

High-tech skydiving equipment adds to risk

By Abby Sewell, Los Angeles Times

PERRIS – The competition was high-performance and high-risk, and Sean Carey and his 16 fellow skydivers knew it.

They were equipped with special parachutes that allowed a faster and better-controlled descent, and their goal Saturday was to dive toward a shallow pond in an advanced maneuver known as swooping.

One by one, they plummeted toward the surface, executing a last-minute turn to accelerate before leveling off and gliding just above the pond. But Carey, an instructor at Skydive San Diego who had done the maneuver successfully hundreds of times, made his turn too low and crashed into the pond.

Carey was the sixth highly experienced skydiver to be killed in the last year at Perris Valley Skydiving, one of the largest and most popular facilities for the sport in the nation.

The deaths reflect a divergent nationwide trend: equipment upgrades and safety rules have reduced overall skydiving fatalities among novices – but the smaller, more aerodynamically designed parachutes have allowed more experienced divers to take more risks.

Increasingly, industry veterans said, fatal accidents involve experts attempting advanced maneuvers with high-performance equipment – people like Carey, who according to his employer averaged 1,800 jumps a year and had won previous swooping competitions.

Last December, another experienced canopy pilot, as they are

known, died making a landing error while swooping at Perris. The facility temporarily suspended swooping while it conducted a review of safety procedures.

The company's general manager, Dan Brodsky-Chenfeld, said he found that Perris' safety standards were as high as or higher than other facilities' but further tightened requirements.

The facility had already required that before attempting a high-performance maneuver, a skydiver must have made at least 700 jumps. After the December fatality, it added a requirement that skydivers receive special training before attempting swooping.

In the wake of Carey's death, Brodsky-Chenfeld said he is again reviewing the standards.

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