

By Kelly Brennan
Photos courtesy of
Ray Cottingham



#COUPLEGOALS

A love story about cashews,
camels and collecting
passport stamps.

**WHAT DOES KEN HILLS HAVE IN COMMON
WITH TWO WORLD FAMOUS AUSSIE LEGENDS,
GREG NORMAN AND PAUL HOGAN?
HOW DID HE REVOLUTIONISE TRAINING
IN OUR SPORT?
AND HOW DID HE MEET HIS LEADING LADY?**

The co-star of this story is Janine Hayes, a Wonder Woman in her own right. She's a competitor, record-breaker, Instructor A, and mentor to many, who helped raise two children while running a drop zone and travelling around the world.

Friends of Hillsy and J9 would know there's no such thing as a short story. But I'll do my best to condense their 90 years of skydiving achievements into a few highlights.

Ken landing



ACTION MAN OF THE SEVENTIES...

Ken Hills started jumping in 1970 at the Newcastle Sport Parachute Club. John McKee (aka 'Dingus') was his first jump instructor. "From there it was hook, line and sinker all the way" he said. Within no time, he was on his 100th jump in New Zealand doing 10-way speed stars from a DC3 at a world meet.

Ken had the gift of the gab early in his career, persuading the team behind Winfield cigarettes to do a skydiving commercial. He was broke, living in Melbourne and needing money for a competition. At first, when he pitched the idea to ad execs in a Sydney high rise office, they said "Don't call us, we'll call you." But they soon changed their minds.

Ken did 48 jumps with camera flyer Ray Cottingham using a massive Panavision 35mm camera. Hillsy was the stunt double for Paul Hogan, the star of the campaign. In the ad, Hoges jumped with a carton of Winnie Red to drop into a mate's party. "I remember sitting right at the edge of the hangar with Hoges, as they cut my hair and trimmed my beard to make me look more like him," said Ken.

Not surprisingly, Hoges – a former Sydney Harbour Bridge worker – was keen to do a skydive, but his manager wouldn't let him. Apparently, cigarette promotion was a safer option!

Another one of Ken's early projects didn't fall into place so well. He organised a 30-way attempt at Pakenham, Victoria. The formations didn't work and people were scattered for miles in off DZ landings. The camera flyer went home in disgust. "It scared the hell out of him," laughed Ken. "He'd never been in the air with that many people before."

WATCH THE
WINFIELD RED
ADVERT



PROFILE
KEN HILLS & JANINE HAYES



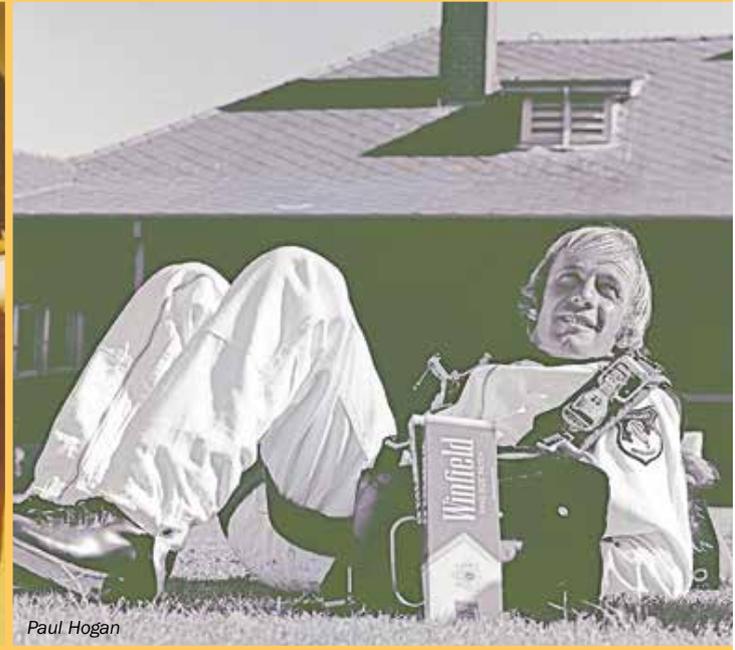
L-R unknown, Ray Cottingham, Ken and Tony Holtham Winfield Commercial Jump



