"IT'S THE GREATEST FEELING TO BE ABLE TO FLY"

Cyndy Simms and Rick Denney

by Trey Weatherly and Jim Lamp

Ten years ago, in the fall of 1977, *Three Wire Winter* published a story on hang gliding in issue six (6). A lot of changes have taken place in the sport of hang gliding during those ten years. For our update on the sport, we interviewed Cyndy Simms, who is assistant superintendent of schools in Steamboat Springs. Our second interview was with Rick Denney, a salesperson for the 3M Company here in Steamboat.

We began the interview by asking Cyndy Simms how she got started in hang gliding. "I always wanted to fly. When I was a little kid, I saw the movie 'Peter Pan.' I thought that looked great to do. I grew up in Virginia, which is close to Nagshead, North Carolina, the first place the Wright brothers flew. That's a very good place to learn to hang glide. At that time, I didn't have a chance to learn how, and I kept saying to myself that I wanted to learn how to hang glide. When I moved to Colorado I learned.

"I got started in 1982 by taking lessons through Freedom Wings in Salt Lake City. At the time I was living in Parachute, Colorado, and I had seen some people flying around there. I talked to them and they said, 'You really want to learn from a certified instructor. We could show you what to do, but that isn't a safe thing to do. You want somebody who knows what they're doing to instruct you.' I had my summer off, so I went to Salt Lake and spent my summer learning how to fly.

"There's a place in Salt Lake called the Point of the Mountain, which is south of Salt Lake City. On the east side of I-15 is the Wasatch Range, and there is a mountain which comes to a point right by the interstate. If you look off to the right, you can see people flying. The reason it's such a good place is because it's only 300 feet high and because there is a gentle prevailing south wind. It isn't very high in terms of a mountain, and it has grass and fields around it.

"Under the direction of a certified hang glider instructor, you learn how to carry the glider around and how to balance it on your shoulders and what the gear looks like and how to put it together. You start flat on the ground first, and you run around on the ground with the glider on your shoulders. That's your first lesson. Your second lesson is to walk your glider up the hill just a short way. You always take off and land into the wind, so you make sure there's a little wind blowing up in your face.

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"There's a wind sock down at the bottom of the field, and you watch the wind sock. Slowly but surely you work your way up the hill. You learn at a lower level at first, and then you get higher and higher. You learn how to take off, and you learn how to land. Then as you get higher up the hill and you're in the air longer, you learn how to make turns and 360's, which is a complete circle. Then you learn how to ridge soar, which is staying up in the lift instead of just coming down. You also learn how to thermal, which is to do 360's in a hot air current which will take you up higher."

Cyndy gave us more details on what it takes to get started in hang gliding. "When you take off, you run down the hill. When you reach 18 miles an hour of air speed -- in other words, you're running 18 miles an hour -- the gilder will fly. You don't force the glider up. You just let it fly. When it lifts you off of the ground, then you're flying. You always wear a helmet and a harness, and the glider has training wheels when you're first learning. If you land hard, the wheels will roll you along the ground. If you don't have wheels and you don't land properly, the bar will stop and hit the ground and go 'smack,' and you do the same thing.

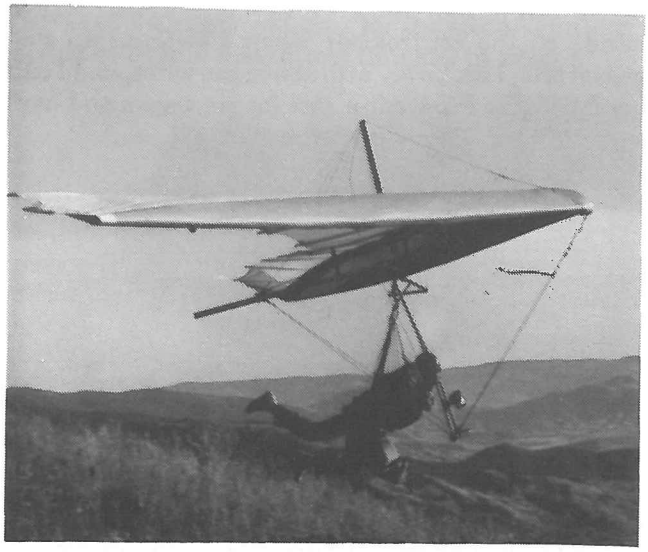
"Attaining an air speed of 18 miles an hour will vary according to the conditions and the slope. It's difficult on flat ground, but when you're running down the slope, it's easier to pick up the momentum. Our launch in Steamboat Springs is a very gentle slope, and so it's harder. You have to run farther to build up the 18 miles per hour. The steeper the slope, the easier it is to run faster because you're going down.

