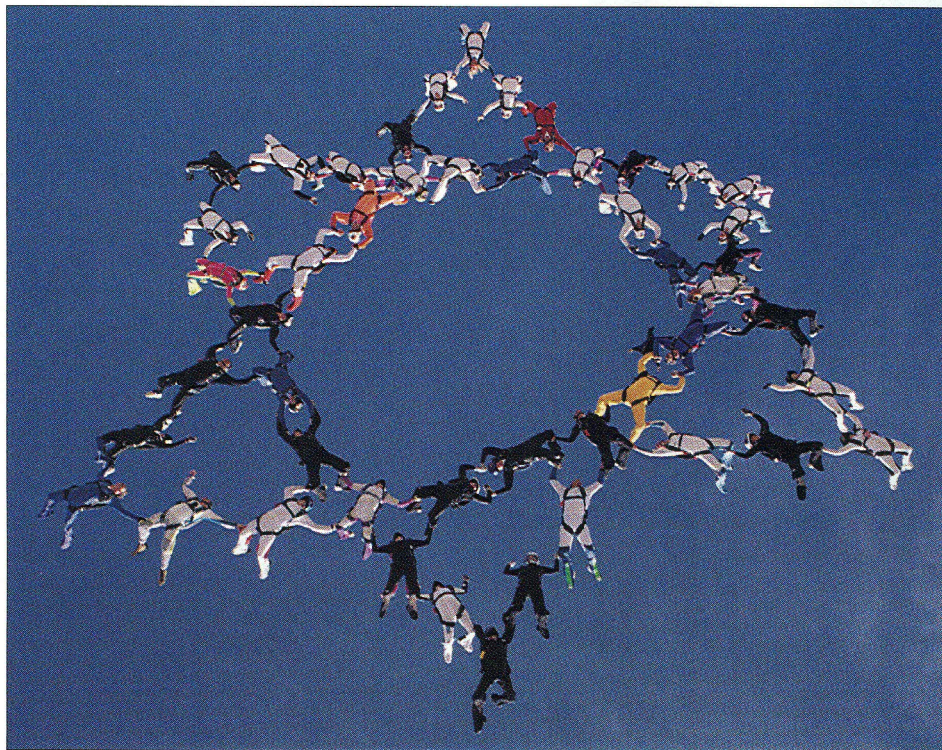


one on one

PORTRAIT OF DAN BRODSKY-CHENFELD

It takes a special skill to fly high and stay grounded at the same time. This unusual combination is found in an Arizona-based skydiver who built an internationally victorious team—after his remarkable recovery from devastating injuries. By Helen Mintz Belitsky

Joe Jennings: Mike McGowan (opposite page)



In basketball there is Michael Jordan; in formation skydiving there's 38-year-old Dan Brodsky-Chenfeld. Manager and coach of Arizona Airspeed skydiving team, the former cocaptain is an athlete who came back from a devastating injury to build a world-championship team.

"Brodsky-Chenfeld is about advancing the sport," says teammate Craig Gerard, whom Brodsky-Chenfeld plucked from the United States Army team, the Golden Knights, to help create Arizona Airspeed. The team is racking up wins—six consecutive years of victories in both national and international competitions—that are helping to increase the popularity of skydiving around the country.

"We've known him since '91," says Margaret Kirkby, manager of Square 2, a sundry shop in Eloy, Arizona, home of Arizona Airspeed. Her husband, Marc, has been a member of the team since its beginnings. "Dan's the one everyone goes to when they need advice," she says. "He always has time for you."

Brodsky-Chenfeld's sensitivity derives in part from having faced the abyss and resurrected his life through sheer willpower. The Perris Valley, California, air crash in April 1992 that took the lives of 16 out of the 23 skydivers aboard left Brodsky-Chenfeld in a coma for six weeks. "The doctors predicted Dan would never jump again," recalls his

mother, Mimi Brodsky-Chenfeld, speaking from her home in Columbus, Ohio, "but I knew if he recovered he'd be back in the air."

"I saw him after the accident, wearing a halo neck brace with screws going through his head," recalls Charlie Brown, Knights team leader, who is still awed by Brodsky-Chenfeld's recovery. "A year-and-a-half later he was out of the brace and lifting weights, looking buffed and healthy."

"My life was built around skydiving," explains Brodsky-Chenfeld, whose passion had an edge over his disability. "When you have the chance to live a dream you're not going to accept anything less."

A member of the Reform temple in Chandler, Arizona, where he lives, Brodsky-Chenfeld says one's spiritual life is fueled by love "for your family, for yourself, for what you do. The more you can show your kids that's what it's about, the greater your success in life.

STARS IN THE SKY

Arizona Airspeed (above) and Brodsky-Chenfeld (opposite page): gripping

Judaism allows for that." His family includes his wife, Kristi, Chloe, 5, and Landen Jack, born last June.