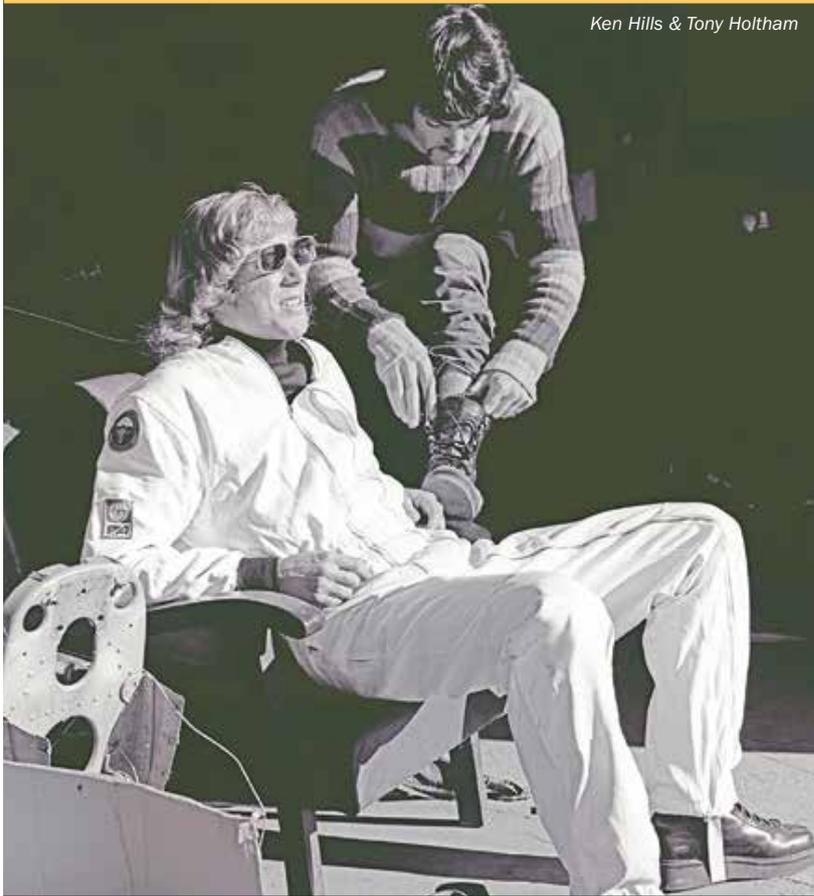
Ken Hills in Winfield ad



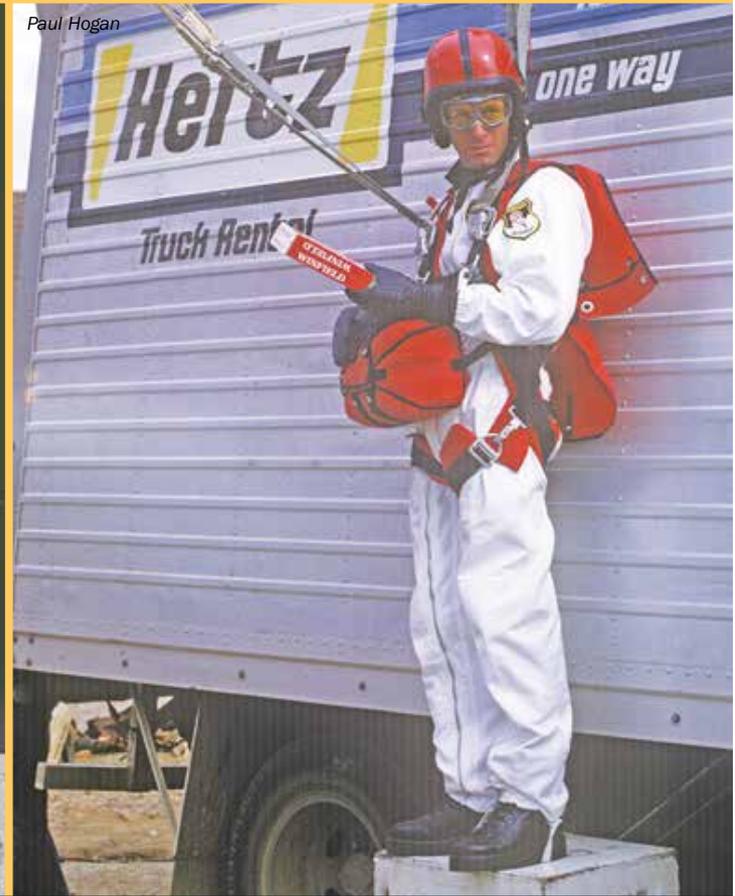
Winfield ad team



Paul Hogan



Ken Hills & Tony Holtham



Paul Hogan



GOD BLESS AMERICA...

In 1973, Ken went to the world meet in Fort Bragg North Carolina, the home DZ for the Golden Knights. Then he lived in America for 14 years, working as a fulltime skydiver.

The first five years were at the Pope Valley Parachute Ranch in California, a location where spotting skills were put to the test in the Sierra Nevada foothills. His boss was Curt Curtis, who was the President of the USPA. Jump buddies included BJ Worth and Skratz Garrison. *"That was the most phenomenal experience a 100-jump wonder like me could get,"* laughed Ken.