"Let's say the wind is blowing five miles per hour; then all you have to run is 13 miles per hour. If the wind is at your back, and the wind if five miles per hour, then you have to run 23 miles per hour to take off. That's really hard to do, so you never take off down wind. You always take off into the wind.

"Another key point is that you don't want to fly in storms, for obvious reasons. The winds are strong, and you can't control your glider. You're like a leaf being blown around. Use common sense -- if the weather is bad, just pack it up, because you can always fly another day."

Smiling while she rubbed her forearm, Cyndy began telling us about her big crash. "I was still a hang gliding student; I was about three-fourths of the way up the hill at the point of the mountain. At that time in your lessons, you are making little turns in the air, back and forth above the hill. At the bottom of this hill there's a big gravel pile. My instructor told me not to fly over the gravel because it's a heat-generating source. A hot air current from the gravel comes up; that's called a thermal. It has lift, so when you fly over the gravel pile, you're going to be carried up. When you're a new pilot, you haven't had much experience with thermals.

"I was practicing little turns back and forth along the hill and accidentally flew over the gravel pile. My left wing popped up as I flew along. I pulled in the control bar which means the nose comes down and your air speed increases. I shifted my weight to the left side so I would be level. I waited for the glider to straighten itself out. I didn't wait long enough because nothing happened. I thought I must have



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done something wrong, so I did exactly the opposite. I pushed out the nose, and I went to the right. When I did that I stalled the glider.

"There's a certain nose angle which causes the glider to fly forward, and it has to be at that angle to get lift. If the nose is too high, the air can't come over the top of it, and the glider stops flying. Then it stalls. What you're supposed to do is pull in the bar so the nose comes back down. You need about 100 feet of clearance to be able to do that, and at that point I was about 25 feet above the gravel pile. I finally did pull it in, but there wasn't enough time to start flying again. I flew right into the gravel pile. I still had my hands on the control bar when I swung into the gravel pile; I broke my arm above the wrist, and I cut my face. I had to wear a cast for six weeks and had seven stitches below my left eye."

We asked what she should have done in a situation like that. "When you are about to hit the ground, let go of the control bar. Get into a bundle, and when you hit the ground, you'll just hit one shoulder or the other. Let the glider take the impact. Let it take the damage, not your body."

We asked Cyndy if people can actually do stalls and pull them out for tricks. "Yes, in fact, when you get about 500 feet above the ground, and that means 500 feet more above this hill, you want to practice stalls so you can learn how to get out of them. To recognize a stall, you listen to the wind blowing past your ears. It sounds fast or slow. You'll recognize when you're almost in a stall because the wind slows down, so the sound in your ears slows down. You want to be able to know just before your glider's going to stall and what it sounds like, so you can pull the bar back in to increase your air speed. More experienced flyers go up and practice stalls for that safety reason.

"People who do aerobatics in hang gliders try to do stalls. They do loops, which means the whole glider goes completely upside down. They need to know exactly what speed to do the loop or it will stall. Instead of completing the loop in a full circle, they will fall upside down. The glider will go down. It's a matter of listening to the air and feeling the glider, to know how much speed to have. I only can relate to what people have told me, because I've never done a loop in a glider. I'm not that experienced, but that's the idea behind it."

