

Women's Weekender Event 2023 Report – Kat Busby Hicks DZO Skydive Tilstock

This July, 42 women descended on Skydive Tilstock, host of our second Women's Weekender event, which continues to be the UK's leading (and only!) women centred event. Once again, the women's weekender takeover team came together under our mission to gather women with every qualification in the sport to lead as inspiring examples providing support, organising and coaching for female skydivers. We run this as a blend of jumping, mixers and seminars. Sara Jayne Orton continued as our Takeover CI, Cath Leather, Kate Lindsley and Vic and Becs Bradley returned to Load Organise and instruct. This year the group was joined by Lucy Mancey, Réka Szóts, Karen Saunders, Cara Pritchard and our home-grown Tilly members: FS coach Julie Murray and Laura Dixon Crilley, who additionally helped with logistics and designing this year's awesome tee. Our manifesters, packers, ground control and even our chef Dianne continued the women led theme which strives to ensure that every position on the DZ is led by women. British Skydiving development event funding was used to offset the cost of coaching for the event. We are grateful to the ID&E committee for supporting the event and for recognising and valuing the importance within the remit of equality and inclusion for women to have a dedicated space in the skydiving calendar.

As a group we appreciate that women need and deserve a space that is just for them. Most women won't have experienced an event where they are the sole focus, and the feedback we have received supports our view that such an event matters. We have learnt from the washup both this year and last, that women value a space to learn from other women. Their fears are often very similar, whether in terms of confidence, of putting themselves forward, of feeling good enough to attempt something new or harder. The women coaches understand this and are well positioned to help instil the particular training, discussion or courage that is needed.

Our ethos is that there is nothing that a group of women can't achieve, and that's why we feel it's so important that women can come together to learn from one another. It's also a reason that we feel it's equally important to have discussion and relaxation time together. The event is also about encouraging women to meet other women in skydiving, as we are the minority sex at 16% female to **84% male** skydivers. At any DZ, women will be far outnumbered by men, and most are used to jumping predominantly exclusively with men. It is therefore unusual and unexpected for women to be uniquely amongst women in a jumping environment. Many wonder what that will be like, and we work to show them that it is a worthwhile experience to partake in. At the event women can make friends, keep in touch, meet at other events throughout the year. Going to new DZs can be daunting, particularly for low experience skydivers, so enabling women to make social contacts and feel secure about knowing other women at an event can mean the difference between attending or giving it a pass.

Because our numbers are so low, it's also important that we work to retain women within the sport. One of the successes of these events is that we are helping women to do this. This year we had four women attend who had long layoffs or were thinking of leaving the sport, including breaks of a year, 4 years, 5 years and almost a decade. Their feedback was that as a direct consequence of our event, they have rejoined or stayed in the sport. Another attendee recently informed us that she is going for her TI rating after being inspired by the event, she hadn't thought of becoming one until she listened to Laura Bamford's presentation on life as an International Tandem Instructor.

Because of poor weather this year, we had additional time to allow for practical demonstrations and discussions. One of the learnings of the first event was that the women often felt unqualified or unsure about packing their rigs. This year we had Karen Saunders, Rigger Examiner - the only person Tom Cruise will let pack for him! - and Lucy Mancey, Advanced Packer. Karen did a riveting talk on kit safety and maintenance, full of tips to keep gear in its best and safest condition. Lucy followed with a

practical session on packing, including a bespoke way for women (with smaller hands than men) to get the canopy into the container easily. Elise Sharp gave a talk on her participation in Project 19 – a record attempt by an international collaboration of women to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the constitutional amendment that gave American women the right to vote. Elise is a triple world record holder, AFF instructor, multi-disciplinary competitor/coach and co-organiser of the UK Women's HD bigway record attempts. Her talk highlighted the route to becoming a free flyer via FS1 skills and she was undoubtedly inspiring. Sara brought a surprise for the group in the shape of a video message she'd received from skydiving legend Cheryl Stearns. Cheryl had heard about what we were putting on and took the time to record a missive of support and congratulations for everyone being part of the event – we were humbled that she took the time and care to support our cause.

The group chilled with pizza and cocktails whilst stunt performer and member of Highlight Pro Skydiving team, Hannah Betts joined remotely from America for a “fireside chat”. She talked passionately about her experiences and the challenges she has faced in her career and her talk was followed by a lively question and answer session. After which the group let their hair down and partied the night away. Réka led morning sessions of yoga which were fully attended, we wanted to foster a feeling of calm, strength, tranquillity and positivity to start each day with.

So clearly a large part of the rationale for a women's event is about fostering belief in ability, building confidence, improving performance and progression, enabling networking and encouraging social bonding. Underlying all of this, is a nod to the particular situation that women find themselves in whilst navigating sexism and misogyny within society. In the runup to this year's event I had multiple discussions with people as to why this event is necessary and why it is exclusive to women. The answer is multifaceted, on the one hand it does create a space which provides safety from harassment, patronising treatment and/or any other unacceptable behaviour that can arise in a mixed sex setting. On the other hand, it allows women to meet and learn in an environment which is all about them, bringing all the associated benefits this report outlines.

