

"If you sign it, you can't sue. If you sue, you have to pay damages and no one will listen to you anyway." Steven grins. "Just sign it," a couple of guys in the front of the bus urge. When he makes the leap and hands in his signed waivers, everyone cheers.

Now it's time to get down to business. After collecting \$175 in cash from each person who wants to throw himself or herself from the propeller-driven Twin Otter called the "Free-fall Express," Laura shows a video in which tandemparachute designer Bill Booth warns these apprentice daredevils that "there is not now, nor will there ever be, a perfect parachute, pilot, instructor or, for that matter, plane." His words, like the waivers, don't seem to make much of an impression on most in the group. Everyone in the bus this morning is exhilarated at the prospect of plunging through the air at 120 miles an hour.

"I like the edge," says Allen, a 32-year-old high-rise construction worker from New York's Westchester County. "I have a need for speed. I like to drive fast, too. In fact, I recently made a list of things I could do so my life wouldn't be boring—skydiving was at the top of the list."

THE SEARCH FOR EXCITEMENT espite the risk, or perhaps because of the possibility that free falling at 120 MPH might be hazardous to their health, thousands of people are flocking to drop zones like this one around the country. But in outdoor-adventure meccas like the mountainous terrain around New Paltz in upstate New York, action isn't the only draw. Socializing with other people including risk-loving women—who like the thrill of danger is another. Formerly a nearly all-male domain, thrill

ing, rock climbing and Bungee jumping are attracting more and more women, so that the ratio of male to fe-

male daredevils in these activities is now about three to one. The camaraderie usually includes an all-night party or two after a hard day of battling gravity.

But for most actionsports fans, the big draw is a chance to experience sheer terror firsthand. "Skydiving, for example, is exhilarating and scary.

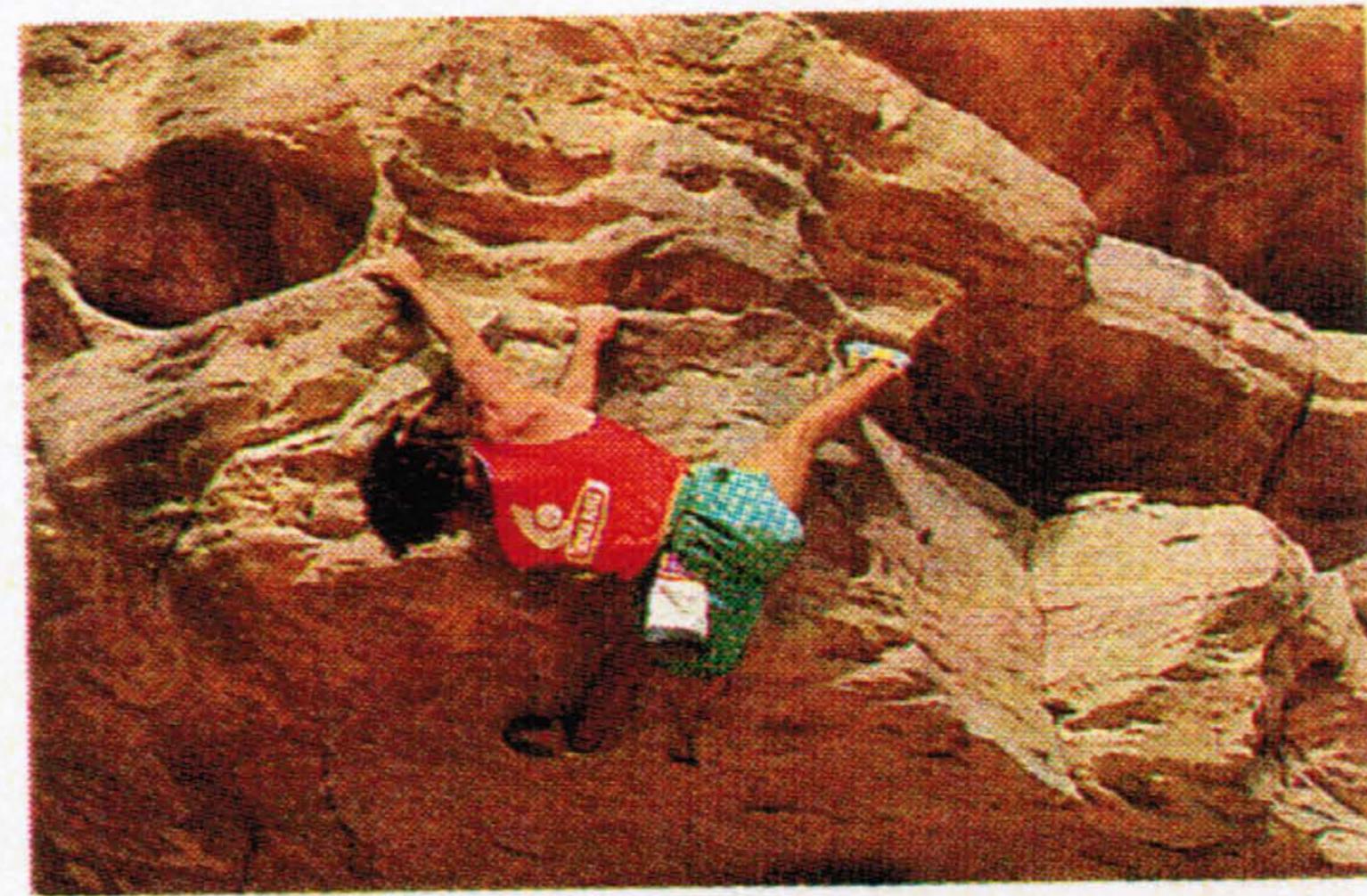
You get a whole bunch of emotions packed into a short time," explains Joe Dafflisio, 40, a skydiving instructor and master parachute rigger at the Ranch. "People from all walks of life, from TV producers to ex-convicts, come here to challenge their fears. Most of them end up having the

