

AFA-tizer #12

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Come Fly A Kite

Las Vegas has gambling, girls, glamour and glitz. We have fans, fun and frolic; we also have wind. I know Chicago is nicknamed the windy city, but Vegas, being in a great basin between the Rockies and the Sierra Nevadas, experiences some tremendous winds. Fortunately we don't get many hurricanes or Vegas would be in Idaho, instead. Okay, so what do you do if you live in a city with warm weather and (somewhat) reliable winds? You go fly a kite, of course. Being fans, and being technophiles, and being Las Vegas residents, we couldn't fly just *any* kites. Our kites of choice are **stunt kites**.

Stunt kites, hyper-kites, stunters, two-line kites, they are known by many different names. One thing they all have in common is that they are controllable. Sure, all kites give the flyer some level of control, but stunters are completely under the control of the flyer. Whereas most kites are anchored by a single string, tethered at a central balance point, stunters have two (or sometimes four) lines attached by a harness that distributes the pull to strong points on the kite. Most are made of nylon or cordura, have graphite or fiberglass spars and use high tensile strength lines. To fly, they require steady wind (between 2 and 30 MPH, it varies depending on the kite), an open field, and a little practice.

Anyone who has flown a single line kite knows the joy of watching your brightly colored piece of paper or cloth bobbing gently on a light breeze, slowly fluttering back and forth, bobbing, fluttering, just sitting there, not doing anything, sitting in the sky without doing much, suspended in the sky like a pigmented piece of paper. Boring. I love to introduce such kite fliers to two-line kites. The difference is so remarkable that I just have to remark on it.

When a novice first picks up the handles, the first thing they experience is frustration, and concern. The scenario usually goes something like...

It's a beautiful, breezy day. The flyer has his kite strings out and he's the brightly colored sail to one end. He marches to the other end where the handles are and with a gentle tug, launches the kite into the sky. The first thing the novice notices is that the kite doesn't behave like a kite. It swoops and swerves and sails more like a bird than a kite. A sound like a model engine fills the air, crescendoing as the sail gets closer to downwind. Back and forth the flyer moves the kite with the ease and grace of a ballet dancer, making circles and figure-eights in the sky. With a flourish, the kite moves to the far right, does a little loop-the-loop and then starts a slow pass, the wing tip barely inches above the ground, all the way from the right to the far left. Then it soars into the sky and quickly spins around itself a dozen times. Back and forth, up and down, always moving, the flyer seems to be in complete control.

"Pretty kite," the novice comments.

"Would you like to try?" he casually asks the novice.

"I'm not much into kite flying," is the reply.

"This is much more than kite flying," the expert comments.

"Well, okay, if you're sure it would be okay?" the novice replies.

"Yea, you'll love it."

"What if I break it?"

"Then I'll fix it."

"Is it expensive?"

"A little."

"How much did it cost you?" the novice asks, gesturing at the kite.

"About a hundred dollars."

"A hundred dollars? Isn't that expensive?"

"Not really, I've got one that was twice as much and I want to buy one that's over three hundred." The novice is anything but assured.

"Aren't kites supposed to cost around five?"

"Only the boring ones."

Gently the flyer brings his kite in for a landing. He hands the novice the handles.

"The purple one goes in the right hand. Keep your arms in front of you and don't overreact."

"What if I get the strings crossed?" the novice asks.

"Don't worry about it, just keep your arms in front of you."

The flyer steps to the opposite end of the strings, picks up the kite, checks the lines and attachments and yells out, "Okay, are you ready?"

"Ah, I think so," the novice answers with a little uncertainty.

"Here you go," the flyer yells as he tosses the kite into the air.

"Wham," the kite goes as it smashes into the ground.

"That's okay, I'll get it," the flyer shouts, "Ready?"

"Is the kite okay?"

"Sure, here goes."

Wham the kite smashes into the ground again.

"I don't think..." the novice starts to say.

"Don't worry, that happens to everyone," the flyer reassures him. "It stayed in the air a little longer this time."

This kind of thing happens *every* time someone new picks up the handles, but eventually they learn how to keep it up.

After twenty minutes or so, the novice hands the handles back to the flyer and takes a break. They usually have sweat beading on their forehead and their arms are a little sore.

"That is **not** a kite! I don't know what it is but it's **not** a kite."

"That's what I've been trying to tell you."

Even though stunt kite flying is usually a solo thing, I often go out with one or two other local fans. Tom Springer, JoHn Hardin, Ben Wilson and I (the NLE

boys) are often seen at a local park, drinking beer, getting sercon, and flying our kites.

One afternoon the wind was especially strong and steady. These kinds of conditions usually mean some level of *Power Flying*. We got out the stronger strings (about 150 pound test) and prepared to sweat.

Tom set up his *Maxima* (a Nice Big Kite with a ten foot wingspan) and proceeded to launch. Tom is not a small man, being over six feet tall and tipping the scales about as much as a moderate sized tuna. He struggled with his kite and eventually gave up, crashing the kite rather than be dragged into a chain link fence.

I, on the other hand, set up my *North Shore Extreme*, (a moderately sized, but fast kite) and flew fast and furiously. Foolishly I decided that wasn't enough. I broke out my second *Extreme* and nested the two together. Nesting is a way to attach two or more kites together in a line. This increases pull and performance. In strong winds (like that day) it makes for an "extreme" experience.

After I setting up my kites, I grabbed up the handles and launched. Power flying is not a big enough word to describe the pull. My arms felt like they were being pulled from their sockets. You'd think I wouldn't enjoy such an experience, but the thrill of manually controlling such a powerful device is intoxicating. It also tends to make me stupid, but I'm over six feet tall and over two hundred pounds so I was sure I could handle it.

I stepped onto a convenient piece of cardboard and immediately began grass-skiing across the field. Moving along at a quick walking pace, I laughed out loud and then fell on my ass. The pull of the kites was strong enough, though, to set me back on my feet so I continued skiing. Again I fell down, again I was righted. This was too cool.

My confidence (and stupidity) soared so I tried a few maneuvers. Turns, twists, spins all the while skiing across a football field. It made my head spin, too. I lost my balance again, but this time, I started to fall forward. Mother Nature has a habit of smacking down the over confident. Right as I was leaning forward, an especially strong gust caught my kites and pulled me off of the ground. I don't know how far I flew, I was kind of busy at the time, but it couldn't have been much more than five feet. When I landed (on my back) the kites were still flying so they continued to drag me downfield. While trying to regain my footing, I lost control of the kites, that is if I ever had control in the first place.

"Wham, wham," they said as they slammed into the ground.

"Ouch," I said as I realized my leg hurt.

The total damage included two broken kites, one sprained ankle, a torn pair of jeans and a bruised ego.

I never knew kite flying could be a contact sport.

*Apa-tizer #12 is brought to you by the sick and twisted mind of
Ken Forman
7215 Nordic Lights Drive
Las Vegas, NV 89119-0335
email: forman@comcast.net*