Skydiving is no less immune to the sexism women face in society as a whole. As both a woman who has survived serious sexual assault, and as a drop zone operator, I feel a burden of responsibility to ensure the women in our sport are supported to thrive as skydivers, whilst also being protected from the ills of sexism that an all-female environment provides. For the former, it's important that women can both see and learn from other women who have the experience and qualifications that one day they can aspire too if they so wish. Mentoring is a proven way of enabling growth and confidence building and that is what the team leading this do brilliantly. For the latter, whilst we put no focus on specifically discussing sexism or harassment, some of these topics have been raised in discussions, and it is a testament to how well the events function as safe and secure spaces that women feel comfortable to discuss these issues. As sexism is a part of women's lived experience, we feel it is sensible and empowering to be able to discuss appropriate tactics and coping mechanisms for difficult or adverse situations, if and when those conversations arise.

A common criticism perceives the event as being primarily centred around tackling sexism and the belief that the issue should be discussed and tackled equally between men and women. Whereas keeping it single sex is akin to being anti-men by not including them in solving the problem. This is a fair point and the issue of how men can be involved in tackling sexism is one that we hope all DZs and British Skydiving will get involved with answering. However, the event is actually primarily centred on women in skydiving, helping to elevate experience, confidence and ability. It is 100% pro women, by allowing them a space to learn and grow amongst other female skydivers. We appreciate that many men would like to be more involved and support women by tackling sexism, so the takeaway from our experience of running this event is two practical solutions:

1. Support and encourage women to attend women-centred events.
2. Speak up and speak out when you see poor behaviour. *An interesting article can be found here <https://hbr.org/2020/10/how-men-can-confront-other-men-about-sexist-behavior>

Men taking these two actions would make a huge difference to women in the sport and in their lives in general.

Outcomes

Despite the wet weather and only one partial day of jumping, these were our quantitative achievements (that we know of):

- One woman returned to currency after four years away from skydiving and has since become a regular club member;
- A return to skydiving after five year's absence;
- A return to skydiving after a year's absence;
- A return to skydiving after nine year's absence;
- A return to skydiving after having a baby;
- One completion of FF1;
- One inaugural 4-way;
- One completion of AFF Level 6;
- One woman inspired to take her Tandem Instructor rating.

This year, I asked for qualitative data from attendees to enable others to really get a flavour of what the event means to those who came. Their words speak for themselves about the importance of the event, and I am sharing their experiences below:

Julie

I wanted to attend because I read an article from a high-profile female skydiving coach, about how many women behave in a mixed coaching environment by holding back (literally and metaphorically), lacking confidence, and not getting the most out of a coaching situation. Whereas men tend to back themselves, push themselves forward and more actively interact with the coach to get what they want. This not only resonated with me, it was also the first time I 'got it', and realised that it was not 'just me' and my personality. I come from a sports background, I haven't really had any negative experiences with men in the sport, and don't think I feel intimidated by men ... but still.

So, it was with some skepticism about 'excluding' men (I generally don't believe that dividing people helps with integration), I attended the Tilstock women's weekend - because I saw it as a development weekend for women rather than an 'anti-men' event. I am a relatively newly qualified FS coach and was asked to be a coach for the event, which I agreed to despite that inner doubt that I wasn't really good enough amongst a group of amazing female instructors and coaches. But it was my home DZ and I was encouraged by Kat and some other coaches, so I took a leap of faith! It actually didn't take long to realise that all of the women had these similar feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy, because in this unique environment the women who attended the event felt that they could be vulnerable and share these feelings without being judged and without this being seen as a sign of weakness - quite the opposite - wow! And because other women understand and recognise these feelings, they respond in exactly the right way - with encouragement, reassurance and support: because no matter how bad we are at being objective and seeing our own capabilities and potential, we are great at recognising it in others. Therefore, we are able to make adaptations as coaches and instructors - just as I learned to adapt coaching to different learning styles in my workplace many years previously. And I believe with increased awareness all good coaches (male and female) can develop an awareness of these traits and adapt their coaching accordingly.

Skydiving is a sport where you need to get to a drop zone to start with - and this can be intimidating. And to progress, you need to actively seek out coaches, go to different drop zones and put yourself onto events - not easy if you lack self-belief and self-confidence. One of my students at the event had to be actively encouraged to have her first FS coached jump with me (by a very experienced instructor who she knew and trusted). She was hesitant, and not confident, and asked lots of questions - but in this environment, she went for it. And she was great - one of the best first 'FS' coached jumps I have done with a student. I know that some men also lack confidence, but it seems that this is an issue for MOST women - even the incredible, amazing, accomplished women in our sport... and some of these women were kind enough to share their stories during the presentations - and their inspiring journeys to success, which helped us to see what is possible! There are many possible reasons why we as women feel this lack of confidence and are also very self-critical: nature, nurture, women's place in history, gender stereotypes, role models, hormones, society... But it is real, and although we can't hope to solve all the causes right now, we can adapt our skydiving environment and our approach to coaching both for women and any other skydivers lacking self-confidence. The event was empowering, informative and satisfying - seeing women 'let their guard down' and progress and develop and be inspired to do more skydiving. The yoga was an added bonus (thanks Réka), and we also had a lot of fun. I personally received lots of support and encouragement from more experienced coaches (thanks Cath), and we all made new friends - creating a network of women across the country. I heard women talk about going to different DZ's because there will be familiar faces there - women you know you can approach and trust - all good for our sport and increasing female participation and retention.