We asked Cyndy if it was difficult to get back into hang gliding after her crash. "It wasn't that hard because you can fly tandem in a hang glider, which means two people at a time. When I had my broken arm, I would go tandem with another pilot. The other pilot would be flying the glider. You hook two people into a big glider to be able to carry the extra weight. You need a really experienced pilot who can fly tandem, someone who know what he or she is doing. I flew tandem for the rest of the summer; I flew solo again the next summer."

We questioned Cyndy as to some of the goals of hang gliding. "One of my major goals is to stay up and not come down. One way to do that is to fly in ridge lifts. Wind hits a ridge and bounces up into the sky. You want to keep your glider in that lift, so you turn and go back and forth above the top of the ridge to see how long you can stay up there without falling out of the

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lift. You sink out if you get too far out. If you fly out toward the landing area, you may fly out of the lift because the lift is right in close to the ridge. It's tricky because you don't want to get too close to the ridge and get blown into the ridge and get hurt. There's a fine line on how close you can get to that ridge and how far out you can go. My longest flight has been an hour and five minutes -- that's not a record, but it's a pretty good flight."

We asked Cyndy about the record for the longest flight. "The record is 221 miles, set by Larry Tudor in Owens Valley, California. He flew his glider almost ten straight hours. Sleep is an issue. That's what limits long-distance hang gliding flights because you can't go to sleep up there. There are two mountain ranges surrounding the Owens Valley -- the White Mountains on one side and the Sierra Mountains on the other. It's quite hot in the summer, and thermals are generated off the valley floor. You fly one range or the other for hundreds of miles, and every summer pilots go a little farther."

When we asked if you need a lot of body strength to hang glide, Cyndy replied, "The trick is carrying the glider. A glider will weigh between 45 and 65 pounds. You select a glider based on your size and weight. Somebody who's taller and bigger would use a larger glider. The most important thing is that the wing-span is big enough to carry your weight. Gliders are measured in square feet. One hundred and forty-seven square feet of sail is what I fly. It it's too small, when you go to launch, you will need more wind, more lift to keep you up. So you want the right size glider. Of course, the bigger the glider, the more it weighs."

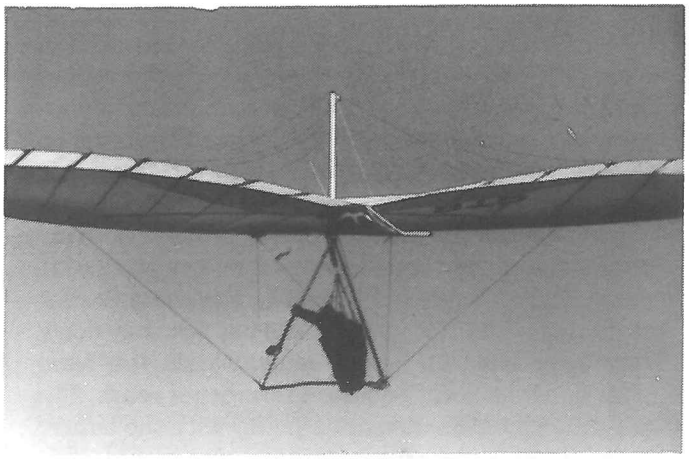
We asked how she gets up the ski hill to launch. Does she go by car, on foot or on the gondola? Cyndy replied, "We don't walk because it's too far and we don't take the gondola because the Ski Corporation will not approve its use. However, the Ski Corp. does approve five car/truck passes for each flying season to access the roads to the Thunderhead Building on top of Heavenly Daze. We used to take off from there, but the new gondola is too low to the ground. Now we take off from Valley View. We have to thank both the Ski Corp. and the Forest Service for permitting us to launch there. They could say, 'No way, because it is too dangerous and you might sue us,' but they don't. They have honored an agreement with the hang glider pilots in town for quite a number of years. The local pilots have an insurance policy with the United States Hang Gliders Association, which includes liability insurance.

