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Richard Henriksen

# A REAL CHALLENGE

## BASE JUMPING – NOT A SPORT FOR THE FAINT-HEARTED

BASE JUMPING REQUIRES a lot of hard work, dedication and mental strength. The image of an attention-craving madman with no respect for life, property or the law could not be further from the truth. The tiny margin of error in the sport leaves no room for mistakes or braggarts. Meet Richard Henriksen, a 42-year-old Norwegian surgeon, father of three and highly experienced BASE jumper.

BASE is an abbreviation of Building, Antenna, Span and Earth. The term was coined by Carl Boenish in 1981, at the time of the first recorded death. The death of William E. Harmon brought the phenomenon to the public's attention. A rather ghoulish reason you might think, but the enormous media coverage that followed this tragic death rapidly made BASE jumping known across the globe.

In traditional parachuting you can experience free fall for several minutes, and you carry a reserve parachute in the event of an emergency. A BASE jumper has no such luxuries. He experiences free fall for a few seconds only, and if anything goes wrong with the chute, there is no back-up. A BASE jumper will hit the ground before a reserve chute has time to deploy. For this reason, BASE jumping equipment quickly moved away from the sophisticated solutions used in conventional parachuting and took a simpler route. Simplifying the equipment to exploit the laws of physics minimises the risk of failure.

After a spectacular launch, a BASE jumper reaches a top speed of around 230 kph in only eight seconds. This is known as terminal velocity, or free fall. At this speed, if anything goes wrong, the injuries would be devastating. Apart from the risk of hitting the ground, a jumper can suffer from something called opening shock. The chute

takes just an eighth of a second to open, and the resulting deceleration can be compared to hitting a rock wall in a car travelling at 250 kph. To avoid injury, a BASE jumper must always calculate the speed versus the opening time for the chute, and regulate this using the brake setting.

The fjords of Norway, and the Trollvæggen wall in particular, are one of the world's most popular locations for devotees of the sport. Situated far from populated areas, jumpers have to hike for kilometres through forest and across country to reach their favourite sites. In Sweden and Norway, enthusiasts are often outdoor types who love nature and the thrill of the sport, as well as the unique comradeship that ties them together.

Richard Henriksen explains why he BASE jumps:

"We are genetically programmed to flee from predators and hunt for food. 20,000 years ago, we faced stress daily in the fight for survival and finding food for the day. This is what our bodies are genetically programmed for. Today, much of the time I spend working as a surgeon consists of staring at a computer and clicking far too often on a mouse to issue instructions to the staff in the X-ray department. This creates a technical stress that our bodies are not genetically designed to cope with. Surgery itself, the manual skill required during operations, gives me big daily challenges, but it's the paperwork that raises my stress levels. BASE jumping has taught me to handle tough situations and stress. I feel that I'm becoming a better and more confident surgeon."

After a long day at the hospital, Richard loves to jump in the car and drive for an hour or so to one of the fjords in the vicinity of Trondheim, where he lives. He then has to make a long and demanding hike to the top of the mountain he intends to jump from.

To challenge himself during the jump, and also push the technical boundaries, Richard performs advanced mid-air acrobatics in the seconds that free fall lasts after leaping from the cliffs. He performs somersaults and screws. He practices and fine-tunes these movements between jumps, at home in the gym or on the trampoline at the swimming baths.

So how does Richard feel when he is standing at the top of a mountain, hundreds of metres up, with only minutes to go before a jump?

"It's a mixture of stress and anticipation, and my pulse rate is a little higher than normal. But I'm extremely safety-conscious, and I'm always 110% certain that I will succeed."

When you see Richard land from a jump it is fairly obvious how he feels. He radiates joy and it is clear that he has experienced a real adrenalin rush. One of the first things he does on landing is to phone the family to tell them that everything has gone according to plan. This is an important routine that he never fails to observe.





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