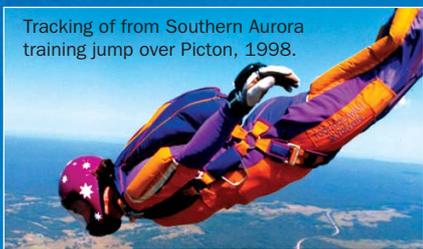


Tracking of from Southern Aurora training jump over Picton, 1998.



Profile of FIONA McEACHERN

By Isabella Lipinski

D.O.B - 22/04/1959

NO. OF JUMPS - 6,000

Mostly formation skydiving

CONTAINER - 2 x Talon 2

CANOPIES - Crossfire 119

main and PA 120 Reserve Cypress

HOME DROP ZONE -

Sydney Skydivers, Picton

OCCUPATION - Vet



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Love by the name of John Cusack brought Fiona to Picton DZ some 20 years ago and ultimately skydiving. Observing what she considered a beautifully feminine looking sport filled with lots of colourful canopies Fiona launched into skydiving. Her presence in Australian skydiving both in the air and behind the scenes has been strong ever since.

Becoming one of the first students to go through and complete the AFF course, Fiona became the first AFF Instructor who graduated from the AFF program at Picton.

With her husband just retiring from skydiving after 31 years in the sport and recovering herself from a knee injury prompted Fiona to reevaluate her own skydiving goals. Luckily, it took her one jump back to realise she is here for the long haul.

A recent victory for her and fellow team members from Flat White who placed second at the recent Australian Nationals in 4-way Open were due to the winning formula of old age and treachery. The team meets in February with the options of looking for a new front float or disband. Fiona is a seasoned competitor, always looking to compete and will do so in the future even in the form of a scratch team.

The mention of Hybrid jumps sets Fiona's mind racing at all the possibilities and ideas of having great fun. "The 80's saw Star Trek platforms being built with people above the formation rather than the current trend of building from below." Using the chest straps as monkey bars is one idea that comes to her mind and get set for many more. It is so inspiring speaking to Fiona who exhibits an open mind and is willing to integrate her experience and ideas with all people across all disciplines.

Why did you start skydiving? I had a boyfriend at the time. He was so keen on it that I either had to get in on it or out of his life. I tossed up between that and scuba diving.

Where? Picton 13th October 1984 first jump... 20 years ago.

Who is your mentor in skydiving? Col Porter. He has this amazing ability to reinvent himself. He started out as a very competitive skydiver and has reinvented himself as a social skydiver and instructor, being as active as ever today. He is my serious idol. I would like to mention also Michael Vaughan for his energy and enthusiasm.

Best jump? I haven't got a best jump. Rather I would say those jumps where everyone is relaxed, within their comfort zone, not stressed, having a good time. Elise Vale's 4,000th jump comes to mind which was such fun where we were throwing things at each other in the plane, in freefall and we built such a nice skydive that I came down from it thinking, this is why I skydive. Then other skydives come to mind like when I see people achieving something from the time we dirt dive on the ground till the space in the air where they actually do it, usually in surprise. The moment when someone transforms from mechanical to automatic pilot is really special.

Jumping Creed? My philosophy is if I want to do good jumps with people then I have to help them get there. You can't just turn up and expect to have a great jump without helping each other.

Scariest Jump? There have been a few that I have walked away from thinking WOW that was close. Nothing really sticks out but I have always walked away learning and thinking what happened and how can we stop that occurring next time. That's the way I diffuse the scary bits.

Future goals in skydiving? This is difficult at the moment because I don't have a long-term goal at present but then this is maybe why I am still here after such a long time. Some people who set and achieve goals tend to move on. My short-term goal is to jump while enjoying it but then maybe this is my long-term goal. Also I would like to improve my landings this year with some coaching assistance.

Number of competitions you have participated in?

Every Nationals since 1988 except for 2004 due to an injury. I have competed in 4-way, 8-way, 16-way and 10-way speed stars.



John & Fiona 1998



Photo: Shaunn Segon

Flat White

Greatest Achievement in skydiving? In a physical sense, the silver medal at the most recent nationals in 4-way Open and also a silver medal at the World Cup in Portugal in Women's 4-way in 1998.

Do you think there is any room for improvement in your skydiving? There is always room for improvement. New moves are coming out all the time and I like to try them out. As far as I am concerned I believe I have done very little. For instance I haven't touched on the freeflying side of skydiving.

What makes you tick? I like to get out and do things and achieve.

