

GOING TO THE EXTREME



PHOTO BY KEITH VALCOURT

IT'S HAPPENED TO ME, you, everyone you know: waking up in bed after dreaming that you are flying. Now I actually *was* going to fly...sort of.

I am tuning out as the "flight instructor" is talking to the class at the Perris Valley Airport in rural Southern California. I'm supposed to be paying attention to her and the lame fucking video she is showing, but all I can think about is suiting up and climbing into the air chamber.

The instructor finally shuts up. Each air student is given a flight suit, goggles and what looks like a crash helmet. I step into this outfit, which kinda resembles a fire suit NASCAR drivers wear, but not as cool. Mine is a thick, stiff material, fluorescent purple and green. Right leg, left leg, *zip*. I strap on goggles—the thick black frames and lenses remind me of those specs Mr. Magoo wore.

Helmets on, we all walk to the chamber for our sky venture. I pick third place—less pressure. If you're first, chances are you're going to look like a fool, flailing all over the place. The second person is still getting rid of the skydiving bugs, so third it is. If I make a mistake, no one is going to notice because they're still laughing at the first two divers. Sure enough, skydiver number one looks like a complete dolt.

You'd think a tall, slender guy would fly like a feather. But no, he can barely get off the ground. He just hovers over the net where the wind is blowing out of a turbine. His co-diver (another instructor) is desperately fighting, trying to get him upright.

Idiot, I'm thinking. *Didn't he pay attention to the video?!*

Look who's talking. I was half paying attention! Think, think....

INTREPID TV SPORTS REPORTER **JENNIFER GOULD** RELIVES SOME OF HER THRILLS AND SPILLS.

Oh, yeah! You're supposed to be belly down. Curl your legs back up in the air like you're trying to touch your heels to your ass. Extend your arms out, slightly bent, like you're about to do a swan dive into a pool.

As I'm remembering all this, diver number two slides into the chamber. Unfortunately, the heavysset woman has a hard time catching air. But with winds clocking close to 145 m.p.h., she does take flight. Her face resembles a dog whose head is out the car window, jowls blowing in the wind.

Now it's my turn. Time to show these people how to fly. I grab each side of the doorway leading into the chamber. Despite my cumbersome helmet, I can still hear the roaring of the wind in the vertical chamber. It sounds like a jet engine.

My heart is pounding. The *thump-thump* drowns out the whirring air.



PHOTO BY KEITH VALCOURT

Have gloves will travel: The dauntless journalist has stepped into the ring and other domiciles of extreme sports to deliver hard-hitting close-ups.



Gould's skydiving report included classroom instruction (top right) and being tossed about in a freefall-simulating wind tunnel.

The instructor reaches out to help me get into the giant, tunnel-shaped room. It's kind of like those gizmos *Star Trek* characters entered to be beamed from one place to another. The wind is so fierce, the instructor has to sign my commands because there's no way you can hear a damn thing.

He motions with his hand, palm side up flat. I quickly try to extend my long, lanky body. He curls his four fingers up into a *C*. I mimic the shape with my legs. Arms out and I'm flying! I mean really, really flying. For a chick who half heard the instructions, I am shooting up fast to the top of the chamber.

Shit! I think. *I hope I don't hit the ceiling.*

My instructor flattens his fingers out again. Oh, I'm supposed to extend my legs! I do it, but too quickly, and come crashing down, right into the safety net. My fingers get caught in one of the squares, twisting my wrist. It hurts...bad!

But fuck the pain! I want to fly again!



Gould gets the hang of hang gliding.

The instructor rushes over to grab me and signals. His hand flat, he slowly curls and uncurls his fingers. Oh, yeah, I forgot you're supposed to make slow movements. Any abrupt action in the air chamber can send you crashing into the thick, plastic walls.

Simulating a skydiver's freefall at Perris Valley Airport wasn't the only time I was injured covering a story. As a TV sports anchor/reporter, I was tired of seeing only football, basketball, baseball and hockey on TV and in the newspapers. I was itching to try a crop of new extreme sports seemingly being created daily. I wanted to go where the action was. Forget about just reporting the news: I would become the news!

