

1



# PARENTHOOD FOR SKYDIVERS

Can skydiving fit with having a young family? Tash Higman spoke to four people in the sport

## PARENTHOOD

**TH: Let's start with introductions. How many years in the sport, how many jumps, how many major achievements?**

**Julia Swallow (JS):** I've been jumping for nearly 25 years jumping. I'm a seven-times National Champion in 4-way and one-time National Champion in 8-way (both AAA). I won gold at the World Championships in 2006 (Female) and took bronze at the World Cup 2012 Open. I was part of World and British Records in Large Formations, and I have 8,000 jumps.

**Claire 'Sparky' Scott (CSS):** I started in 1992, have 6,000+ jumps, I'm a three-times British AAA Champion, three-times World Champion (Female), two-times World Cup Champion and took the bronze at last year's Indoor World Championships. I used to hold Static Line and AFF ratings until recently.

**Michael Wilson-Roberts (MWR):** I've been in the sport for 18 years, have nearly 3,000 jumps and was on the British HD Record. I just won silver at the VFS Nationals 2016 with my team, *QFX*.

**Craig Poxon (CP):** I've been skydiving for 19 years and have about 4,500 jumps, of which just under half are tandems. My major achievements are the 400-way World Record, I've been on a couple of Sequential Records which have since been broken and I've been to a few World Meets. I don't really have any medals, just some golds in CF at Nationals.

**TH: How many children do you have and how old are they?**

**MWR:** I have a baby boy. Liam was born on September 18 last year, during the Head Up Record attempt at Dunkeswell. He was a month early and it was all quite an emergency. In my defence, I obviously didn't make it because I was five hours away. He's one year old now.

**CP:** My daughter is called Agnes, born on May 19, and is four months old.

**JS:** One daughter, and she is 18 months old.

**CSS:** Tilly is five and Benjamin is three.

**TH: Did you think about stopping?**

**JS:** No, I always knew I would be back to compete again at the Nationals in 2015 and get back the trophy. I was three months pregnant at the Nationals in 2014, so I didn't compete then.

**CSS:** I am still debating about whether to carry on jumping. I didn't manage to jump last year because of being so busy with the kids' activities, but I also didn't really have the excuse to jump. When I had just had Tilly, I was jumping soon afterwards on a player/coach team, and then trained to go to the Dubai Cup with Jules that year. After Ben, I was a player/coach on *NFTO*, so that gave me the reason to jump. Unless there is a

2



competition to train for, I haven't seen the need to jump and have found that the kids' social lives take priority at the moment!

Now that I haven't jumped for over a year, I do think more about safety and my responsibility as a mum. But, then again, I was always a worrier when I was jumping full time!

**MWR:** As a man, no, not at all. It wasn't that the decision to have a child was based around skydiving. It was just never an issue.

**CP:** It may have crossed my mind, but not seriously. Why would I change, why would it be different? I've done it for so long, had that lifestyle and taken that risk, so what difference does it make?

**MWR:** Or no risk, because you've done it for so long that the risk actually isn't that bad.

### TH: Did you jump while pregnant?

**JS:** I jumped but didn't realise I was pregnant. I was seven weeks pregnant at the time I found out and, as soon as I knew, I stopped. In fact, I had to let Sparky down in the process because we were meant to be competing at the Hib Cup!

**CSS:** I did maybe a couple of jumps while I was pregnant with Tilly when I kind of knew but hadn't had it confirmed. As soon as I knew for definite, I stopped straight away. We had had problems before and I didn't want to risk it. With Ben, I knew in the off season and then there was no chance of me jumping again. It's really not worth taking the risk

### TH: Does having children change how you feel about the sport? Are there things you wouldn't do now?

**JS:** Not really, but life is completely different. I now have a 24/7 job, so trying to fit in not just skydiving but what you need to do to keep you on the top of your game is virtually impossible. Plus you are constantly knackered. However, I did break my wrist in December when landing my reserve. Chloe was nine months old at the time, and to keep looking after her with a cast on for six weeks was extremely challenging. I did feel really guilty about compromising how I was looking after her.

