

Photo Interview: Taya Weiss

I've been jumping for more than 20 years now. I still love it, and one of the things that makes it so sweet is this diverse community we have. Some of the characters we share the sky with not only shred with the best of them, they are amazing people with incredible stories.

In this interview, I hope to introduce you to another one of those characters whose story is almost hard to believe.

The idea of this series is to introduce you to those people and try to focus not on their skydiving/BASE jumping resume, but more on who they are as humans. I don't ask about jump numbers, medals, canopy sizes or sponsors; I try to focus more on what makes them tick. This time around you will meet one of the brightest and most educated skydivers I have ever met, who is also a pioneer and leader in some of the most cutting-edge aspects of our sport. Ladies and gents, Miss Taya Weiss.



Zach: What is the best way to really piss you off?

Taya: I work full time at not getting pissed off! It does happen now and then, though. I'd say when personalities get in the way of progress or efficiency, especially due to poor communication, it pisses me off. On a team, I don't like when people let things fester because they won't talk it out. And I have no time for sexism, whether overt or subtle.

Where did you start off in this world, and where have you called home over the course of your life?

I grew up in Boston and went to college at Harvard. My mother is from Lebanon, so growing up I spent some summers there. I wouldn't say that was home, but it qualifies as a place that registers on my personal planetary map. As soon as Harvard was done I made my way to San Francisco briefly, and then to South Africa. I lived in Johannesburg, which I still consider a second home, until I returned to the U.S. to get my graduate degree at Princeton in New Jersey. Then I became an itinerant skydiver for a while before settling down in Southern California, where I now live in Santa Monica and call Skydive Perris my home drop zone.


You called the summer "the reaping season" for BASE jumping. Do you think there is a way that can change, or is the simple nature of flying so fast and in such close proximity to terrain going to make that impossible?

It can change. It has to change. It will change through education and mentorship and training. Not all of the deaths are because people are flying too fast. Many, believe it or not, died because they were flying too slow. Some have died because they were doing things outside of the margins of their abilities or equipment and they didn't accurately self-assess. It will change as people have more access to the information they need and apply more discipline to using that information. It will change with good leadership and people who are senior in the sport taking others under their wing. We have to believe that change is possible. I don't think anyone in the BASE jumping community accepts that this level of loss is normal or sustainable.

Outside of skydiving and BASE jumping, what do you do for fun?

I love to get out in nature at the beach or in the hills around Los Angeles. I will take any chance to travel just for the sake of exploration. Dinner and a movie. Experiencing art. I am a big art nerd. Last year I flew to Amsterdam for 36 hours just to catch an exhibition I really wanted to see.





SPEED ROUND

Teacher's pet or class clown? Let's face it, pet.

Coffee or tea? Coffee

Pizza or cupcakes? Pizza

Physical strength or mental fortitude? Mental fortitude

Sing or dance? Dance

7-cell or 9-cell? Seven

Love or passion? Love

Beach or mountains? Beach

Vodka or whiskey? Whiskey

Chocolate or vanilla? Chocolate

Surf or turf? Both


Rare or well done? RARE!!!

Friends or family? Friends are family.

Early bird or night owl? Night owl

Loyalty or ambition? Loyalty

Run or swim? Run



The word on the street is that you spent some time in school. Can you tell us about your education?

<Laughs> I am an overeducated skydiver. At Harvard, I studied social theory as an interdisciplinary degree based on philosophy, history and economics. I wrote my undergraduate thesis on the culture of constitutional change in Kenya. I studied and got reasonably fluent in Swahili. After graduating, I did research on the illegal small arms trade in Africa. I also studied violence against women and children and developed police training for 12 countries on how to understand and prosecute it; that's one of the things I am most proud of. At Princeton, I got a master's in public affairs with a focus on international politics. I wanted more theoretical background for the type of humanitarian work I was interested in. When I was trying to get wingsuiting recognized at the International Parachuting Commission (IPC), that degree came in handy.

With smarts like that, you must pay your bills as a rocket scientist or brain surgeon.

Skydiving, actually! I run Lightning Flight, where my team and I teach people how to fly wingsuits as well as hosting skills camps and events. We are based at Skydive Perris, where planes fly seven days a week and Lightning Flight has 12 coaches and load organizers on a rotating schedule. Our new location at Skydive Elsinore will be open soon and I am excited to expand and continue to provide world-class wingsuit education! We are busy! There are lots of people who come out to do their AFF and thanks to YouTube, already know they want to wingsuit.