My segment on KTTV-FOX 11 in the Los Angeles market was called *JennX*. But due to all the injuries I suffered in the line of duty, I almost changed the title to *JennRX*. At one point I thought, *Maybe I'll call that AFLAC duck and try to get them to sponsor me.*

Slam ball. Kite-surfing. Off-roading. Inline skating. Mixed martial arts.

I tried them all, wanting to show my audience, firsthand, what it entailed. The best reporting is by an eyewitness, up close and personal on the frontlines.



Rock-climbing. Carve-boarding.

I got to fly again another time. Windsports Soaring Center gave me a lesson in hang gliding at the Manhattan Beach dunes. At just 30 feet up it's considered the bunny slope of hang gliding. Experienced enthusiasts soar 300 feet-plus above amazing terrain: mountains, ocean, you name it. Beginners sometimes have to fly tandem with an instructor, tucked away in a giant windsock. Basically you look like a stupid caterpillar in the sky.

Not me; I get a harness. One around the

Sidelines are for sissies! I wanted to use television to show how skilled and amazing these various athletes are. Just call me the Edward R. Murrow of extreme sports!

BMX. Motocross. Aerial arts. Boarding—snow and skate.

The more I reported, the more new sports were entering the scene, and I wanted to be the guinea pig once again. Every report I filed almost looked like a version of *Jackass*. I considered changing my name to Jenny Knoxville.



A gutsy gal, Jennifer tackles rock-climbing with her trademark reckless abandon.

shoulders, the other wedged against the groin. Each has a metal clip that latches onto the hang glider for safety. Even though I am running down tiny hills to catch air, my launch is still satisfying. The instructor told me to look where you want to go because the hang glider follows your line of sight.

I must have been staring at my cameraman because before I know it, my feet are in his face; he and the video camera land sideways in the sand. "You are the wind beneath my wings, Brian," I quip.

The only time I didn't really feel safe was when I did a report on street luge. You've seen this sport in the Winter Olympics: Competitors lie flat on their backs on a mini-sized sled traversing an icy course at speeds approaching 50 miles per hour.

Okay, now imagine the same thing, only on a rough concrete street. The guy teaching me is covered with gnarly indentations and scars despite the fact that you gotta wear a thick-as-hell, full-leather body suit and pads on your elbows and knees. And, of course, a helmet.

My cameraman and I stand atop a hill in Laguna Beach as the guy just takes off. We literally jump into our car—me in the driver's seat—and we're next to him, camera rolling, as he speeds to the bottom. No control, no way to stop, unless you flop over, in which case you're guaranteed a nasty case of road rash.

Realizing that, I chicken out.

Not that I don't mind going fast. I mean, I went to the Richard Petty Driving School at California Speedway and learned how they do it in NASCAR. At speeds around 200 m.p.h., the G-force practically pushes you down, melting you into your seat as you try not to throw up.

Zooming around the track, I try to focus on the road to keep from getting dizzy and to know when to veer toward the wall or down to the edge of the centerfield grass. But I can't seem to find the tiny white squares that are painted on the roadway—the ones that are supposed to map out my line. Fuck! How can you see them when you're driving that fast?!

At the Dromo One indoor kart-racing track in Orange County, my speed was cut down to 30 m.p.h. This is where many aspiring NASCAR and open-wheel drivers get seasoning before they hit the big time. D1 is also a fun place to race against your friends...and whack their cars without having to call your insurance company!

PERFORMING MY DUTIES as a TV newscaster, I don't know how many times I was forced to see a doctor. A sprained ankle here, a lil' stab there (from fencing)—it was all par for the course. (Oh, yeah, I even played a round of speed golf. Don't ask!)

With each story I earned a badge of honor. Every time I limped into work, every time I couldn't type because my fingers hurt, I knew I was going to the extreme for a worthy cause. 🌍



"I'm doin' 5-to-15 for assault and rape. You look a lot like the dude, actually."