Any advice for up and coming skydivers? I think everybody has bad jumps and you take what you can out of the bad jumps and then you work with the good jumps that you have done. No matter whether you have 2 jumps or 2000 jumps we all go through hard times where we feel we are up against a brick wall, where we feel we are not improving. So, we just have to go through it or around it. Maybe, it is a good idea to go and do different types of skydives and then come back to what you were doing. Keep plugging away at it and remember the good things and why you do it. All those beautiful days when the sun is shining and there are a few clouds in the air and you look out the door and think how you wouldn't want to be anywhere else. Just hang onto those thoughts in your head while you work through the bad stuff.

Odd skydiving facts about Fiona:

- State Coach for NSW for 3 - 4 years
- State Secretary or Administrator for NSW Parachute Council for about the last 6 years
- Nationally, I am the Director of Competitions, which means I sit with the Board but I don't have a vote. I advise them on bids and competitions as well as those who want to put in bids for competitions
- Internationally, the APF sends me as an alternate delegate to the International Parachuting Commission. Within that I have been elected as the chair of the formation skydiving sub committee which means I write the rules for 4-way, 8-way & 16-way skydiving competitions
- Did one jump on a PC into water on new years day from a helicopter with 30 jumps; no shoes, no helmet, wet gear, I threw up before the jump
- One camera jump at Bachelor where I was a pylon, Susie Mcevoy suggested I wear a camera helmet. I caught a hawk on video due to a relaxed track just as I was pitching
- Scuba diver
- Likes to chase John on roller blades whilst he is on his bike
- Had a canopy collision after a 15-way at Wellington, didn't chop a damaged canopy. Crew course taught me to deal with such situations. It gives the skills and confidence.



1991 at Katherine



1988 at Katherine

- Plays papers, scissors, rock in freefall and consequently has confused people about their body position

Do you enjoy all this groundwork? It's patchy work. There are times of the year where I am absolutely flat out and frantic and then it is quiet. The good thing that has come out of all this is that it has allowed and encouraged me to attend the last few world parachute championships and world cups, often in the capacity of a team manager. It has been helpful hopefully, for our teams as I gain access to international issues. As a state coach I tried to put coaches onto drop zones by apportioning the money the state council had available. The value of watching people progress from 4-way B-rels to 16-ways over a period of a week is wonderful.

Will you be attending Skysisters? Yes, I will be load organising with Julie Nichol for the women's formation skydiving record.

What is the biggest formation skydive you have been on? 105-way; an all-women record attempt in Florida in 1995. I am also hoping to make it to the Jump for the Cause later this year, a 150-way record at Perris.

Have you got a favorite formation size? No, I don't think so. The grass can seem greener on the other side. For instance, when I have been committed to 4-way for the weekend, I might want to join a 16-way formation. Then another time when I am doing 16-ways I feel that they might be going a bit slow and I wouldn't mind doing a hot 4-way.

What is your slot in 4-way? Centre outside. I enjoy it because it is one of the controlling slots and I can be a bit of a control freak, ha ha ha.

Important skydiving equipment? AADs are a jolly good idea. I would jump with my teammates without one but not as a load organiser. It is there for that one in a million chance that you aren't able to pull for yourself. Audible altimeters come in handy when you are jumping from different altitudes.

Ratings: Instructor B, Level 2 Accredited Coach

Teams: **Flat White** (we all had white jumpsuits and were flying flat) for 4-5 years. Training jumps 400-500. Piece partner is Rob. **Team Dettol** original 10-way speed star team (because little boys always think they can fly). Late 80's **Spare Bears**. **Team Vixen**, Karen Gale, Dee Bowring and Roz Tomkins early 90's. After this year there were a lot more female teams. **Alchemy** 8-way team. **Slip stream** and **Southern Aurora**

Views on women in skydiving? I enjoy jumping with both men and women. Men have more strength and women can turn faster due to their size. Doing all women big way stuff is psychologically interesting, as women tend to be more cooperative in contrast to men who are more competitive.

Most significant change you have witnessed in your skydiving career? Definitely freeflying. When I started, positions of freeflying were considered out of control. Also, right now all the canopy flight. It is no longer just a way to get to the ground but how you get there. It's spectacular in all senses of the word.

Longevity for skydiving? To always learn something from every jump. To always have a little goal for every skydive. eg I want to have a neater exit or a really good track or expanding my awareness. I always have a personal goal.

What comes easy to you in skydiving? Not a lot that I can think of and that is probably the reason why I am still here. Struggling and reinventing myself have helped. I have strived for a lot of stuff.



Flat White training over Caloundra

Photo: Shaunn Segon



Southern Aurora at Portugal