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Survival of the Fittest

A skydiving mishap proves to Meg Harris that her CrossFit training has prepared her for the unknown and unknowable.

By Meg Harris

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Terry Hopkins

The author with instructors Steve Vaughan and Kyle Rice, just before her first skydive.

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Meg is pulling down on two lines; these are the steering toggles. If a skydiver doesn't do this at landing time, the canopy doesn't slow down enough to land safely, and she or he could slam into the ground and be seriously hurt.

In July 2009, I was at about 3,500 feet when the hopper presented me with the challenge: "Avoid a potentially devastating and body-mangling skydiving accident."

I suppose a better word for "accident" might be "incident," mainly due to the fact that the latter implies a freak occurrence, which it was, as opposed to something that was a mistake on my part. What went wrong was not a result of my actions. Of course, it was still up to me to save my own you-know-what.

In fact, up to the decisive point, I had made all the right decisions and had done everything I'd been trained to do. While in freefall, I deployed the main parachute, and as it opened, I looked overhead to ensure it was square, stable and steerable. Gliding through the air under a square and stable canopy high above the earth—much like I had done only 10 times before at that point—I reached up to pull down the steering toggles, which are loops attached to two lines that allow a parachutist to steer with ease. To my shock and dismay, the left toggle disconnected from the line, leaving me with a useless fabric loop in hand and its abandoned line trailing pathetically in the wind a good 15 feet above my head.

I only panicked for a second. Then I decided panic would not land me safely, and I had to think. Although I was skydiving in a civilian setting, my brief time spent in the Army had taught me not to lose control, to think on my feet or, in this case, in the air. I remembered my Accelerated Free-Fall instructor had once briefly described that you can steer the parachute with the rear risers, which are lines connecting the back of the chute to the shoulders of the rig. You reach up and back, grab the risers and pull them to steer.

This was a feasible way to land, albeit physically demanding, as it would require exceptional upper-body strength to do properly. I could choose this option or I could "cut away," meaning pull a handle that would detach the main parachute and deploy the reserve canopy. The problem with the second option was that I was a nervous "newb" in the sport—still a student actually—and was paranoid of the thought of going back into free fall so close to the ground, not knowing if, God forbid, anything would go wrong with the reserve.

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Taken during the author's first jump, this photo shows the instructors helping her deploy the parachute.

Decision Time

As a skydiver, once you choose your course of action, there's no second chance—you're burning precious altitude every second and, right or wrong, you have to stick with what you decided until the end. It's like being in the middle of one of those epic chipper WODs, staring up a length of rope, trying to decide if you're too tired to climb to the top. The clock's still running, so you have to choose fast. Once you start climbing, there's no turning back.

I decided not to take my chances with a cut-away and opted for a rear-riser landing. Due to my small body mass and the huge square footage of the canopy, I floated over the airport for what felt like forever, wresting the rear risers constantly to keep myself in the proper place to execute a landing pattern. If I drifted too far away, I'd land in the trees, a lake or some unsuspecting person's yard, none of which were places I wanted to be.

Once it was time to land, I pulled down as hard as I could on the risers to soften what I knew would be a messy landing, and I managed to touch down in a bit of a heap—but totally unharmed. My arms and shoulders were searing with pain as if I'd just completed Murph while wearing a weight vest. I had a private breakdown in the middle of the

field, recomposed myself, then sulked back to the hangar. My far-more-experienced jumping partner, who was an instructor, asked me "what the hell that landing was," annoyed that I landed way off target and not in the proper pattern. But once I explained that I'd lost a steering line and landed with rear risers, his countenance quickly changed to one of impressed disbelief.

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Functional Fitness

After discussing my little incident with several experienced skydivers, I realized what I'd done was, to them, a bit remarkable for someone on her 11th jump ever. Many of them said they'd have never tried that landing because they would worry they weren't strong enough in the upper body to land without getting hurt. They told me they would have cut away. Moreover, in the case that an experienced jumper would have tried what I did, he would have spent far less time in the sky struggling against the tension of the risers since the typical jumper uses a far smaller canopy which descends much faster than the zeppelin I had just landed. I was pretty surprised to hear a seasoned instructor with thousands of jumps under his belt say, "I'm glad that happened. It makes me realize I need to practice that maneuver just in case it ever happens to me."

In retrospect, I could have cut away and might have been fine, but what if I'd had problems with the reserve canopy? What if I didn't have enough altitude for the backup chute to open in time? The risk was more than I was willing to take. Even if I'd never even heard of CrossFit before that point, I wouldn't have cut away. But there was still the question of strength. What if I hadn't been training at a CrossFit box for nearly a year at the point when I decided to land using the risers? Could I have maneuvered the canopy? Almost all skydiving injuries happen when landing. What if I'd not had the strength or endurance to control the lines for those terrifying 20 minutes in the air and then wrench them down so I could land safely?

I don't like to imagine the mangled ampersand of hospitalized flesh that I would have been had I not been CrossFitting regularly. I am convinced my athleticism literally saved me from some atrocious injuries. But—who knows?—maybe it also saved my life.

One final thought: in the Army, our instructors always told us they made us enter the gas chamber and experience the burn of CS gas to instill confidence in us that our equipment worked. However, the mask doesn't work for you if you can't take a moment to stay calm and put it on. Similarly, and although I may never be 100 percent confident in my gear again, this experience has taught me confidence in my own ability as an athlete.

You never know what you're capable of until you face a real challenge. This specific incident truly exemplifies the idea of "survival of the fittest" in the most literal of senses and proves to what extent the fitness that CrossFit facilitates

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can be utterly invaluable. To quote Greg Glassman in the cornerstone article "[What Is Fitness?](#)," the hopper model "suggests that your fitness can be measured by your capacity to perform well at these tasks in relation to other individuals."

I know I am fit because I chose to do something that even pro skydivers likely wouldn't have, knowing they didn't have the physical preparedness that was necessary. I now know that when I face the hopper again, I'll be ready.



About the Author

Meg Harris is a Level 1 trainer at [Ultimate CrossFit](#) in Charlotte, N.C. She has been training since 2008 and started coaching in November 2010. She also is a new 2nd lieutenant in the Army, branched aviation, and started flight school at Fort Rucker in May 2011. She hopes to fly Blackhawks someday and is currently still skydiving. Meg would like to emphasize the fact that what happened to her is uncommon in the sport, and she would encourage anyone who has never been skydiving to jump tandem at least once.



Erin Tucker