A HIERARCHY OF INSANITY

ost, but not all. "According to Parachutist magazine, only one in 50,000 people dies each year as a result of skydiving," Dafflisio says. However, the risk of injury, often serious, remains high.

"With a lot of these thrill sports, when something goes wrong, it can be catastrophic," says Mark Bracker, MD, an emergency room physician in San Diego, California. "While advocates insist that participating in one of these activities is safer than driving a car or playing Little League baseball, the fact remains that if you're not hanging off a precipice, you're less likely to fall from one," Bracker remarks. And that means you are less likely to suffer broken limbs, rotator cuff strains or sprained ankles, let alone the bigger stuff, he adds.

But everyone who participates seems to know that, and they don't appear to care. Rich Gottlieb, the 39-year-old owner of Rock and Snow, a rock-climbing-outfitters' center in New Paltz, admits, "Rock climbing is not safe." Gottlieb, who often climbs without safety ropes, believes that the mental and physical discipline of climbing is predicated on a respect for the stone face from which one is about to dangle his life. "Climbing without a rope is very danger-



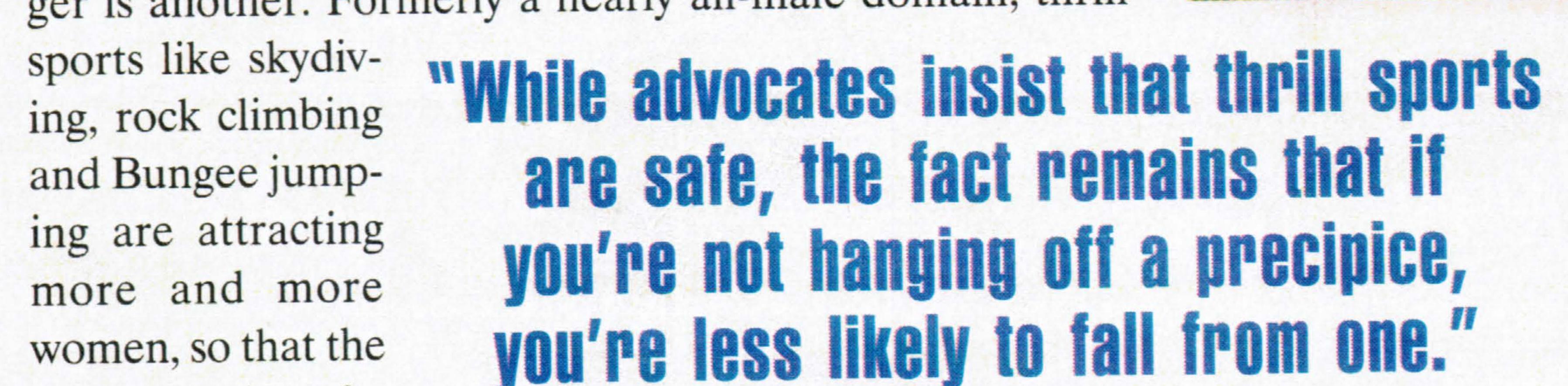
ous," he says. "So is climbing with a rope if you're going first on a team. And you can hurt others as well as yourself. When you realize you've made a mis-

