

And the Hits Just Keep on Coming...

By Craig Rodgeron

It's Wednesday afternoon in a field at Schoolcraft College in Livonia, Michigan. Winter is coming. A dozen kites paint the sky as Jon Trennepohl finishes assembling a barn door kite he built for higher winds. After launching, he anchors it to a tree. Kiteflyers have been gathering here to fly for years. Half of the people on the ground have just returned from the AKA Convention in Ocean City, Maryland. Many have won awards in various competitions. If he had worn them around his neck, Jon's jangle of medals would have been the loudest of the bunch, like a prize goat at the county fair.



Jon Trennepohl proudly displays his award-winning "Fulcrum" in Ocean City (above). With wife, Marianne, in the early years of their kite business.

In Ocean City, Jon took first place in Masters Individual Multi-line Ballet, first in Cooperative, tied for first in Structural Design, and won a special award for Most Innovative. All of Jon's awards were centered on the Fulcrum quadline kite, the newest addition to the Sky Burner line. Sky Burner Kites, Sky Shark tubes, Kites & Fun Things: these are all parts of the kite company run by Jon and Marianne Trennepohl in Plymouth, Michigan, just ten minutes from this field.

Jon Trennepohl's interest in kites reignited as an adult when he spotted a dual-line

kite at a friend's house. He enjoyed the challenge of learning to fly a sport kite and sought out organized competition. He came home one day in 1987 and told Marianne that he was opening a kite store. It's not uncommon for a small retail store to only last a couple of years, but this was not the case for *Kites & Fun Things*, still thriving after 30 years. Probably it was because kites were much more to Jon than just a job. And it was Marianne—who, over time, became a muse, den mother, and little sister to a motley collection of people regularly gathering at

their retail store—and who was also keeping track of “the business.”

One person who found their store early on was Wayne Brunjes, a graphic artist and student at the time. He started working with Jon on kite ideas and contributing ideas about design.

“We were flying Top of the Line, Renegades, and Fire Darts,” remembers Jon. But with Wayne’s input, Jon started designing other kites, and the “Skyburner” was the result of experimenting on framing and shaping a sail. A ¾ size version, called the “Afterburner,” was later added to the line.

In sport kite competitions, Jon often flew a stack with the Afterburner as the front kite. He recalls, “One of our biggest successes was selling kites in Japan. We were in Seaside, Oregon at [the 1990 AKA] Convention with Mike Mulroy flying pairs. A Japanese team wound up buying all of our kites. They took our stuff to Japan. If we were making a thousand kites, half of them were going to Japan.” Three years after opening the store, this was no longer just a retail kite shop, but a legitimate manufacturing company with annual sales 3,000-4,000 kites!

Jon explains how his kites evolved: “The big change came when I decided to take one of the kites and start cutting it up on the trailing edge. I created an outside cut-away wing tip with a batten that held the sail. We had a fatter wing tip. Our kites, at the time, had been real noisy. How do you quiet a kite down without putting a leech line in it? If we kept the curve, we could get a ‘cut away.’ My sail makers thought

I was absolutely crazy when I did this prototype. We kept working with it, adding the batten at just the right place. It became a nice series of kites.”

The result was The Pro Dancer, Standard and SUL (Super Ultra Light), which are still used today by many kites in competition and exhibition when there is a shortage of wind. Jon personally sews the sails on these kites as they are ordered. He recently redesigned the bridle on the Pro Dancer SUL, keeping the kite at an overall weight of about five ounces. The 18-year-old template for the sail leans against the wall near his cutting table.

The industry’s first sport kites were made from ripstop nylon and fiberglass tubes. As interest in the kites grew, new designs were added. Manufacturers formed marketing partnerships and brought new sport kite designs to the market. Germany’s HQ Kites and America’s Premier Kites manufactured Sky Burner designs internationally for the mass market. At one point, one could buy a T&T (Tricks and Tracks) that was made in the USA or an “imported” version. Experienced flyers could get a hand-crafted kite for competition and pleasure. “Newbies” could buy a mass produced version so they could affordably grow into their own level of experience.

As the kite industry grew, Jon continued to experiment with different products to improve his kites. He experimented with tapered carbon tubes, fittings, and ferrules. Working with carbon tube manufacturers, he was involved in evolution of G-Force and Sky Shark tubes for kites.

Over time, Jon and Marianne have become the worldwide source for Sky Shark carbon tubes.

Diversification on the supply side has been a vital part of their continuing success, but Jon quickly points out that it was largely created out of need. Their kites demanded a consistent source for carbon tubes, so they took over marketing Sky Shark to make sure they had frames for their kites. And when the opportunity presented itself, they became

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the U.S. distributors of Icarax PC-31 ripstop polyester fabric. Touring the back room of their shop, there are parts bins filled with fittings, ferrules, tapes, specialty fabrics, vinyl end caps, line, threads, and 30 years of kitemaking history. Jon is able to do a repair on a Joel Scholz creation or an old Prism Illusion. He is like most kite builders: unable to throw away anything that might be needed sometime later.

As an “old school” kitemaker, Jon teaches how to sew a felled seam in his workshops. He has

At Kite Party with his Sky Burner “ADX.”

slowly added taped seams and spray adhesive assembly to his skills set, but knowing how to sew a classic felled seam and its variations is like knowing how to fly precision figures. The traditional skills serve one well when it is time to add artistic flair to an endeavor. He still resists adding more

Aerolite was developed as a glider. He and Wayne Brunjes have taught workshops on the Tyro glider at several kitemaking retreats, and he has built rokkakus, barn doors, and suspended wing deltas. The Trennepohls have travelled the world with their kites including: England, France, Italy, China, Malaysia, Columbia, Japan, Denmark, and many other countries.