"When you're a new pilot in Steamboat, you have to fly with a flight director -- this is a pilot who has been flying for a number of years. Right now, I think there are only four: Chris McKeague, Rod Williams, Rick Denney and Bob Newford. This past summer I didn't fly my hang glider; I got my private pilot's license instead while I learned how to fly an airplane.

"I love to fly, whether it is a hang glider or a small airplane. It's one of the best feelings in the world. I would encourage anyone who's ever thought about flying to give it a try."

We interviewed Rick Denney, who told us about when and how he got started hang gliding. "I started when I was in high school. I really couldn't afford to stay in hang gliding because of money and working. I was going to high school and trying to save money to go to college. When I got back into flying here in Steamboat eight years later, the equipment had changed dramatically. My wife knew I was going to start flying again. She wouldn't watch me launch for a long time, but now it doesn't bother her. You basically make allowances and compromise; she likes to go mountain biking. We have radios, and she can talk to me from her bike. Some days I'll go with her and do something, and other days I'll go flying.

"There have been a few scary experiences, but it's usually bad weather that's scary. We sometimes get into something that's called 'cloud suck,' and that's when big grey clouds move in and you get under them and work them because there's usually lift around them. It's really just a big thermal; it's all lift and no sink. Actually, the sink is so far away, it's hard to get there. You have to work to get to the sink. If not, you can get sucked right into the thunderheads. I've never gotten sucked into a thunderhead, and hopefully I never will. Usually people don't come out of those alive because some of them tower up to 60,000 feet. That's about the scariest part of flying. In the summertime, we get these thunderheads, and you want to go up and not sink out. So you go near them



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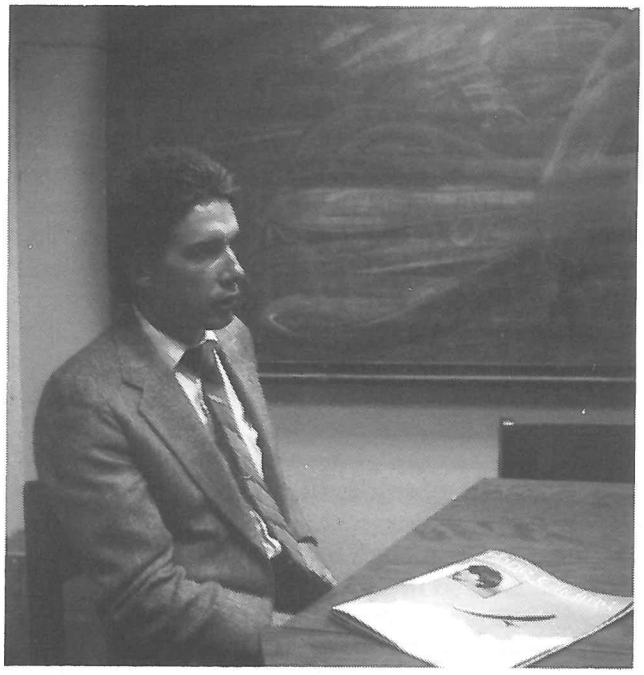
just to try to scout the distance. These thunderheads grow, especially out here, and when you're going up 1,000 feet per minute with the bar stuffed, that's pretty scary.

"Cumulus clouds are usually thermal-induced clouds. So what's happening is a column of warm air is going up, and as it cools it condenses and forms a 'cumie' -- cumulus cloud. These are the puffy, white, independent clouds you see in the summer. When you see cumies forming it is usually a good indication that flying will be good that day. We try to get into the thermal below the cumie and take it to cloud base. Cloud base is the bottom of the cumie. There is usually smooth lift there, and the altitude obtained may vary usually between 13,000 and 18,000 feet above sea level."

