

Local Sports News

GLIDING TO HELP

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Locals taking flight to raise money for hurricane relief



Spectators can best view efforts from Gibraltar Road about 11 a.m. on weekends

If there were ever two things that weren't compatible, paragliding and hurricanes seem like a pretty safe bet.

But in one of the more unusual athletic fundraising efforts around, local paragliders and hang gliders taking off from Santa Barbara's mountains for three more weekends are competing and collecting for hurricane relief.

Local paraglider Bo Criss and his friend Dean Stratton came up with the idea of holding a local competition and benefit after finishing their paragliding season in Las Vegas in late October.

"We're trying to appeal to a wide variety of pilot's interests," said Criss, who took up the sport 10 years ago.

There are seven ways to win in the competition.

- 1. Fly the farthest distance in their three best flights out of the possible 12 days of competition -- paraglider and hang glider divisions. Flights could range from five to 60 miles, Criss said.
- 2. Do the most mountain launches during the 12 days of competition.
- 3. Complete the race course the fastest -- paraglider and hang glider divisions. The course uses virtual GPS points like buoys in a sailboat race.
- 4. Do the most laps in a single flight between two points on the range -- paraglider and hang glider divisions. Weather conditions play a big part in making this easy or difficult.

- 5. Stay up in the air for the longest time in a single flight.
- 6. Raise the most money for the Red Cross and Hurricane Victims.
- 7. Have the most fun.

The last one, of course, is rather subjective, but Criss said an effort will be made to determine which pilot has the most spirit of the competitors.

Since the competition is continuing over six weekends -- it started Nov. 5-6 and concludes Dec. 10-11 -- pilots had time to use weather conditions for optimum flight.

GPS tracking and the honor system are being used to report and record the efforts. More than 50 competitors, most of them local, are entered.

The best weather for gliding is light winds and high cumulus clouds above the mountains, Criss said. If the clouds are too low against the mountains, it's hard to navigate and air pressure can be problematic.

Spectators can best view their efforts from Gibraltar Road about 11 a.m. on Saturdays and Sundays.



Glider pilots commonly launch off the hillside below Flores Flat, sometimes descending all the way to Parma Park, others landing back on the mountainside.

"Foot launch pilots in Santa Barbara absolutely love what they do," Criss said.

The easy access to the mountains here makes the area a popular one for self-start flight.

Pilots are collecting per-mile, per-launch and flat-fee donations from supporters. For more information about the event, visit www.circlinghawk.com/redcross.html.

Criss said he would like to raise at least \$5,000 for the American Red Cross from the event, but he has hopes that the fundraiser could double or triple that. Each pilot is asked to raise at least \$100.

A native of Kansas City, Criss learned to paraglide after visiting a friend in Salt Lake City who had taken up the sport.

He quickly was hooked and now owns Circling Hawk Paragliding, a business that provides tandem flights, fundamental instruction and tours, including an upcoming expedition to Brazil.

"It fits in a big backpack," he said of his paraglider. "It's an aircraft you can take anywhere in the world."

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PHOTOS COURTESY DEAN STRATTON

Santa Barbara's Tony DeGroot is one hang glider taking part in a competition that is raising funds for hurricane relief.

One way to win the competition is for paragliders or hang gliders to fly the farthest distance in their three best flights out of 12 days of competition.