wouldn't have it any other way. "It was a Terri grew up shooting alongside her father. "It was a way to be with dad," she says. She first learned shooting in organizing just such an event in Cincinnati.

"I knew shooting on Saturday afternoons wasn't going to get me there, so I joined the Army. It's the best decision I ever made," says Terri, who made it to the Olympics once before and placed fourth. "I didn't get a medal, but I was there and no one can take that away from me," she says.

Joetta was working part-time at a gun club during high school when a couple of benefactors decided to send her to the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs. "They were determined to send a girl, and even though I wasn't a shooter at least I worked at the club," she says.

Joetta says the few times she tried shooting with her dad, she always missed the target. A professional gun-fitter at the Olympic Training Center told her that her high cheek bones and long neck, traits essential in fashion modeling, were interfering with her shot. Once she was properly fitted, she almost never missed the target. What advice do these women have for others who might want to try life in the extreme?

"You don't have to be the fastest or the strongest, the biggest or the bravest, you just need to have the right equipment and be willing to try," says Joetta. "Just push yourself a little further everyday," Nicki says.

"Don't be intimidated, everyone was a beginner at some point. Find someone to teach you the fundamentals," says Terri. From high above, the voice of Katie Hawkins whispers: "Just breathe."

**"I was hooked from the very first moment..."**



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