I am also proud to be part of the Next Level team, a new wingsuit training group complementing Lightning Flight, that offers a worldwide network of instructors and mentors who share similar values. We work together on developing and continuously updating courses that can take a jumper from a first flight course to their biggest goals, whether in skydiving or BASE. I am hoping that this current generation of wingsuit pilots, myself included, can do for wingsuit training what Flight-1 did for canopy piloting.

What do you suck at?

Basketball. Anything that involves little round moving objects. I've never played chess and don't know how to. Some people think that's weird. I suck at sitting still. I've never been able to hold down a real desk job for more than five months. I self-sabotage after a while. I just can't do it.

What accomplishment, skydiving or outside of the sport, are you the proudest of?

I hold a current wingsuit-formation world record. For me it was the first IPC record for wingsuiting, which is one of my proudest achievements because of the years of work traveling around, talking to people, and getting us accepted by the skydiving community and our sport's governing bodies. I was crazy

enough to keep going to meetings with my color-printed pamphlets, making presentations and sending petitions. The journey was harder than I thought it would be. It turns out that politics is everywhere, and I learned a lot. I'm very proud that we now have a worldwide standard for judging wingsuit formation flying. Wingsuit flying is the only skydiving discipline where large performance records don't involve taking grips, so the standards were challenging to define.

In BASE jumping I'm most proud of still being alive. I think wingsuit BASE jumping is one of the most wonderful things on earth and it feels amazing. It is very addictive and it can be very hard to self-assess and know where your limits are. To know when it is OK to push yourself and when you need to step back. I may still mess that up one day, but I am proud that I've thus far made decisions to survive. Hopefully I will quit before I die.

In life, I am most proud of meeting the man of my dreams and being open enough and brave enough to make the relationship work. I am IN LOVE! It's absurd. I am so happy!

Drink or cocktail of choice?

Definitely Scotch. I like peaty, mossy, like it just came out from under a rock in the rain Scotch.

Would you consider yourself an extrovert?

I am an extrovert. I love people. I like to be very open and interactive.

Master chef?

Sure! Well, chef in training. I make a mean breakfast. Huevos rancheros and healthy breakfasts with fresh squeezed OJ. I love making breakfast for house guests and friends. I also cook a lot of Lebanese food; that's my soul food.

What about physical fitness? What do you do to stay in shape?

I practice Pilates. It changed my body and my whole approach to flexibility and core fitness. I did a teacher training to improve my own practice and help others. Yoga done right can be a great form of meditation that helps my breathing in other physical activities like hiking and climbing (as well as an awesome way to sweat). Also, flying a wingsuit often is a workout as well!

What is the most important thing in your life?

My marriage. Love in general; making sure that I take care of myself and am there for the people that I love and care about. I care about my relationships and care about being there for the people who are there for me and building a community. Work comes and goes, but what gives life meaning the most is the people who anchor us.

What might be something people would be surprised to know you do well?

I can shoot!

Is that legal in California?

I don't know! Don't tell anyone; we only talk about it in Arizona.

For the new jumpers out there, would you like to share any tips or advice?

I've said this before, but I feel like not enough people talk about it. Wait until you have at least 100 jumps until you get romantically involved with someone at the drop zone. Do not mix mentorship and dating early on. It is tough, especially for new skydivers, because it is exciting and we want to spend all our time on the drop zone. But if you get your heart broken or your confidence eroded on a very personal level before you feel established in the sport, it can be easy to give up and miss out on all the great stuff that comes once you have more experience.

Who do you look up to?

Nelson Mandela. Desmond Tutu. In skydiving, Dan Brodsky-Chenfeld, Kate Cooper-Jensen, Melissa Nelson Lowe, Melanie Curtis.

Do you consider yourself a generally happy person?

Yes.

What makes your heart race?

Standing on the edge of something that I am about to jump off. That does it every time.

What is the first thing you do when you wake up?

I look over at my husband's face and feel extreme joy and happiness in that moment.

Store you can spend your whole paycheck in?

REI!

