



Weekender (Sunshine Coast)

Friday 22/04/2011

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MINI MIX AND MATCH(BOX)

OUR MOST FAMOUS
REDHEAD INSPIRES
A TINY TAKE ON ART



SISTER ACT

WITH A FOCUS ON FUN, FASHION AND THE ODD
PIECE OF FOOTWEAR, THESE SKYSISTERS ARE
STAKING THEIR CLAIM ON THE AIR UP THERE

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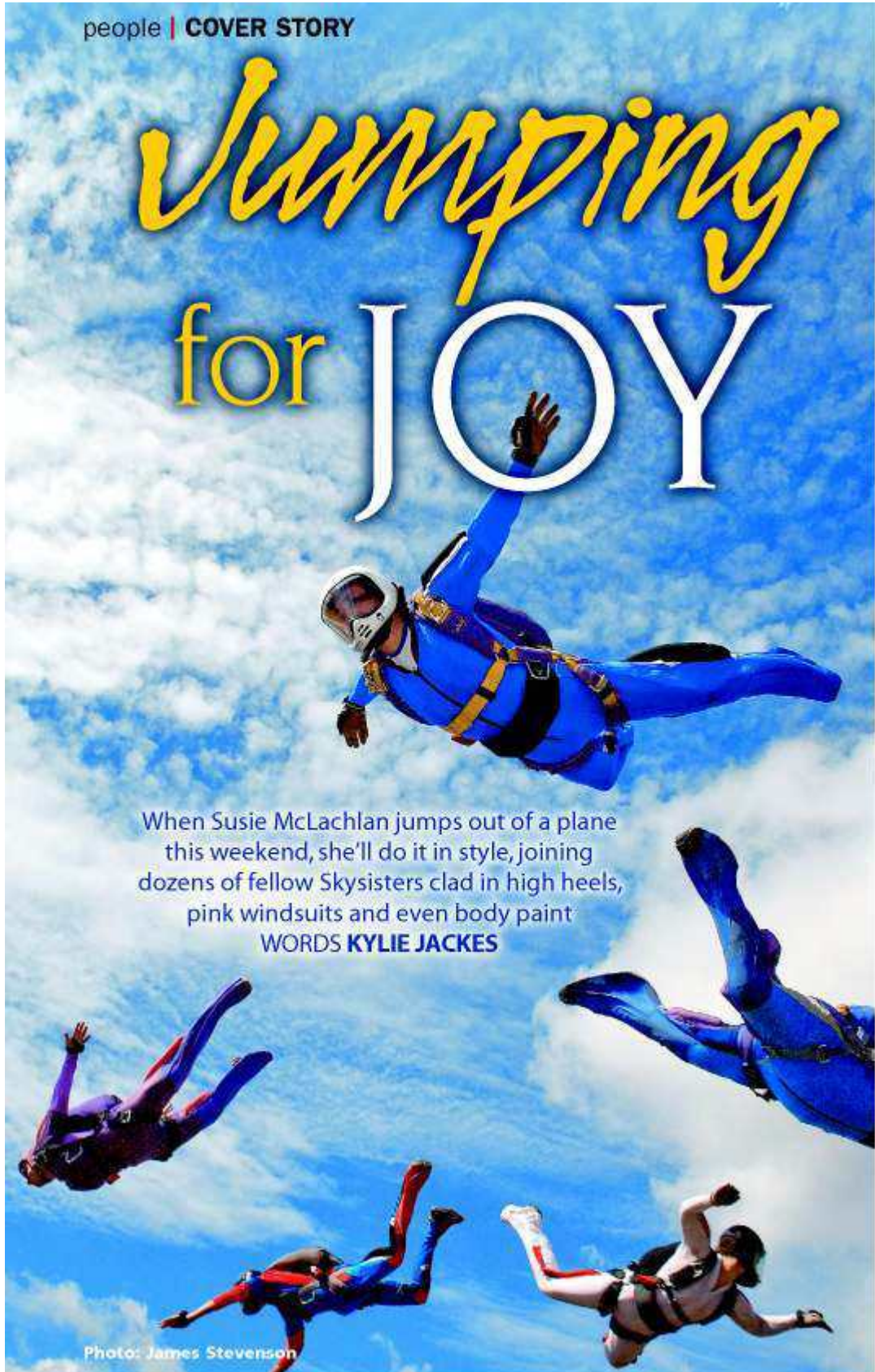
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one of the best aspects of skydiving is the people she has met through the sport and the way it has changed her outlook. It is a feeling shared by good friend Sonja Bruss, who turned her passion for skydiving into a career by working alongside Susie at Ramblers.

