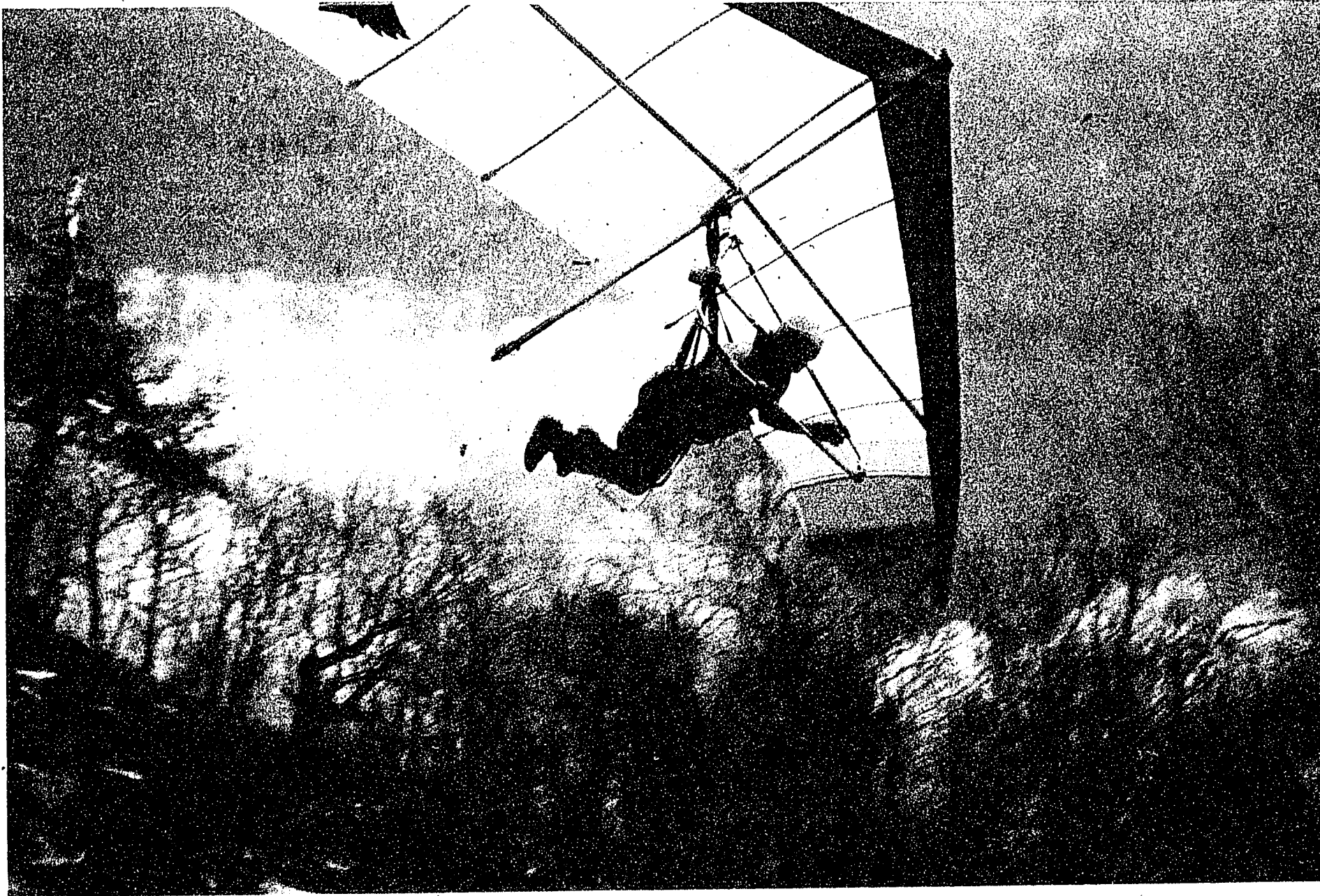


Marty Beckenbach soars over the Super Bowl near Lock Haven



As followers grow, hang gliding's safer

By MIKE POORMAN

Daily Collegian Sports Writer

Hang gliding, a growing sport involving 60,000 Americans, has matured not only in terms of participation, but in safety as well.

"We know what we're doing today," hang gliding instructor Marty Beckenbach said. "Hang gliding is safe."

The United States Hang Gliding Association is the governing body for hang gliding in the country and according to its statistics, deaths resulting from the sport in the past seven years have dropped from 40 in 1974 to 24 last year.

And in the same time, the number of hang gliders has increased nearly 10 times.

"Hang gliding is up to date now, we're learning so much all the time," said Beckenbach, a certified USGHA instructor. "We're learning so much all the time."

"Many years ago, it probably was dangerous. Gliders were made out of bamboo and plastic. How can you expect something like that to fly properly?"

On today's hang glider, sails are made of heavy dacron, frames are constructed of aluminum and guide wires are used to maintain shape, Beckenbach said.

"There's so much involved in designing a sail and engineering a glider to make it fly safe," he said. "It's the same way as designing an

ultra-fast aircraft like the Concorde except that we're on the other end with the ultra-slow craft.

