

# Free falling

**Z**iv J Haskal, MD, FSIR, has jumped out of an airplane 112 times. Why? Because he likes to go fast. At least, that's how it started.

In 1982, Dr. Haskal, now a professor of radiology and fellowship director at the University of Virginia, was a college student and adrenaline junkie who wanted to experience skydiving. Tandem skydiving had not taken off yet. Skydivers would jump solo after a full day of training; they were still using round, military-style parachutes.

"Round parachutes don't decelerate," Dr. Haskal says. "They can't be put into a stall to slow them down, and despite the training I landed pretty hard and thought, 'Do I need to be shorter than I am already?' It was rather jarring." Yet, he was intrigued.

Eight years went by—medical school, residency—before Dr. Haskal took jump No. 2, on Jan. 21, 1990, in Hollister, California. He rented gear, including an altimeter, which measures altitude or, more importantly, tells you when you must pull your parachute to land safely.

During his freefall, Dr. Haskal looked at his altimeter. "It looked like it was moving, and I thought I still had some time. Then at some point I realized that the ground looked a lot lower than I thought and that the altimeter had never moved." So he quickly opened his parachute—much lower than he should have. "I landed, and the altimeter was still at 6,500 feet. Stuck. After which my then-girlfriend bought me a new altimeter."

Despite those first crude landings, he began to jump and jump and jump. He didn't stay with that girlfriend, but he still uses that altimeter. And he began to diligently study skydiving safety. "There are things that you can do, like in any sport, to control safety," he says. Things such as becoming familiar with what 6,000 or 4,000 feet looks like, limiting the number of people you jump with (his limit is 20 people), wearing a hard helmet, using an audio device that beeps when you reach a certain altitude and using an automatic activation device, which will automatically open your reserve parachute at a certain altitude if your main parachute isn't deployed.



Because of his preparation Dr. Haskal doesn't get nervous or overly excited before a jump. "It speaks to the human ability to take an extraordinary and unusual situation and become comfortable with it," he says. "I jumped out of a 727 jet once. Next to me was a guy with a schnauzer in a baby pack with swim goggles. Now that was exciting."

## Ballet in the air

As Dr. Haskal became experienced, he began doing aerobatics and creating formations with other skydivers. "Just jumping out on your own and doing somersaults is not that interesting," Dr.

Haskal says. "It's more the interactions in these kinds of maneuvers of building formations that has always been the challenge, the training to improve your skills."

The groups map out formations in detail on the ground first. Then they jump from the same plane at particular intervals, moving themselves into position while falling. "It requires a combination of aggressive movement, which means quick and very adrenaline-focused, and a sense of bodily control," Dr. Haskal says. For example, if he is part of a formation of 14 people and the last one out of the plane, which might be at 15,000 feet, he must catch up and also "go back" because the plane continues to fly forward and away from the group as each person jumps. Depending on "when" he is, he might have to fly quickly and in a very rapid steerable descent—about 200 mph. Then, he slows down as he approaches the group, flying into position. Relative to his speed, he might have an inch to maneuver into formation. Subtly lift his head or make another unplanned movement and he could miss his spot entirely. All of this might happen in just one minute of free falling, although Dr. Haskal says it feels like five to 10 minutes.

In the air, after the noise of the plane fades away, Dr. Haskal doesn't register any noise. "Everything's quiet as you jump out, and it's strikingly different. Over the next few seconds you hear this sudden acceleration of noise building as wind around you starts to increase because you're falling."

After he settles into the fall and pulls his chute, it becomes still again. "Suddenly, it becomes very silent, and that's just a beautiful ride. It's the equivalent of sitting in a comfortable lawn chair at high altitude and just sort of relaxing and choosing where you want to go." 