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SNOW 25°

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- [News](#)
- [Sports](#)
- [Classifieds](#)
- [Service Directory](#)
- [Real Estate](#)
- [Arts & Entertainment](#)
- [Business](#)
- [Columnists](#)
- [Commentary](#)
- [Editor's Blog](#)
- [Education](#)
- [Town Talk](#)
- [Events Calendar](#)
- [Letters to the Editor](#)
- [Autos](#)
- [Obituaries](#)
- [Our World](#)
- [Photo Galleries](#)
- [Special Sections](#)
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- [Submit News](#)
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- [RSS Feeds](#)
- [Email Headlines](#)
- [Vail Daily Store](#)
- [Email Newsletter](#)
- [Road Conditions](#)
- [Snow Conditions](#)
- [Mountain Cams](#)
- [Video Headlines](#)
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- [Dining](#)
- [Shopping](#)
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January 12, 2006

## Paragliding perfection

A sport with the exhilarating experience of flying hundreds of feet above the valley floor

**J.K. Perry**  
September 21, 2005

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EDWARDS — Floating through the air free of flight attendants, bad food and a noisy fuselage helps one understand the notion of flying among the birds.

Paragliding grabs pilots and riders by the socks and inserts them in the realm of red tails and golden eagles.

Last Saturday, I took a tandem flight off Bellyache Ridge beneath the wide expanse of a paraglide "wing."

Launching is smooth, devoid of any jarring - one second you're running on the ground, the next lodgepole pines are the canvas your shadow is painted on.

I met Dave Champaign and Greg Kelley of Vail Valley Paragliding just west of Edwards, a meeting point for paragliders adjacent to the "LZ," or landing zone. After signing away some rights, five of us

Dave Champaign, prepared and ready to launch, waits for the right amount and right direction of wind in order to have a safe take off. **Special to the Daily/Matt Inden**



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crammed into Champaign's minivan along with three sacks containing the paragliding "wings."

On the road to Bellyache Ridge, our launching point, the conversation was paragliding shop talk, motorcycles and skiing - some of the stuff adrenaline junkies are made of.

From the ridge, the sun shone blindingly off the Eagle River and trailer roofs to our right. Directly below us sat the landing zone, a thin patch of sagebrush between Interstate 70 and a bend in the river.

Waiting for wind

Dick Joyce, a silver-haired man with a salt-and-pepper beard, took flight first. The Frisco resident was close to getting his novice pilot's license.

While Joyce spread out his wing on the ground - attached by thin cords to the chair the pilots sits on during flight - Champaign gave me a new appreciation of wind dynamics.

Quickly, and very smoothly, the wing lifts the pilot off the ground into the wild blue yonder.

Joyce had a bit of a problem getting off the launch pad. The conditions, subperfect, knocked Joyce's wing off kilter. A moment of hesitation by Joyce caused Kelley to yell out "Run, run."

He got moving again, stumbling through bushes until he was free of the ground.

The takeoff worried me. I'd be strapped in front of Champaign, my pilot on this run. What if I tripped over the rock-strewn terrain, falling on my face and pulling Champaign down? The ground was rough, with some sage brush close to the takeoff point.

The next paraglider's smooth takeoff eased some of my misgivings, but that ground hadn't gone rockless in the intervening moments.

Simply put, a paraglider needs a pocket of oncoming wind to launch. When those conditions exist, the pilot runs down the slight incline pulling the wing. The wing's air cells, or pockets, will inflate and rise.



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Pilot Steve Lucido gets a bird's eye view of the valley during his flight Saturday over Edwards.

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I want control

Champaign got me strapped into a chair consisting of a harness snaking through my legs, over my back and around my chest. The instructor explained that once the wind was in our favor, he would say "Ready. One, two, three. Run!"

I'd experience the pull of the wing and have to lean forward as we charged off the launch.

"Just keep running," Champaign said.

But what about those rocks, I thought.

Champaign hooked me into his harness via two carabiners I prayed would hold. A few minutes of "parawaiting" - what paragliders like to call the minutes of delay before the wind picks up - and there were

signs of a strengthening wind coming up the ridge. A wind indicator made of yellow caution tape on our right pointed toward us.

I sensed the time was near. Champaign extended the wing controls he held on either side of his body.

"Ready. One, two, three. Run," he said.

Two steps later and the wing wrenched my body to a halt, like running in water.



Paraglider Dave Champaign and reporter J.K. Perry prepare for the reporter's first flight.

"Keep running," Champaign told me.

Down the hill. Over the rocks. No stumbling. Still running and my feet suddenly are pumping through the air. I'm looking down at the valley, silence gripping me. Champaign tells me to sit back in the chair.

"What a rush," I think.

Champaign steers us into a tight left turn, causing me to groan and yell in delight. Then a right turn. We cruise across the valley. The interstate ribbons below, the muffled sound of engines and tires on

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pavement reaching our ears.

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I wonder if the motorists below are craning their necks to catch a glimpse of us, like I've done in the past. Will this plant the seed of paragliding in their mind like it did for me?

Edwards, Avon and Eagle-Vail are in the distance. I try to pick out specific shops and buildings. Then, a few snapshots with a small camera Champaign gave me and I want control of the wing.

**To learn more**

Fuzzy math

For more information visit [www.vailvalleyparagliding.com](http://www.vailvalleyparagliding.com) or contact Dave Champaign at 845-7321.

Champaign hands me the controls, and I gently pull down the right toggle for a turn, careful not to upset the wing or Champaign. I follow it up with a left turn.

I've been skydiving in the past, and the parachuting, rather than the free fall, always worried me more. Despite the attached altimeters, judging the distance between feet and ground is fuzzy math at best.

After about 10 minutes of flight, we're over the landing zone, our combined shadow coming up to meet us. Champaign pulls down on the controls five feet above the ground and we hit, running out a clean landing.

Exasperated from the experience, I help Champaign put the wing and chairs back into the sack. He slyly tells me to put the 80-pound pack on my back so he can take a photo.

He starts walking away.

"Hmmm," I think.

"This is what I do for people who ride for free," Champaign says before I hike back to the car with the wing on my back.

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For more information visit [www.vailvalleyparagliding.com](http://www.vailvalleyparagliding.com) or contact Dave Champaign at 845-7321.

Vail Colorado

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