take like that, everything ebbs out of you. It's as if someone took a sledge hammer to a bathtub instead of just pulling the plug. Still, I had a neighbor who choked to death on a hot dog. As far as I'm concerned, there's a lot of risk in just being alive, and

when I climb I feel more alive. It makes life worth living."

While rock climbers hang in midair, suspended by their fingernails, hang gliders challenge gravity by riding thermal currents through the sky. Sometimes gravity wins. "Hang gliders tend to get cervical spine fractures," says Eric Stutt, MD, director of emergency room services at Carmel Hospital in Carmel, New York. "People say the sport's safe, but it's not." Hang gliders, who soar through the air under Mylar wings, and paragliders, who lift off while seated under a parachute, also risk fractures and head injuries resulting from crashes into mountains, midflight stalls and inclement weather. Bungee jumpers, who dive off bridges, balloons or cranes while harnessed to a flexible elastic cord, often strain the muscles around the chest cavity. (Enthusiasts point out that while there have been Bungeerelated deaths in France and New Zealand, none have been reported in the United States.)

Recreational thrill seekers frequently scoff at the notion of inordinate risk when justifying their dangerous tastes.





Retired Army Major Edgar Lampkin, 47, who used to test parachute designs for the military by jumping from altitudes as high as 25,000 feet, goes a step further: "The first humanoid who went across a stream without knowing how to swim was taking a tremendous risk. So does anyone who runs a traffic light at the corner or who goes out at night in New York City after 8 PM. It drives me crazy when people who sit on the sidelines try to establish a hierarchy of insanity in the giant mental institution we live in."

ost psychologists recognize the ability to take some risks in everyday life as healthy. But *obsessive* risk takers suffer from an unhealthy addiction to danger, says Rosalind Dorlen, PhD, a clinical psychologist in Summit, New Jersey. "They tend to be action-oriented people who crave sensation in order to stimulate themselves. It's as if they need more of a jump start than the rest of us just to feel alive."

According to Dorlen, the level of stimulation people need and are comfortable with may be built in, like eye color. "Risk junkies" would find themselves on the far left-hand edge of Dorlen's (hypothetical) risk-taking spectrum. In addition to thrill-sport participants, this group would include compulsive gamblers, people whose daredevil sexual behavior puts them at risk for AIDS or other diseases, people who get high on maintaining a constant state of emotional crisis and those who in any other way play Russian roulette with their health, finances and relationships.

"In the middle range are people who enjoy a nice balance of challenge and risk," says Dorlen. "They like excitement and complexity in their lives and are able to find both in skiing, sailing or some other similar weekend activity. They bathe them-



selves in excitement and love it, but they are not in danger of ending up in jail or getting killed jumping off a cliff attached to a kite."

On the far right-hand side of Dorlen's scale are people she describes as "victims of the 'what-if' disease." They are cautious, reserved and boring. "You know pretty much what they are going to be doing 35 years from now—the same thing. But, in fact, they may have such a highly revved nervous system that working a crossword puzzle might give them the same thrill a daredevil gets from a sky dive. Life for dull people may be

THE THREE STAGES OF THRILL SEEKING

he rush of stimulating sensations that characterizes thrill-seeking behavior can be separated into three phases, notes Dorlen. "The symptoms of the first stage are consistent with panic or generalized anxiety disorders. In anticipation of the activity, a man may experience a dry mouth, wet palms, butterflies in his stomach, a racing heart and insomnia." In the second phase, during the activity itself, the fear is replaced by intense concentration and absorption. Many men describe these moments as peak or "flow" experiences. In the third stage, "All of this gets replaced with the equivalent of an orgasm when the task is completed," says Dorlen. "People use a lot of 'E-words' to describe how

they feel then: euphoria, elation, excitement, ecstasy, exhilaration."