Rick told what it takes to fly off Mt. Werner in Steamboat. "We're very restrictive of who we will let fly here because of the gondola. Unless we have seen you fly before, you cannot fly here. We have a flat high-altitude launch here versus a steep launch. Flat launches are more difficult because you have to run a lot longer and harder. Other launches in the state are pretty comparable to what we have as far as altitude. We are launching at 9,500 feet above sea level. The air is a lot thinner. Your glider won't fly as quickly. You have to run a lot harder and a lot farther. So we are very restricted at that to protect ourselves and our site. You have to be at least a hang-4 rated pilot if you are an out-of-town pilot to fly here. As far as people who live here and taken lessons, we work them up from a hang-2 to their hang-4. We work with them until we feel they are qualified to fly here on their own. They would have to fly with one of the flight directors. They can't just get a car pass and go up on their own. We would have to watch them launch, and it's in our flight plan that we have it set up that way. The Ski Corp. issues road passes to the flight directors and we use our discretion on who flys here."

Rick tells us about flight directing: "It's a club, and we usually delegate one person to take care of dealing with the Forest Service instead of five people going down and talking to them. It's a lot easier that way. This year I did it, next year somebody else will do it. We have to get a Forest Service permit, and we have to have liability insurance to satisfy them. We have to get a Ski Corp. sticker for our cars so that we can drive up there."

Rick explained to us that hang gliding pilots should wear the right attire. "When you're up real high, you have to wear protective gear. Some wear a pod harness, and there are different types of harnesses. We all have some type of harness to keep us warm, and also you would want to dress for the type of day it is. If you think you're going to get a sled ride, which is basically a straight shot to the landing field, you dress casual. Generally we want to get a lot of altitude, so we don't even bother to go up if we think it is going to be a sled ride. I dress for being up around 18,000 feet or so, which is fairly cold even in summer-time. It's about 30 degrees up there, plus you have a 20 mile an hour wind. You have to be flying about 20 m.p.h. because that's your stall speed. It gets pretty nippy up that high."



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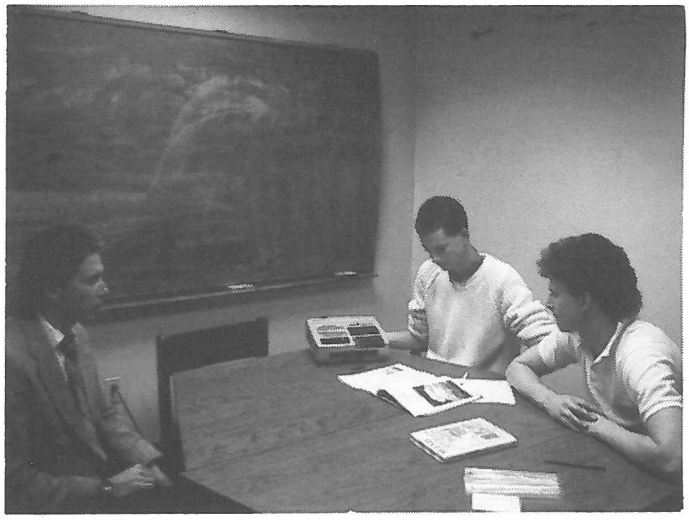

". . . AROUND 17,800 FEET IS THE HIGHEST I'VE BEEN."

Rick hasn't flown in Steamboat in the winter yet. "We haven't received permission from the Ski Corp. yet to fly in the winter time. In the winter time we would use a snowmobile or the chairlift. Other areas, such as Aspen Highlands and Telluride, encourage people to fly off their ski mountain for the tourists' entertainment."

Sometimes gliders look as if they are falling helplessly. "We don't fall helplessly; sometimes we hit big sink holes and sink rapidly. Gliders basically fly themselves; we just direct them to where we want them to go. In smooth air you can take your hands off the control bar, and if your glider is in tune it will fly straight by itself. They won't go into spins or stalls on their own; those characteristics have been designed out. Usually the people who do aerobatics are the pilots who go into stalls or spins. When something goes wrong, either it's a mechanical failure, or they put their glider in a position and at a speed which makes it hard to recover."

