

Tandem paragliding above Panorama: a first-timer's first-hand account

By Nicole Trigg
Pioneer Staff

*When I was a kid
I dreamed I would one day fly
Up from the swing set
And into the sky...*

... is the beginning of a song I once wrote. As a child in a swing at the playground, I used to fantasize that at the highest point of my upswing, I could simply release my hands and be carried into the air, floating effortlessly away. With parents from two different continents, I spent a lot of time in planes growing up, and the most exciting part about a trip to Ireland or New Zealand was the sensation of the plane lifting off the runway. As a young adult, I tried bungee jumping for the first time in Switzerland — loved it. Then, soon after, had the experience of being ferried around in helicopters when treeplanting during my summers as a university student. One memorable highlight was being offered the front seat on the chopper ride home (in the Fort Mac bush in Alberta) because it was my 21st birthday and the pilot asking me if I wanted to free fall. Sure, I said. He winked conspiratorially and we immediately went into a tailspin, much to the horror of my unsuspecting friends in the back seat.

But sky diving from a plane seemed to hold too much consequence, so I shied away. And paragliding never really presented itself as an option in my earth-focused outdoor lifestyle of snowboarding, mountain biking, hiking, etc. — activities all heavily reliant on the fact that the ground was firmly beneath me.

Until I moved to the Columbia Valley, that is, and met Max Fanderl of FlyingMax.com. A big, tall German guy with a penchant for spending a lot of time in the air, Max, along with his extreme-athlete wife and business partner Penny Powers, helps organize the valley's annual Lakeside Event paragliding meet. After I reported on the event for the first time, Max offered to take me tandem paragliding. Though I felt my eyes light up, I managed to find excuse after excuse, year after year, as to why I couldn't go. Flying through the air so high above the ground minus the security of an aircraft around me seemed really far-fetched.

It turns out Max sees this behaviour a lot: initial excitement at the idea then... turtle mode. It took almost four years for that offer to become reality. It was the old adage of "being in the right place at the right time" that finally pushed me into action.

Easter weekend, on my way to guest services at Panorama Mountain Resort, having forgotten my season's pass at home



and needing a new one reissued, I bumped into a friend, another paraglider, who also needed a lift ticket to get to the take-off zone for the Easter Meet — what's become the valley's second most popular paragliding event in which pilots take off from Panorama's Rollercoaster run and attempt to land in targets at the base of the mountain.

As we chatted in line, Max walked by, recognizing both of us. He and my friend exchanged some paragliding chit chat then Max turned to me and said: "Nicole! You have your skis, yes? Meet me at the take-off area in 30 minutes!"

Completely taken by surprise, I looked at him and realized this was one of those "now or never" type moments. All the excuses I had been coming up with for years no longer applied. I couldn't plead being "too busy", I didn't already have "other plans" — the only thing between me and flying was a chairlift ride. Swallowing nervously as a pang of anticipation hit me like an electric shock, I nodded and told him I'd be there.

When I skied up to the take-off area about half an hour later, I was warmly greeted by the group of paragliders there, including Penny, whose bright, reassuring smile helped calm the butterflies in my stomach, as did the laughter and jokes the pilots were exchanging. Some were taking a break; others were preparing for their next flight. Max was readying the wing, spreading it out across the snow and untangling all the lines that attach to the harness. Pointing to where I should wait, he shoved a GoPro selfie stick into my hand. As I waited uneasily for him, I eyed the ski slope below me skeptically. I had no idea what to expect.

Before I knew it, I was securely in a harness with Max standing behind me, telling me to point my skis straight down the mountain. We started to move and quickly picked up speed. Not wanting to screw up by instinctively snowplowing, all my focus was on my skis and keeping them parallel. The next thing I knew, we had lift-off — and I was flying.

The entire experience didn't last more than 10 minutes (seven minutes and 12 seconds to be exact, according to the GoPro video), but felt timeless and dream-like. I later explained it to friends as the most intense jolt of adrenaline I'd ever felt combined with the most incredible feeling of peace. As we gained elevation and the treetops below began to look like matchsticks, I hollered, "Max, this is unbelievable!" then kept repeating the word unbelievable until I finally declared: "I have nothing to say; I can't even express how I'm feeling right now."

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My own incredulousness at the awesomeness of paragliding is perfectly captured in the video, which portrays me holding my hand to my heart and shaking my head, as if trying to ward off that tears-of-joy state (while the other hand is holding the GoPro extension pole). Max's comment of "so you're not afraid of heights" brought me back to an acute awareness of exactly where I was — in the sky above Panorama, which looked like a little toy model below me.