What's wrong with that? Nothing, in itself. But if what you need is danger to get the right release, and if you need to constantly raise your fear level in order to get an equally satisfying dose of intense excitement and euphoria, your behavior could be described as addictive. "Obsessive risk taking or thrill seeking satisfies the chemical requirements of an addiction. The cycle of anxiety/absorption/ ecstasy releases adrenaline and endorphin substances in the brain, producing a chemical high," Dorlen says.



"Skydiving can be a heroic metaphor for your ability to accomplish the impossible."

BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH

dvocates of extreme thrill sports like Alpine (rock) climbing and Bungee jumping agree that fear is a big part of the fun. Take Brett Wolf, 33, a former gymnast who has taken up climbing. Distinguished among thrill seekers only by his measured speech (most speak as though they're on speed), he muses, "As an athlete, I experienced that tingling numbness, that wonderful endorphin rush. Now, when I climb rock and ice, I get to overcome my fear of the unknown. You have to learn to draw on your anxiety in order to acquire the drive to do that."

In acknowledging their need for speed and excitement, many thrill seekers say that pursuing high-risk activities keeps them from becoming depressed. Others like investment banker Keith Galanti, 32, find that activities

THRILL SEEKERS CONTINUED FROM PAGE 39

like speedboat racing help them unwind from their hectic careers. "Managing the risk of high speed is not only challenging; when it's over, I feel relaxed," says Galanti. Skydivers report that jumping out of airplanes gives them confidence to face other challenges in everyday life. "It can be a heroic metaphor for your ability to accomplish the impossible," says Lampkin.

Challenging his physical and emotional limits, Jordan Mills, 24, was a competitive rock climber before switching to Bungee jumping. Instead of hanging from ledges, Mills is now hooked on the thrill of throwing himself off bridges attached to an elastic cord. "I agree that, at least at the beginning, the thrill results from overcoming your fear," Mills says. "Then, after you've jumped off a bridge a few dozen times, that changes. You feel comfortable with the anticipation, so you want to do something more acrobatic, maybe a 200-foot swan dive. Next, in order to get that same wonderful anxiety before the jump, you might have to do something completely illegal, like jumping from a giant suspension bridge in the middle of the night."

SEXUAL BUNGEE JUMPING: Risking death or serious injury isn't restricted to high-speed or gravity-defying activities. Indulging the dark side of your libido can be just as thrilling if you're willing to risk your health, family and job for a quick rush of dangerous pleasure.

Tom, 28, managed a health club owned by his father-in-law. He used to meet his girlfriends in the locker room for quickies, knowing that his entire future and family life could be ruined if somebody came in. Like many thrill seekers, Tom used "ready-fire-aim" behavior to express complicated feelings that included his resentment of his father-in-law's control of his career as well as his own need to constantly prove himself sexually.

Sex therapist Erica Goodstone,

PhD who has a private practice in New

York City, has observed similar patterns in both male and female clients. "Sexual risk taking is a way of acting out deep core issues. Individuals who sleep around or risk stable relationships for instant gratification aren't motivated by strong sexuality so much as they are responding to something that's out of balance in their personality," she says. She observes that even though men often think that sexual thrill seeking is manly, "to chance having your whole life fall apart and hurting someone else badly is not healthy." The compulsion to risk ruining your life and possibly someone else's can be a way to avoid responsibility, Goodstone believes. "People who need to have 'forbidden' sex under threat of discovery are usually reacting to something that occurred in their early childhood and that they are unable or unwilling to face," she explains.

and downs associated with gambling can be as thrilling as the physical sensations of Bungee jumping, and men who become addicted to gambling have the same high threshold for stimulation that their physically oriented fellow males do.