Pilots have to keep their gliders high to do aerobatics. "You should always pull out of them at least a thousand feet about ground level. Glider manufacturers don't encourage aerobatics. None of the glider manufacturers will rate the glider for aerobatics. I'm sure the reason is for liability purposes. Gliders can do aerobatics, but you really can't economically test a glider for the stress you put on it while doing aerobatics. This year Jim Zeiset broke up a glider. He was in a cloud suck near a thunderstorm and was into a steep dive. He let up on his control bar a little bit and slowed down, and then the glider broke up. It shouldn't have broken up at that speed. This happened down in central Colorado; he deployed his chute and landed safely."

Rick has done some climbing with his glider. "Almost 18,000 feet, actually around 17,800 feet, is the highest I've been. That was here in Steamboat Springs. We have a picture of me at 17,000 feet. Jeff Gildehaus took it from his glider. You get a little bit cold and it is really exhilarating because the air is thinner and there is so much adrenalin flowing in your system. It is safe to fly that high if you don't stay at that altitude for prolonged periods of time due to lack of oxygen, and if anything would go wrong you can throw your chute. At that altitude you have a lot of things to do before you hit the ground., You can throw the chute five times if you have to. Sometimes the chutes don't deploy immediately; they are hand-deployed chutes."

The chute can be a lifesaver. "Most pilots have them on their chest. It's a hand-deployed chute. You pull a handle, grab it with both hands and then you look for an opening because your glider is usually broke at that point in time. You try to throw it into an open spot and throw it up and out. You are usually spinning. I've never had to use it. I would probably quit if I ever did."

The forces of nature determine how high and far a pilot travels. "The amount of lift that we find and the velocity and direction of winds aloft determine altitude. The longest distance that I have flown is about 30 miles of straight line distance. That day I was up for about two hours. It was near Kremmling; that's where I landed. I took off from the ski mountain. Driving to Kremmling is a lot more road miles than it is to fly there. The longest flight from Mt. Werner was done by Bob Luther this summer; he flew to Winter Park."

Rick feels Steamboat Springs is one of the best places to fly in Colorado. "Mostly I fly here, and the big reason is because we're spoiled. We don't want to go someplace and have the conditions better here. We went down to Aspen once this year, and we go to Green Mountain Reservoir and fly there a couple of times a year."

Rick told us about piloting, instructing, and the rating system. "There are different ratings of hang glider pilots. They are beginners, imtermediate, advanced, instructor, and observer. A hang-1 is a beginner. You get that basically in the first day. A hang-2 is a novice pilot. Then to be rated imtermediate, a hang-3, you have to fly at least four different mountain sites in a year and demonstrate intermediate ability to any observer or instructor, not just another pilot, but someone who has been rated by the U.S.H.G.A. to rate you. Then you have to take a written test and a verbal test for each one of your ratings, as well as a practical test. The highest is an advanced instructor rating. Hang-4 rating is the next highest rating.

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"Jeff Gildehaus is the only rated instructor in town right now. To be an instructor, you have to be at least a hang-4 advanced rated pilot, and then you have to be rated by other instructors. It takes more than one instructor to rate you. You have to go through a special instructors' rating certification school. They have those but once a year around here. They are in Salt Lake City and Denver. If you want to learn to hang glide, the costs are about $40 to $50 per morning (a season), and that includes all of your equipment. So it's rather inexpensive to try it out. It's better to get a package deal than one lesson."

Rick said hang gliding is a growing sport. "Right now it's pretty stable in the United States, but its popularity is growing faster in Europe. I think it is mostly because they don't have the problems that we have in the United States. The United States has liability problems. Many glider manufacturers import the fabric and tubing to build their gliders because United States companies want to sell it to hang glider manufacturers. A lot of hang gliding sites are now condo developments and housing projects. What used to be landing fields are now taken up by housing. That's basically what's been happening with the sport. Most people don't want you flying on private land, so we're a lot of times restricted to state parks or federal land. To use these places, sometimes we have to get special permits; we have a special use permit through the Forest Service to use the same area the Ski Corp. uses for skiing in the winter.

"I encourage anyone who has the urge to fly hang gliders to seek professional instruction through a certified school and have the time of your life."