Everything was changing at that time, including the gear. Ken got to test jump the earliest square chutes and piggyback systems. *"Anything brand new that was made, all the manufacturers sent it to Curt,"* he said. *"He would just come out of his office with a bag of stuff, give it to me and say 'go find out if this works!'"*

He described 'all kinds of scary stuff' that he'd never jump again, from Delta wings to Parasleds. The Paraplane was the first 7 cell parachute that he thought was really worth buying.

Ken was reunited with his old mates from Australia at the world meet in Germany in 1975. *"I was the coach of the 10-man team and one of the guys broke his leg so I got put onto the team at the last minute,"* he said. *"We took the silver medal!"*

One of Ken's most memorable jumps at that time was with an exhibition team that did a 24-way over the Arizona desert. *"That was out of a Lockheed Lodestar, which was the scariest aeroplane I've ever been in."*

Another perfect picture from Ken's heady days in the US was taken by fellow Aussie, Andy Keech, and it was featured, full spread, in Andy's book, Skies Call 2. Andy had envisioned a 3D Starship Enterprise jump in one of his dreams. It was a hybrid type of formation with two offset flat groups on different levels, linked by a person standing up. There'd been some unsuccessful attempts in Florida, and Andy approached Ken while he was organising at Pope Valley. *"He came up and filmed it and we did it first go and held it for about 25 seconds,"* said Ken. *"Andy was rapt!"*

TEEN DREAMER TO HIGH ACHIEVER...

Back in Australia, thirteen year old Janine Hayes had written a poem about skydiving and spent endless hours during her teens staring out her bedroom window, longing to jump out of a plane. Her wish came true in 1981, at the age of 21, at Labertouche DZ.

Janine was also instantly addicted. *"I've always equated skydiving with going back to the cashew jar,"* she later told a newspaper in one of many career interviews. *"You always just want to have another one!"*

Janine become an instructor within three years of her first jump, and she gained her F licence in seven years. In 1988 she represented Australia at the WPC in Sweden. It was the first of many world meets for her, and there would also be numerous other global skydiving adventures.

Janine didn't miss many events in the 80s, but she missed the Aussie Nationals in 1983/84, when a bloke called Ken Hills came back for a flying visit. He didn't stay long, but it was long enough to help shape Australian skydiving history. Ken was a jumpmaster on Australia's first "pre-approved" AFF jump, sharing the tips he'd picked up as Americans were developing the training program.



WHEN KEN MET JANINE...

Ken returned to Australia for good in 1987 and was helping out at the Toogoolawah Nationals when he met Janine. Ken's first memory of her is vivid. He was one of three passengers squeezed into a VW Beetle, as J9 drove them to Toowoomba to check out the Spitfire that was being rebuilt by her husband at the time, Jim Czerwinski. "Janine drove through fog and pouring rain, in the mountains, turning around and talking non-stop the whole way!" he recalled.

Ken ended up living in the region, and the pair formed a friendship while washing dishes.

The skydiving scene in Australia was much quieter than America, so Ken found himself driving a bulldozer and doing cattle work to make a living. He also joined some skydiving friends and 17 camels on a memorable Simpson Desert trek.

A few years passed and Janine returned to Victoria, where her first child was born.

After Janine's divorce, Ken moved south and their friendship became much more. They went on to raise two children, run a drop zone and fly planes, while having many skydiving adventures.

On the ground, they've always danced like nobody was watching. But, in reality, the whole room would usually stop to watch them jive. They've been in perfect sync on the dance floor, just as they have been in life.

DEVELOPMENT AND PROMOTION...

Ken brought back some valuable expertise when he returned to Australia. He had started the Skydance centre in Muskogee Oklahoma, and he'd run three US Nationals there. With so much experience in judging equipment, displays and large aircraft, he remained very involved in Australian competitions and events.

In 1988, in Thailand, he coached the CRW team 'Early Openers' to a gold medal win at the World Parachuting Championships in Thailand. (How many Aussies can claim two medals at world meets?!)

Ken was Greg Norman's stunt double for a skydive into a Melbourne golf tournament. That jump was from Alan Bond's airship. Very few people could claim an airship jump, but Ken took it one better. He was the only one onboard for this leap, and he climbed out onto a metal ring that was a tethering point for ground crew.

He worked his way around to the front of the gondola, complete with his Greg Norman Akubra, and gave spotting instructions through the glass to the pilots. "I was going, 'over the left a bit more'," he laughed. "Nah stop .. go backwards a bit!" The guys told him to piss off, so Ken jumped.