Alice

The most fabulous weekend! I think my biggest takeaway from the whole thing is not quite realising how much I would value attending an event like this and the importance of having a space organised by women in skydiving, for women in skydiving, to support women in skydiving ...honestly what a fabulous group of people! When the jumping wasn't even the best part, just the cherry on top for me, it says that this was something special. I will probably never say this again in a skydiving context, but I'm actually glad we got rained off on Saturday, enabling us to hear all the talks, experiences and learn so much skydiving knowledge. I met so many lovely new faces and have left feeling very inspired by all the insights and jumping stories and achievements that were shared.

Jill

I love the supportive atmosphere at this event where it's okay to ask questions, to make mistakes and to learn from them, because world champions and record holders do these things too!

Bethan

For me this event was pivotal in keeping me in the sport after a four-year break. As a very nervous skydiver I was so close to calling it a day before I saw the Women's Weekender advertised. But the support I received throughout the weekend made me realise that walking away was not an option! The fun we had in between jumps was the icing on top of an already perfect cake.

Jess

I can't think of words that express how important this event was and I came away from it so inspired. There's a lot of assumptions about what women can and can't do in skydiving and in everyday life, and it took a weekend like that to make me realise the embarrassing number of those assumptions I accepted as the truth in the past. You're all seriously inspirational women and I now, to quote Hannah Betts, have the confidence of an average white man (or at least, I no longer think there's any reason I shouldn't!) Oh, and thanks to Lucy I'm now almost excited about the next time I have to pack because she made it look so easy!

Orla

The women's event facilitated my return to skydiving after having a baby. I had almost forgotten how much I loved skydiving, and this event gave me the nudge I needed to get back in the sky. I often

wonder how many women stop skydiving when they have a baby and don't find a pathway to return, and I wondered for a short time if I would end up the same. I was able to meet old friends and make new ones. There is no substitute for women being able to support other women in a safe, supportive environment.

Ailbhe

This was so much more than skydiving... After a five-year break from skydiving, my prejump jitters were welcomed with informed & encouraging advice. A moment of calmness as the plane door rolled open and I witnessed a full load of legends committed to the magic zone that's felt as your feet leave the security of the plane floor. This weekend has awoken something inside me, the ripple effect of woman supporting woman is the most powerful force. Awareness and gratitude for the incredible strength of women before us, the unjustifiable suffering of women today, and our duties to the women coming behind us.

Lucy

I guess my big takeaway from this event is just how valuable it was for those attending. For the women who say they don't need/want or support women only events, maybe you've succeeded well in this sport without them and you're not the target audience, but you damn well could be the inspiration to the women who do need this.

Laura

I'm just glad I could give back to the community. There are so many fantastic women in this sport that were the inspiration and support for me to keep going, keep trying, keep getting better. It was an honour to share and pass on the love.

Wendy

A truly amazing event. It took a couple of days afterwards for it all to sink in. The talks were informative and inspirational. Hannah's talk particularly resonated with me, when she stated that internally she is quietly confident but externally she can be full of self-doubt. We were offered psychological tools to overcome this and an explanation for why many women suffer with this. It is by no means an 'anti-men' weekend but there was something completely empowering about being on a plane full of women! Jumping with a legend and obtaining a sticker was just the icing on the cake.

Learning

This year we held the event in July aiming for warmer weather but were unfortunately stymied by rain, meaning we only managed one partial day of jumping. However, the feedback was that the second day of discussions and practical sessions were valuable and worthwhile to the attendees and so we will aim to have a discussion day on the Sunday of the event in '24.

We advertised a crèche but attendees this year sorted alternative childcare. We are still willing to pursue the childcare option for next year as the event continues to grow, it may encourage more women by tackling a barrier to participation. We were unable to hold the tunnel day as the cost was too much to be practical, but we are considering a Women's Weekender tunnel trip abroad.

Due to the timing of the event clashing with big events in Europe, the gear manufacturer reps were mostly in Europe so we didn't have any stands this year. However, Cara from XDream was coaching with us and was on hand for kit advice, hire and purchase. We will see who is available in '24 and host the informal discussion we agreed in 2022 if possible.

The Women's Weekender at Skydive Tilstock returns Friday 28th – Sunday 30th June 2024