Besides improved equipment, better teaching techniques and a stiff governing body have made hang gliding a safe sport.

The USGHA governs areas in hang gliding where the Federal Aviation Administration rules areas in powered aircraft. The USGHA is responsible for issuing licenses, which assign gliders a certain class.

"Observers give you a license or a rating," said Beckenbach, who is also a USGHA certified instructor. "To fly certain sites, you have to have a certain rating. It also determines where you're at in some of your flying skills."

Beckenbach said what really limits a beginner is by whom and how he is taught.

"Learning from someone is the only way to do it," he said. "When I first learned, I taught myself. It wasn't too safe and I didn't know what was going on. The best way to do it is to learn by an instructor who knows what he's doing."

But even an enthusiast like Beckenbach points out the real dangers of hang gliding.

"It's very dangerous if you don't know what to do," he said. "If you have someone there to show you and tell you, you're fine. You just have to remember that you're flying an aircraft and you're in the air."

Hang gliding a dream turned reality by expert Beckenbach

By MIKE POORMAN

Daily Collegian Staff Writer

Just like Peter Pan, Dumbo, Timothy Leary and Sister Bettrille, Marty Beckenbach can fly.

The difference between the four is that Beckenbach uses a hang glider.

"I've always wanted to fly," he said. "I've always had dreams of flying."

Those dreams got a strong push toward realization when Beckenbach was in the hospital and paralyzed from the waist down due to a baseball injury.

"I was really bumming out and I saw hang gliding on the TV and in the magazines and it really gave me the spark of life," he said. "I just decided to do it."

So he did. After recovering from his back injury, he taught himself to fly. It wasn't easy learning on his own, but once he got his feet off the ground, Beckenbach was hooked. But it took awhile.

"The beginning stages are very difficult, but once you're past that you start to fly higher," Beckenbach said. "It's just a matter of building confidence in yourself and your gliding."

"You just have to have it in the head. If you want to do it, you just do it. Just let yourself go and fly like a bird. It's very, very free and natural. It doesn't take anything real muscular or like that."

After reaching new heights, the Rochester, N.Y., native spent the next few years hopping around the East Coast, to Connecticut to Massachusetts and back to New York, always sporting a hang glider and giving lessons along the way. The sport of hang gliding intrigued him.

But last year Beckenbach left his job, and persuaded by Dennis Pagen, a noted flyer and hang gliding author, he came to State College.

"Dennis asked me to come down here to hang glide and to try to get some people around here into it," Beckenbach said. "So I decided to come down here about this time last year. And ever since then it has been really good."

The State College area is one of the best in the country because of the ridges needed for high altitude flying and the smaller hills needed for training beginners.

"For soaring and flying, any ridge you see around here - Tussey Ridge, Nittany Ridge, Bald Eagle Ridge - are excellent," said Beckenbach, who owns four hang gliders and has flown nearly everywhere in the United States.

A good place in the area for taking off into the wind - necessary because it reduces your ground speed - is the Super Bowl, Beckenbach said.

"The Super Bowl is where the Bald Eagle range and Nittany Mountain range meet at one point near Lock Haven," Beckenbach said. "It's called the Super Bowl because both these ridges meet and form a nice, big bowl and a lot of lift comes in there. Good for southwest wind."

However, wind isn't always needed to hang glide.

"When you start to fly in higher altitudes you really don't need wind as long as there are plenty of thermals - warm air masses that rise from the ground - because there's plenty of that air mass to rise," Beckenbach explained. "To soar you do need some type of wind. If there's thermals, you don't need wind to fly."

But at times there can be too much wind to hang glide, Beckenbach said. The hang glider can't be flown over the speed it was designed for and it's harder to penetrate the wind needed for taking off, he said.

Once in the air, flights sometimes last for hours and are over a mile high, Beckenbach said, casually speaking about three-hour flights and reaching cloud bases of 5,000 feet as if they were nothing special or fearful.

"Fear depends on the person. I used to be afraid of heights, but that was before I got into hang gliding," said the five-year veteran of the sport.

"Once I got into hang gliding I was no longer afraid of heights," he said. "I'll be afraid of heights if I'm standing at the edge of a cliff and I don't have my glider with me."

"But there has to be some fear. If there's no fear, I would start worrying because then you might start getting too cocky and start doing crazy things. There's fear in everything."

But there's really nothing frightful about the sport, he said.

"It's a very peaceful sport," Beckenbach said. "It's a feeling I've always wanted and I can't find it in anything else. I can't equate it with anything else I've done. I'm willing to share it with people."

"Beginning pilots are what the sport relies on most. The growth and success in the future definitely relies upon instruction and beginners bringing new people into the sport. Letting them experience the greatest feeling we have - just being able to fly like a little bird."

His attitude grows out of the community feeling of hang gliders.

"Anyone that hang glides is like family," Beckenbach said. "I don't know why it is, but when I got into hang gliding I found the nicest people I have ever met in my life. Maybe it's because we all experienced the same thing."

"It's the closest thing to your dreams. You're actually flying just like a bird."

"Personally, I just want to be free and quiet, and that's really what hang gliding is all about."



Photos by Rick Graff