"When you jump with someone and see them in free fall, you have an instant connection and you become friends for life," Sonja explains. "It puts things into perspective and gives you more confidence too. You realise, 'if I can do that (jump out of a plane) I can find a way of achieving anything I want to'."

With parachuting technology first developed to save aircrews from emergencies and help deliver soldiers to battlefields during war, Susie explains the sport's military origins meant it was perceived as male-oriented for many years.

The cumbersome 40kg packs also proved a hefty barrier. "The weight of the packs ruled it out for a lot of women, but females actually make really good skydivers because they're

(physically) flexible and aren't afraid to ask a lot of questions," she explains.

These days, with rigs weighing just eight kilos, Susie says the lightweight design has enabled more people to join the sport, often customising their gear, from pin striping on their suits to matching footwear. "I could never part with my first set of gear," says Susie, who views her sky-blue suit with the kind of reverence bestowed on a wedding dress.

Six years ago, noting that women accounted for just 420 of Australia's 3000 registered skydivers, Susie was inspired to stage an event to help address the disparity and create a platform for "skydiving chicks to come together for a unique boogie". The result was Skysisters, a female skydiving convention at her dad's Toogoolawah drop zone, which aimed to encourage, support and challenge up-and-coming and experienced skydivers.

"Our first convention in 2005 exceeded my every expectation. I had never been to a

festival with such a great vibe," she says of the week-long event, which generated international interest and spurred a second symposium in 2007.

This year's event is set to be bigger and better with more than 150 Australian and international skydivers set to converge on the drop zone over nine days.

With 5000 jumps scheduled across the festival, a legion of Skysisters aim to set new international records with wingsuit flock skydives and canopy formation stacks and break four of their own records, including a 60 big-way formation attempt. They set the current 47-way record in 2005.

For new Skysisters such as Kylie Stephensen, who will complete 30 jumps in two weeks, the event will be life changing. Captivated by the sport since her first jump on Valentine's Day last year, she leapt at the chance to become a

Skysister student. Raising \$10,000 for the event, she secured one of 12 slots available to train for her A licence and b-rels and will be a qualified skydiver by the end of the event.

"Although the training usually takes place over a few months or so I am going to do it in just two weeks, which will be a pretty big challenge, but I can't wait. I'm really looking forward to taking part in a four-way formation," says Kylie, who hopes to one day represent Australia in the sport.

While Susie's objective is to ensure participants such as Kylie achieve their goals, her bit of fun will be getting, 'the' photo for the wall. "I actually don't have too many skydiving photos at home, even though my husband, Wayne, is an instructor too, so I want to get that one great shot," she confides.

With world-renowned aerial photographer Norman Kent on the international guest list, she has already planned her ultimate aerial glamour shot. >>

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Sonja Bruss in a wingsuit. Photo: Stuart Quinn



Photo: James Stevenson

"Norman is one of the best in the world. He has shot skydiving scenes in movies such as *Get Smart*, *Point Break*, *Drop Zone* and *Terminal Velocity* so it is huge that he is coming," Susie says. "I'm going to wear a frilly dress and have lengths of fabric, which I'll let go of for the photo. And I'll either wear really high heels or boots with zips so I can take them off just before landing. I'm not a girly girl but it will make for a great photo."

One event she is not leaping at, though, is a body paint jump. "We've got 15 ladies who are going to get painted by a local Eumundi body artist and jump. There'll also be some lingerie loads too, with people jumping in their underwear. Very brave," she says with a laugh.

Just like her father, who has spent the past four decades nurturing and training jumpers and instructors to ensure the growth of the sport, Susie sees the symposium as a key step

towards retention and raising much-needed funding. "Internationally, many countries offer considerable financial support to their skydivers to train and compete for world championship competitors, but as this level of financial aid is not readily available here, the Australian Parachuting Federation developed the Australian Team Trust Fund, to which we will pledge all Skysisters 3 proceeds," she says.

With the event coinciding with the 51st

anniversary of sport parachuting in Australia, Susie sees her biggest reward as helping more people discover the joy of jumping. "There is an old saying about the new jumpers, that they think skydiving started when they started, but if it wasn't for the old we wouldn't have the new and it is because of both that we have a great future to look forward to."

Skysisters 3 is April 22-30, skysisters.com.au

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