He learned family values from his own close-knit family—brother Cliff, who owns a music company in New York, and sister Cara, who works with her husband, a glass-blower. "No one has a family like mine," he says. "Everybody is doing something they love. My parents taught us by example that your life should be filled with things you love. In my case they wished I loved something else," he adds, laughing.

The wiry skydiver, his muscles toned and his mind focused by workouts that include meditation, visualization and yoga, tries to describe the thrill of stepping out of a plane and being suspended in air.

"Just relax and lie on your belly in an arched position," he says. "It's easy if you let yourself relax. You usually fight it at first, but then the air hits you and you learn how to

push down on it to get greater resistance. By changing your body position you can move up, down and sideways."

Since the age of 5, flying was his dream. His father, Howard, recalls his son jumping off the top bunk bed with a pillowcase for a parachute and a football helmet on his head. Since his parents wouldn't give their consent when he was underage, it took 13 more years of simulated jumps before he signed up for training.

Yet this high-flying man is well grounded. He wins kudos from his wife for this quality. "Dan is calm," Kristi says, "I've never seen him stressed. And he's confident. It's not only what he says, it's the way he walks and the presence he has." They met when she enrolled in a skydiving course. She has 300 jumps to her credit and only gave it up when she became pregnant with Chloe.

The ever-gentle Brodsky-Chenfeld is vehement when defending the integrity of the sport as competition and debunking the notion that skydiving is stuntwork. "It's a sport like skiing," he says with asperity. "The skydiver is not a daredevil—he's a competitor. And he has the courage and good sense of the pro.



"Sure, I was terrified at first," he admits. "But I've got 13,000-plus jumps without getting hurt. Fear doesn't happen anymore. The equipment is better than ever and we have many backup systems. You just need respect for what you're doing. Once you hit 4,000 feet, get away from everyone else and deploy your parachute, and you'll hit the ground safely."

Brodsky-Chenfeld's day as a cocaptain used to begin at 5:30 in the morning with a five-mile run. By daybreak he'd be off to Eloy, the busiest drop zone in the world, located in the heart of the scenic Sonoran Desert, midway between Phoenix and Tucson. The clear desert weather allows 350 flying days a year, and a single event can feature 10,000 jumps over a period of several days.

Eloy is an arid stretch until you near the airport, where colorful parachutes dot the sky—yellow, hot pink, green striped and purple. Fascinated ground-huggers watch the jumps, a Sunday outing for families who gather in the shade of palm trees to escape the sun, already torrid in February.

The divers glide out of a plane flying at 90 to 100 m.p.h.; their vertical fall hits a speed of 120 m.p.h. Then they sail down in graceful curves at nearly double the Federal highway speed limit, maneuvering their bodies until with a final whoosh they hit the ground, doing a swift trot as their feet touch earth.

In formation competition the starting line is 13,000 feet up, Brodsky-Chenfeld explains. "We jump together and the clock begins. We build formations in the required order as

many times as possible within the time limits: 35 seconds for four-way and 50 seconds for eight-way.

"It's almost meditative," he says, comparing formations to synchronized swimming. "The jumpers take grips on one another. The grips must be in the correct places simultaneously. In between formations, all the grips must be released at the same time. The grips-on, grips-off sequence is a race against the clock, which starts the moment the team leaves the airplane. A break in the sequence and the team loses points."

The videographer is part of the team. He records the performance and the tape is used for judging. The team gets one point for each formation. There are 10 jumps in each event. Airspeed broke a world record at the national

championship last September, completing 39 formations in 35 seconds.

There are no formal rehearsals. The four-way and eight-way teams practice difficult formations, but they do not know in what sequence they will be required to build them until shortly before boarding.

That's where visual-

ization comes in. "It's a priority in all sports," he explains, "but it's especially important in skydiving. We practice only 12 minutes a day in the air. The way to practice the rest is to produce mental pictures that allow you to see how the whole jump works, not only from within but from above. And above all, visualize perfection."

"The individual moves are not difficult. Doing them together is what's hard. We see the moves in each other's eyes and feel it in each other's touch. That's what we train for—reading intent. The leader in the center of the formation silently signals the break, a perfectly orchestrated move segueing into a new formation."

The sky is Brodsky-Chenfeld's domain, and he has used it to support other causes, organizing a Star of David jump in Los Angeles in 1998 which raised \$20,000 for the Los Angeles Jewish Federation. He coached Israeli Elad Rosenberg, who was so inspired he returned home to help form the Israeli skydiving team.

Brodsky-Chenfeld retired from active competition after the world championships this year in Australia. "I've been competing since 1983," he explains. He will continue coaching, jumping (as a team alternate) and, of course, promoting the sport, this time through a film he's working on. He's trained competitors and veteran jumpers from around the world and is now teaching formation skydiving at a nine-day skills camp.

Timing is of the essence in skydiving, and Brodsky-Chenfeld, a master at it, knows when to change course. **H**

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