I always say that BASE jumping is as dangerous as whuffos think skydiving is. You are deep in the BASE and wingsuiting worlds; would you say my assessment is accurate?

As Dan BC says about skydiving, it is a dangerous sport that can be done safely. BASE jumping has grown very quickly in recent years and is in a different stage of its development than skydiving, which has more rules and more structure to it. I do think it is dangerous and I don't try to make it seem any other way. But it is getting safer through good training, better equipment and more people treating it with respect.



What will be the next big step in wingsuiting?

Better training. Wingsuiting is getting to the point where there are so many crossovers that need to happen between skydiving and BASE jumping. Wingsuits, rather than continuing to get bigger and bigger are starting to get more efficient. We are at a stage where competition needs development. We have a long way to go in developing new ways to fly our bodies inside the wingsuit. We will see more freeflying, acrobatics and more structure and training.

The BASE videos on YouTube are unbelievable. They make my heart race just watching them, and every year they seem to push the boundary further and further. People flying below tree-top level on lines without any outs seem to be almost common place now. With the bar set so high, can the popularity of these videos be part of what pushes people to push things beyond their own limits?

There is no doubt that some people will push in pursuit of what they perceive to be their moment of fame. If you ask the people in those crazy videos, though, they will tell you that there is a lot of analysis, thought, research and training that go into the flying. Many of them who are still with us have taken a step back. They have gone back to the basics, at least for a little while. We need to think about what the future is and ask, what does progress mean? If the goal looks like just flying closer and closer to stuff, that can only take you into the ground. That's exactly where we don't want to be.

After we did your photoshoot, I got a delivery from Amazon with two books in it. Do you remember those books, and can you explain them?

<laughs!> I sent you "All My Friends are Dead," and I also sent you the sequel, "All My Friends are Still Dead." You and I had some really good talks about the subject of these books! That book was given to me by a non-skydiver friend who said they hoped I would not be offended by it, but they saw the book and it made them think of me. I just thought it was the best thing. Shortly thereafter I started getting more and more copies of this book. People who didn't know each other sent me 7 or 8 copies. It is a little bit of dark humor, and that is a great way to handle sadness and grief when a lot of your friends die.

I have definitely lost a lot of people through skydiving and BASE jumping. It is hard. It is hard to come back from that and those types of loss truly push you to swim in the risk that you are taking. To question yourself about it, understand it and never look the other way. For me it has been a real journey of getting to know people's families who are not in the jumping world and understanding the effects of loss that go beyond our Facebook generation of "Fly Free, so-and-so lived the dream, etc." And then it looks on the surface like everyone moves on from it. When you take a very deep dive into loss, sometimes you just have to laugh. Seriously. You need to laugh a lot. You need to laugh at yourself, at the situation. If you can't laugh about it ... It's better than crying. I love those books. It is a way of injecting a little bit of humor into what is otherwise a tough journey for many of us.



I was going to leave the piece below in the introduction of this interview, but I was worried it would put a dark hue over how the readers perceive Taya's personality. She is anything but dark. So I leave it here at the end of the line. This interview was different from most for me. I guess they all are in their own way, but this one was really different. When she was in town for the shoot we talked a lot about life. We talked a lot about love, and a lot about loss. We talked a lot about dying specifically.

Taya is a pioneer in many ways, and pushes the limits with the best of them. The sky has brought love to her life—and also taken away more than one of her significant others and many of her friends. She calls the summer "reaping season," and with uncanny timing I saw a new post that one of her close friends died in Europe wingsuiting, just moments before we walked into the studio to take her pictures. I let her know and in an instant, I could see the pain in her eyes. It was only there long enough for her to give a muffled "Fuck!" and just a moment of solitude. She nodded her head, shook it off and I could see she was over it. Just like that she was back and ready to take photos. She didn't need a hug, or a moment to shed a tear. She dealt with it in her own way and had moved on. All of this was less than 10 seconds in time. Something in that moment will never leave me. She is such a happy and outgoing person, but in that time, I witnessed someone who had become a pro at dealing with losing those she cares for.



ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER/ PHOTOGRAPHER:

Zach Lewis started jumping in 1997 and flies camera for Dallas Khaos Khobalt. He enjoys jumping, taking pictures, taking pictures while jumping, and whiskey.