**CSS:** After having had Tilly, I guess I pretty much resumed what I had been doing before. Jumping in Dubai onto the Palm when Tilly was 11 months old was a big thing for me, comfort zone wise, but it was good for me to do it to remind me that I was still me. Now that my jumping has got more sporadic, I would have to think very carefully now before doing any kind of jump. I hated big-ways before I had kids and now I have them there is no way I would do one. If I was to get back into jumping now, it would have to be for a really good reason.

**MWR:** I may not start BASE jumping, but nothing has changed in skydiving.

**CP:** It has for me. I didn't think anything would change, but it has surprised me how much my attitude has changed towards it. As an Instructor, I'm quite risk-averse and all about risk management. Tandems are very safe in the UK, but they are still potentially risky because of the gear and the malfunction tree and you don't know what the student is going to do. I jump a small canopy and have done for a long time – touch wood, I've never had any incidents – but I try to relate it to my attitude before in the way that I carry out my jumps and it's always in the safest possible manner.

But, when I look at my daughter, even the chance of something happening and her being without me and me missing out on the rest of her life has made me wonder about what I'm doing. Having said that, I'm still doing it. And it is normally worse between layoffs. I obviously haven't been jumping that actively because of the birth and trying to be available and not go off and be selfish and jump, so you've got the 'break nerves' as well.

### TH: How do you manage childcare at the DZ?

**JS:** In the UK, Chloe's grandmother came along (for me to give Chloe her feed) or my husband James would look after Chloe. I personally don't like Chloe being on the DZ all day when I'm training or coaching – it's not nice for her and it's a distraction for me. Now she's older, she goes to a crèche when I'm training.

**CSS:** In the early days, they had to come with me. I breastfed Tilly until 10 months and Ben until 14 months and, in the early days, it was very difficult to get them to take a bottle. Made debriefs quite interesting when feeding at the same time! But, once they started to get more mobile, I had to leave them at home with my husband Andy or a babysitter. They are too much of a distraction otherwise!

### TH: Very supportive families, clearly!

**CSS:** I guess I'm lucky now I am pursuing the indoor skydiving scene more. Our training tends to be in the evening, which is when the kids are in bed.

**MWR:** Karen comes up and has a nice day out. When we do that, it's a fun jump day and not a team training day, so we sit out on the grass and have a nice day. Karen hasn't jumped since she got pregnant, so she doesn't mind being on the ground with old friends.

**CP:** Erica doesn't jump, so she doesn't really come to the DZ much. It's not like she sits in the corner and nobody speaks to her, but she hasn't got the history like Karen. Because she doesn't jump, it's easy – Erica does it all, which is a bit unfair when I'm off having fun and she's having to care for Agnes. She's a full-time mum at the moment, so it's not that different to what she has to do at home.

That's really not fair. Skydivers are inherently selfish as people. It's just natural, because it's all about the rush

and all about you and damn the risk because you want to have fun. That becomes a test when you have to do things as a team, whether as a skydiving team or a family team.

### TH: How does your family feel about you jumping?

**CSS:** Andy, like me, is more aware of his mortality since having the kids. And, being very close to Tom Scanlon, he was quite happy to give up skydiving. Now he just does speed flying – which, in his mind, is safer!

**MWR:** Karen is a jumper and was almost ready to stop. She was on the Head Up Record, the Girl's Head Down Record and was almost ready to have a break when the family thing happened, so she just lets me get on with it. For me, it's more a commitment thing. I don't think about the risk too much, but it's another commitment in my life which is equal to if not more important than skydiving was to me.

