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Flying Humans, Hoping to Land With No Chute

By MATT HIGGINS

[Jeb Corliss](#) wants to fly — not the way the Wright brothers wanted to fly, but the way we do in our dreams. He wants to jump from a helicopter and land without using a parachute.

And his dream, strange as it sounds, is not unique. Around the globe, Mr. Corliss said, at least a half-dozen groups — in France, South Africa, New Zealand, Russia and the United States — have the same goal in mind. Although nobody is waving a flag, the quest has evoked the spirit of nations' pursuits of Everest and the North and South Poles.

“All of this is technically possible,” said Jean Potvin, a physics professor at Saint Louis University and a skydiver who does parachute research for the Army. But he acknowledged a problem: “The thing I’m not sure of is your margins in terms of safety, or likelihood to crash.”

Loïc Jean-Albert of France, better known as Flying Dude in a popular [YouTube video](#), put it more bluntly: “You might do it well one time and try another time and crash and die.”

The landing, as one might expect, poses the biggest challenge, and each group has a different approach. Most will speak in only the vaguest terms out of fear that someone will steal their plans.

Mr. Corliss will wear nothing more than a wing suit, an invention that, aeronautically speaking, is more flying squirrel than bird or plane.

He plans to land on a specially designed runway of his own design. It will borrow from the principles of Nordic ski jumping and will cost about \$2 million, which explains why he is so much more vocal than the others about his quest.

Mr. Jean-Albert figures he could glide to a stop on a snowy mountainside. “The basic idea is getting parallel to the snow so we don’t have a vertical speed at all, there is no shock, and then slide,” he said.

Then there is Maria von Egidy, a wing suit maker from South Africa, who said she had begun creating a suit that would allow pilots to land on their feet on a horizontal surface.

“I think people will recognize this makes sense,” said Ms. von Egidy, who has been pursuing financing for her suit. “Why didn’t someone think of this long ago? I’m hoping that will be the reaction.”

That depends on whom you talk to — the endeavor is either quixotic or brave. Even [Evel Knievel](#) had the sense to pack a parachute when he climbed into his Skycycle X-2 to jump Snake River Canyon in 1974.

This spring, Mr. Corliss will attempt the first of three tests to prepare for his goal. Wearing his wing suit, he will jump from a plane, which will then execute a 270-degree turn and descend at a steep angle. He will fly down to the plane and re-enter it. This will be his second attempt at the benchmark. His first failed when he missed the plane; he deployed his parachute and glided to earth.

“The plane was flying too fast,” said Mr. Corliss, who gained a degree of notoriety in April 2006 when the police arrested him after he was stopped from jumping off the [Empire State Building](#)’s observation deck. A judge dismissed the charges.

Wing suits are not new; they have captured the imagination of storytellers since man dreamed of flying. From Icarus to Wile E. Coyote, who crashed into a mesa on his attempt, the results have usually been disastrous.

But the suits’ practical use began to take hold in the early 1990s, when a modern version created by Patrick de Gayardon improved safety.

Modern suit design features tightly woven nylon sewn between the legs and between the arms and torso, creating wings that fill with air and create lift, allowing for forward motion and aerial maneuvers while slowing descent. As the suits, which cost about \$1,000, have become more sophisticated, so have the pilots. The best fliers, and there are not many, can trace the horizontal contours of cliffs, ridges and mountainsides.

“Wing-suit flying totally changes the way you fly and you jump,” said Mr. Jean-Albert, who is seen in his YouTube video skimming six feet above skiers in the Swiss Alps. “It creates a third dimension because in normal skydiving your trajectories are pretty vertical.”

Some wing suit pilots have briefly slowed the vertical descent to about 30 miles an hour. But they are moving forward horizontally at 75 m.p.h. Even if a pilot could achieve such speeds, Mr. Potvin said, any slight wrong movement could cause a crash and certain death.

Mr. Corliss said he could land safely at about 120 m.p.h. To protect his neck, he said, he will attach his helmet to a rigid-framed exoskeleton with the wing suit.

“Is there some crazy person out there who might beat me because he’s willing to do something more dangerous than me?” Mr. Corliss, 31, said by telephone from his home in Malibu, Calif. “Yes, but I’m not that guy.”

Mr. Corliss has plenty of experience jumping from high places. A BASE jumper — someone who leaps from buildings and cliffs and lands with a parachute — he has made more than 1,000 jumps, including from the Eiffel Tower and the Golden Gate Bridge.

He was encouraged by the response to his plans from Vertigo, an aerospace company in Lake Elsinore, Calif., that has worked on projects for [NASA](#) and the United States military.

“Is it possible?” said Roy Haggard, a founder of Vertigo and a skydiver himself. “Yeah.”

Mr. Haggard had a plan similar to Mr. Corliss’s, but he said he had neither the time nor the money to pursue it. If Mr. Corliss can raise enough money, Mr. Haggard’s company will help him design and build the runway.

“Everybody wants to be the first one to do it,” Mr. Haggard said.

Which leads to an obvious and inevitable question: Why?

“Because everybody thinks that it’s not possible,” Mr. Corliss said. “The point is to show people anything can be done. If you want to do amazing things, then you have to take amazing risks.”

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