I suddenly realized that I wasn't afraid of being so high up. Sitting in the harness felt so safe and free, unlike the vertigo I felt standing on the top of Mount Nelson a couple years before. Plus my feeling of safety was further buoyed by Max's expert professionalism, as he calmly explained thermals to me and, of course, took care of all the extreme flying business.

Then, to my surprise, his next instructions were to hand him the Go-Pro stick and take the controls. Reaching up, I grabbed the handles and began to steer the wing, pulling on the right handle to fly right, then left... the grin on my face grew bigger and bigger. Craning my neck in every direction — directly below, up at the wing, side to side — I tried to take in everything I could from this incredible bird's eye vantage point that I knew was about to quickly come to an end.



Following Max's directions, I dropped the handles and took back the GoPro so he could take over control of the wing and start our descent. But first, some whoop-de-dos, he said. "Sure! Let's do some whoop-de-dos!" I exclaimed, having no idea what a whoop-de-do was. He pulled on the right handle, and we started to spiral downwards, dropping in elevation while picking up speed — suddenly I was on an airborne rollercoaster ride, laughing hysterically.

Once Max steadied the wing and steered us over the landing area, I had one last mission: to drop the weighted plastic bag I had attached to my harness, aiming for the target below — part of participating in the Easter Meet is to drop these "eggs" onto the target. "Now!" commanded Max. Missing completely, I exclaimed in dismay but Max, amidst his laughter, explained he had to set up for landing. Fun times were over; now onto more serious business. As we swung in a circle above the landing area and began our approach, it occurred to me I didn't know what came next. "When do I stand?" I called out to Max. "Ah, now!" was my answer and, just like that, I was back on the ground, skiing across the snow and quickly coming to a complete stop.



Just like that, my dream-come-true was over. Exhilarated and beaming ear to ear, I called to Penny who was waiting for us across the landing zone: "I'm addicted!" As I helped Max fold up the wing, I had a million questions — cost of gear, time it would take to fly solo, when his next course was scheduled — and mentally calculated that it would be a while before I could do laps of Rollercoaster in the air rather than down on skis. Now that some time has passed and the thrill has receded in my memory, I still have the video to remind me of what's possible and where this sport could take me if I find it in myself to aim high enough! To follow Max's adventures in the skies above the Columbia Valley, follow his "Flyingmax.com Aviation School" page on Facebook. To learn more about paragliding in the valley, visit www.flyingmax.com.

Crazy Soles and cycling club launch Toonie Tuesdays

By Steve Hubrecht
Pioneer Staff

Mountain bikers, trail runners or those who just want to get outdoors for a bit of fun and exercise now have a new monthly event to look forward to this summer.

Invermere's Crazy Soles store is teaming up with the Columbia Valley Cycling Society to hold a Toonie Tuesday running and biking event next week, and is hoping other local businesses jump on board and to help organize similar events on the second Tuesday of each month right through until the fall.

"We're trying to get people together, to grow the cycling club and to create more of a community (for both biking and trail running)," said Crazy Soles co-owner Beva Kirk.

The first Toonie Tuesday is May 10th along The Johnson trail at Lake Lillian. Participants can choose to either run or bike the short course for one lap, two laps, or as many laps as possible in a hour. They can also opt to alternate laps of biking and laps of running, if they want.

Mrs. Kirk said the club is looking for other businesses or other people to step forward to host the event in future months — ideally having a different organizer each month.

"It's super low-key; these are not necessarily timed events. They can be group rides or poker rides. The idea is to have some kind of hour-long event," she said. "The only thing is that they are meant to be open to both mountain bikers and trail runners. The cycling club is already on board and will help get insurance, and we'll use their trails."

The emphasis for the events is on having fun. "We're keeping it super simple," said Mrs. Kirk. "And hopefully each event will be followed by a social, whether it's just a barbecue right there or going out somewhere after the event."

Mrs. Kirk said set up and take down for each event shouldn't take more than an hour and a half.

The final Toonie Tuesday event will be held in October at Nipika Mountain Resort.

As the name suggests, the events will cost two dollars to participate in, with the money going to pay for insurance and prizes. Participants also need to be members of the cycling club, but membership will be available for purchase at the events.

Registration for the first Toonie Tuesday will be from 5:45 to 6:15 p.m. with the event starting at 6:30 p.m. Post-race food for the first event is still to be announced.

For more information on the schedule, the event or for those interested in organizing or sponsoring a Toonie Tuesday, contact 250-342-2074 or crazysoles@telus.net.