And I want to do the right thing. I feel guilty that I've been away for two days jumping and I haven't seen my little boy. I want him to have an active lifestyle as well. He benefits from me being a skydiver because he just does anything. He goes swimming every week and we let him try things out himself. Karen is fine with it and, if anything, I've been hitting it harder this year. I don't know whether you try harder; you set your stall out and say "I'm →

**1 Julia Swallow and Chloe, by Rob Lloyd**

**2 Chloe Swallow and dad James cheering Satori XL at the World Championships 2016. Behind them, Emma Hart of Revolution Freestyle came ninth in the world despite only starting her training four months before the competition due to being pregnant with baby Anna. By Craig Poxon**

**3 Craig Poxon and baby Agnes in the Chatteris Twin Otter**



4



a skydiver, nothing's going to change" and overcompensate. Like I said, I hit it harder this year with joining a skydiving team and that was kind of unwittingly after I got a phone call and couldn't say no! "Will you join QFX?" "Well thank you for asking, and of course!" How can you say no? That meant 250 jumps and training in Empuria.

**CP:** At least that's more structured, so you choose your weeks. You're not going to the DZ every weekend.

**MWR:** That is exactly right. In fact, that has been one weekend a month and tunnel every other week. It makes it manageable.

**CP:** And Karen's done some tunnel?

**MWR:** She went back to fly after she had a year off being pregnant and, when Liam was about three or four months old, she went back to Bedford. She did some outfaced carving and switching both ways and I just looked at her and - I wish! I tried to outface carve again and splatted myself on the top net. That kind of annoys me actually - Karen was so natural at it and I'm thinking "Why aren't you jumping?" Anyway, she hasn't got an issue with me jumping.

**CP:** Erica isn't a skydiver, although she's done a couple of tandems. I was going to take her on another and then she got pregnant, so we decided not to do it. Although plenty of people skydive when they are pregnant, it was a combination of her going on a skydive with me that meant we decided not to do it. That means we'll probably never skydive together, or at least not until Agnes is 16.

It was interesting what you were saying

about Karen in terms of she's ticked all the boxes and achieved what she wanted to. I was getting to that stage anyway, sitting at a windy DZ all weekend every weekend and getting to the age when I'd quite like to have a lie-in the morning and don't have to get up to go to the DZ so early. I've been starting to wonder whether it was my turn to have a bit of a hiatus anyway and I got out of sport jumping because most of that was instructional as well. Meeting and getting involved with a non-skydiver changed things anyway, and it wasn't such a big deal to me anymore. I still got 100 jumps a year, which kept me happy, although now that Agnes is around it's probably only 50 jumps this year. And then you have to question - is that enough to be current and safe? Am I actually being more risky by doing fewer jumps? It's weird; you just want to get home and see your kid. It's quite a tear, actually.

**TH: Do you expect your children will jump once they are old enough?**

**JS:** Who knows? She will be around the sport so much, it will probably be the last thing she wants to do!

**CSS:** Mmmm... in some ways, I would still like to be jumping by the time they do their first tandems or be in a position to jump together. However, I do also know now how my mum felt when I called her to say that I had just done my first Static Line jump and wasn't coming home because I was up to do another one. If the kids decide they don't want to jump, I will be pretty relieved. In some ways, it would be nice to fly with them indoors, which I know isn't the same, but then it was the flying that was my passion

and not necessarily the canopy part! I've already flown with Tilly a few times.

**MWR:** I don't expect it, but I'd like him to. I've not really thought about it. He can jump if he wants, but it'll be an expensive hobby. Will they do tunnel? That's really the question, because that's going to come first, isn't it?

**CP:** I've also not really thought about it. I've got a kind of ambition to keep my tandem rating for another 16 years so that I can take Agnes on a tandem, just so she can experience it.

**MWR:** What's worse? "Daddy, I'd like to do a skydive" or "Daddy, I've just bought a motorbike"?

**CP:** Ask me again in 16 years. ●

**4 Michael, Liam and Karen Wilson-Roberts, by Rob Lloyd**

**5 XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX**

