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"Jump for the Cause" Skydivers Set New Record

They did it.

After a week of grueling preliminary jumps and at times an uncooperative Mother Nature, 180 women skydivers from 31 countries finally set the world record they came to Perris to establish.

They set the record Saturday at the Perris Valley Airport, a fitting end to the "Jump for the Cause" that drew them to the City from Europe, Canada, Mexico, South America, Australia and Japan. Their efforts raised nearly \$1 million for the City of Hope to fight breast cancer and raise awareness about the dreaded disease.

Jump for the Cause was co-founded with Mallory Lewis, after her mother, legendary puppeteer Shari Lewis, lost her own battle with cancer in 1998. Previous events in 1999, 2002 and 2005 raised a combined total of over \$1 million and broke the previous world records with 119 women in 1999, 131 women in 2002 and 151 in 2005.

After Saturday's record jump, Lewis could not hold back her emotions.

"The dedication and passion these women bring to this event is inspiring," she said. "All national and religious differences have been put aside to fight the common enemy, breast cancer!"

Event coordinator Mary Tortomasi, one of the record-setting skydivers, said Perris was the natural spot for the record. The airport is the premiere skydiving location in the world, with about 120,000 parachute jumps taking place annually.

Elite paratroopers from military forces worldwide train at Perris, lured by the good weather, large drop zone and friendly accommodations provided by the City.

Tortomasi said she never doubted the record would be established in Perris.

"Perris is THE place to be," she said.

But a world-record parachute jump just doesn't happen.

The women who completed the record skydive as part of the "Jump for the Cause" at the Perris Valley Airport this week began training two years ago. They took part in preliminary skydives in their native countries to ensure the best of the best would make it to Perris for the big jump to raise money for breast cancer awareness and research.

When the women skydivers began arriving in Perris in mid-September, their real work was just beginning.

Every aspect of the climatic jump had to be choreographed over and over. Participants literally got on the ground in formations they would attempt to complete while free-falling, a process they call "dirt-diving."

There were ground rehearsals detailing how the skydivers would exit their airplanes, how they would arrange themselves while falling and link up with other groups of parachutists also taking in the jump.

A series of smaller jumps took place over several days prior to the big one, in effect practice attempts to iron out the kinks.

The skydivers practiced jumping with the aid of bottled oxygen, since many would dive out of airplanes at a height of more than 20,000 feet, twice the usual altitude for parachuting.

There were moments of frustration.

High winds kicked up just as the fleet of nine airplanes carrying the parachutists prepared to take off, which forced the cancellation of the attempt and delayed the record-setting skydive by several days. But the hard work was worth the effort.

"This cause is amazing," said Wendy Smith, a filmmaker from New Zealand with more than 18,000 skydives. "It unites the best women from every corner of the world."

Men also came to Perris for the big jump. Former Army paratrooper Dana Bowman flew in from Texas to show his support. Bowman's legs were severed when he was struck in mid-air by another parachutist during a jump in Yuma, Ariz., in 1994. Undaunted, he resumed his Army career and just five months later, once again took up skydiving. He retired from the military and today works as a motivational speaker.

Bowman's motto: "It's not about disability, it's about ability."

Perris Mayor Daryl Busch congratulated the participants who set the world record during this week's City Council meeting. The Mayor is a frequent visitor to the airport and attended the opening ceremonies of "Jump for the Cause."

"Our hats go off to them," he said.

See a Short Video



Former Army paratrooper Dana Bowman and "Jump for the Cause" coordinator Mary Tortomasi are all smiles as they chat between skydives.



Bowman lost his legs in a skydiving mishap 15 years ago but won't let the accident prevent him from exercising his passion for parachuting.



New Zealand native Wendy Smith gears up prior to a skydive.