JANINE'S INCREDIBLE CAREER...

During the 1990s, Janine's achievements went from strength to strength, representing Australia in accuracy at world meets in Yugoslavia, Austria, China and Hungary.

She was honoured with the Australian Sports Medal in 2000, in recognition of her many volunteer roles, including National Development and National Coaching. And for the next two decades she has kept breaking records and competing at international level.

Janine was Chief Instructor at Aerial Skydives in Traralgon for 13 years, with Ken as the tandem-master. "We did a lot of tandems," said Ken. "Janine was a good organiser. I was just the jumper."



Janine's 30 jumps in a day 2011



BIG-WAY MISSIONS

Ken recalled a scare that put him off Big-Ways for a very long time. They were doing 80-ways out of DC3s and Twin Otters in Florida. They ran into cloud while exiting and all he saw in freefall was whiteout. *"There were 80 people inside that cloud with me over DeLand, and I was just like, 'Oh My God, how many parachutes am I going to hit?'"* So, he smoked it down to about 1,200 feet to play it safe! *"I didn't think anybody would be that dumb that they'd be down the same height as me."*

Despite declaring that was the end of Big-Ways for him, his interest fired up again when his old California friend, Dave Ruckert was running "Spectrum" jumps in the nineties.

Hillsy and J9 were on the record 81-way in Corowa in 1999. They secured a record together again in 2015 when the Aussie Big-Ways team did a 119-way in Perris Valley, California.

Hillsy felt the modern Big-Ways were organised really well, apart from having to land downwind sometimes to keep everybody going in the same direction. *"It's the only time I've ever been hurt was on one of those jumps, when I had to land downwind,"* he said.

He started easing out of jumping after this, apart from the odd gathering with friends, like the Bowen Big-Way Boogie in 2018. *"Ken was sort of getting out of it and I kept talking him back into it over the years,"* said Janine. *"I think, once a jumper always a jumper. It's kind of an innate part of you."*

PLANNING AHEAD

Ken recently hung up his rig for good after nearly 50 years in the sport, but J9 is going strong and making big plans for her 40th anniversary year in 2021.

She's a mentor with Aussie Big-Ways and was on last year's 130-way record.

2020 is frustrating for Victorians, with drop zones still closed because of Covid-19. In between Victoria's first and second wave of the virus, Janine managed to slip up the road to Moruya, for some accuracy training.

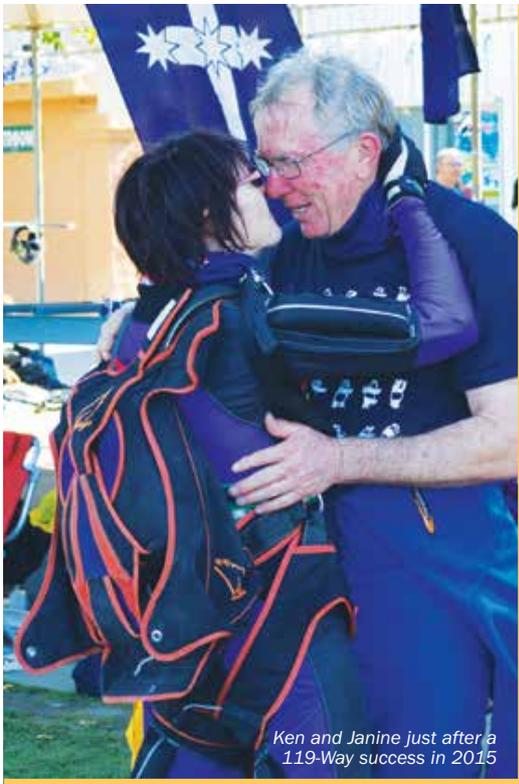
The pandemic has opened up an opportunity for next year. Two key events have been rescheduled and J9 won't have to choose between them anymore. She's hoping to win a place on our Accuracy team at the WPC in Russia, and is also in a 4-way team at the POPs World Meet in the UK.

Janine usually does milestone celebrations in style. She did 30 jumps for her 30th anniversary, plus she had a big DZ party at Commando Skydivers for her 60th birthday earlier this year. So her 40th anniversary should be something special.

Let's hope there is music and dancing for the big occasion, so we can applaud the Hayes-Hills dancing moves. And let's also give them a well-deserved standing ovation for their contributions to Australian skydiving.



Janine 2016 Nationals



Ken and Janine just after a 119-Way success in 2015



Janine at the 2015 Nationals



Ken and Janine with Andy Keech, Perris Valley 2015



Janine 4-Way at 2020 Nationals
Photo: Steve Fitchett



Photo: Steve Fitchett