Chet Forte, 55, has paid a heavy price for his addiction to what he describes as "the action." A former Emmy Award-winning director of ABC's Monday Night Football and Wide World of Sports, Forte gambled away more than two million dollars. After losing his home and his job, he declared bankruptcy and faces indictment for failing to disclose his massive gambling debts to the IRS. Now a sports talk-show host for a San Diego radio station, Forte recalls, "I lived for the excitement of being in the action. It was a period of insanity that lasted nearly 27 years. During that time, I never had a winning year, but I couldn't stop what I was doing until I lost it all." Now a member of Gamblers Anonymous, Forte says he has replaced his need for destructive excitement with enthusiasm for his job and for rebuilding his life.

Replacing a dangerous activity with equally satisfying but healthy behavior

can be difficult for many risk junkies. "Gamblers who are undergoing rehabilitation suffer more than drug addicts because they are addicted to their own adrenaline," says psychotherapist Phylis Chase, MSW, of Bellmore, New York. "It gives them the same feeling as speed. Like drug addicts, risk junkies need to constantly raise the ante in order to get high. Thrill seekers tend to be self-centered individuals who live to satisfy their need for sensation. In chasing a particular feeling, like excitement, they are truly narcissistic."

To understand the sickness of a risk junkie, Chase says, it can be helpful to realize that many people who crave excitement don't have models for healthy relationships. "Whether you are an exercise addict, a gambler or someone who indulges in risky sexual behavior, you may well be using this activity to avoid dealing with your feelings. The pursuit of such physical sensations as adrenaline rushes and endorphin ecstasies can blot out uncomfortable memories and emotions," she says.

of terror, nothing beats facing your imminent death. Rod Albers, a contractor and single-engine-airplane pilot, was an alcoholic who pushed himself to the limit in all arenas of his life. "One reason for my drinking was to maintain the high. In the plane, as soon as I hit that throttle, the adrenaline kicked in. I also owned 14 cars and thought nothing of pushing the speedometer to the max," he recalls.

Then, while sailing a Sunfish in the Virgin Islands, Albers got swept away in heavy winds. When the boat overturned in heavy seas, he clung to its bottom as giant waves washed over him. "Ten-foot-high rollers were pushing me toward a wall of jagged boulders. As I accepted and faced the terrifying fact that I was going to die, my fear was replaced by an inner calm and peace I had never felt before," he says.

Letting go of the sailboat, he watched as it was dashed to pieces on the rocks. Another wave picked him up and deposited him between two boulders. The next wave took him into shore. "That event changed my life. I

immediately stopped drinking and shifted my energies into a new direction. Now, instead of seeking those highs, I am trying to find ways to sustain that feeling of inner calm and connection," says Albers, "I no longer need to sit on top of a volcano every weekend."

Facing death head-on can be one experience that rechannels a high-level need for stimulus in other, less volatile, directions. Although Albers found that pursuing activities that give him a sustained flow or peak-performance high could be just as satisfying as more risky adventures, for others, simply learning how to relax can go a long way toward moderating a taste for too much adrenaline. "Action junkies tend to be hyper in everything they do," observes Phylis Chase. "They're always rushing from place to place, person to person. When I give workshops, one of the first things I do is teach people how to walk slowly and enjoy their new pace."

Being "hyper" may cover up a fear of boredom for obsessive risk takers. "Boredom often masks another uncomfortable feeling underneath. It can be a response to intense pain. Boredom is also a passive state. When they're participating in a dangerous activity, risk junkies are no longer numb," observes Steven Leeds, a psychotherapist in New York City.

Developing a new attitude about boredom can be a powerful tool for learning how to experience "E-words" without the threat of self-destruction. "Risk junkies don't know how to get in touch with their own center. Instead of perceiving inactivity as boring," says Chase, "they need to experience the power of serenity in addition to their high-octane behavior—at least some of the time."

That may be easier said than done for a guy who likes to live his life at full speed, whatever his motivation. But the rewards of finding other ways to satisfy that deep-seated need for excitement can include greater fulfillment and personal power. Invariably, it means developing a new relationship with yourself.

Laurie Nadel, PhD, is a New York journalist who specializes in behavior issues.

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