Jon's broad experience building kites makes him a mentor to kite people of all disciplines. He is exposed to ideas and techniques that he shares willingly. His anecdotes and oral history of various kite personalities of yesterday and today shed useful light on the creative process: "I have worked with some great kitemakers: Pam Kirk, Mike Dennis, Steve Tapp, and Leong Ceewan. I am always picking up ideas from other great designers. One of my favorites is Tim Benson. What a class act."

A veteran of sport kite competition, Jon weighed in at this year's AKA Sport Kite Symposium, offering to supply kites to the winners. An offer he says the AKA had turned down several times in the past. Even though interest in sport kite competition has waned in the last 20 years, sport kite demonstrations are a common part of modern festivals. Jon often flies "demos" at festivals. He still plays an active role in many international, national, and nearby festivals. Locally, he helps to organize and participate in the Lyon Township Kite Festival, and contributes to the new Ann Arbor "GrieveWell" Kite Festival and the Detroit Kite Festival

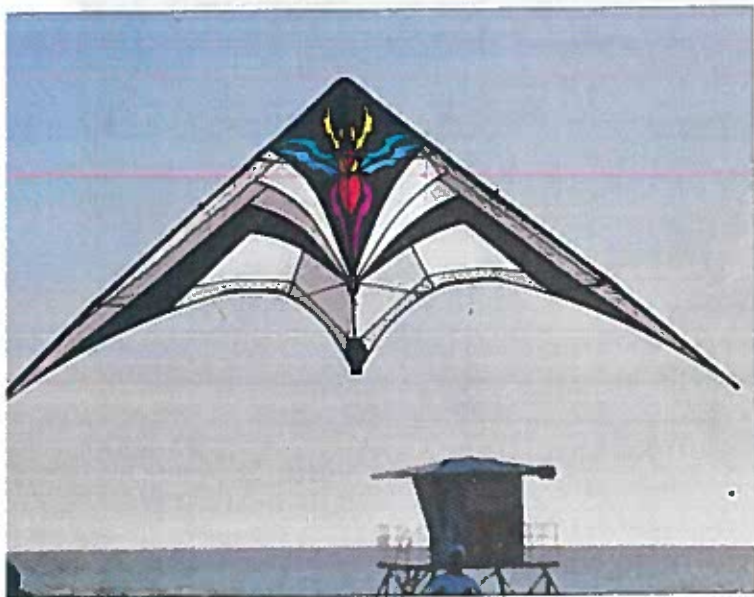
on Belle Isle. Jon loves to see people enjoying kites.

Recently, quadline kiting has experienced a resurgence of interest. In a market that has been dominated by Revolution Kites, there are now new products. There have long been designers building kites that fly on four lines—Guildworks' Synergy Decca had a loyal following for years. But marketing partnerships have changed significantly and flyers are experimenting with new kites.

A few years ago, British kiter Carl Robertshaw sat down with Jon Trennepohl to discuss common ideas about developing a completely new four-line kite. This was to become the Fulcrum. Both men brought years of design, building, and flying to that first discussion over Carl's computer drawing. They have worked on the Fulcrum with a lot of miles and water between them. The design of this new quadline kite was developed and fine-tuned on both sides of the pond.

E-mail and phone calls followed each prototype, crossing from the UK to the USA. Details changed. Over the last year, there was always a version knocking around. Jon and Marianne's work space. Production details were ironed out as both designers accepted a final version. A mass market kite sail maker had to be lined up to sew the three dimensional sail. Today's kite market also demands custom work, as many kite people request and pay for custom colors. An American kitemaker was found to meet this need.

In the summer of 2017, Carl and Jon started planning



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A custom "Widow Maker," one of seven made (above). With a helping hand from Jim Streatly, Jon presents his "Pro Dancer."

than one "accent" colored tip to a wing on his Pro Dancer SULs. Only one...you pick which side.

Over the years, Jon has built many single line kites. His version of the Geo Pointer has won fans and awards. The

for the Fulcrum as an entry at the AKA Convention and "Grand Nationals." Carl had some ideas on a "cooperative" version of the baby that he and Jon had birthed. The Cooperative project for the AKA competition was truly an exercise in collaboration. Deeply-colored translucent laminates were layered over fabric to mix the color and opacity. This kite uses backlight (sunny sky) to accent the art. It was being entered in the Kitemaker competition, and the details were important. Asymmetrical panel designs were guided through Jon's Bernina sewing machine.

Kite lovers everywhere had seen videos on YouTube of Carl flying the Fulcrum like a pro. Now the kite had to be a canvas for art. The colorful laminates Jon incorporated were not standard to the kite; this was not a production kite. Making one customer happy was not the goal. Impressing a panel of judges, most of whom also make kites, was the end game. Three different awards for the artistic version proved that the time in creating it was worth it. Jon flew a stock model (all fabric) in Masters Multi-line competition. He saved the Cooperative version for judging in the Kitemaking competition and earned a first place medal for himself and Carl.

Thirty years and four locations later, Kites and Fun Things is still a brick and mortar shop that sells kites. During one visit, I see a grandmother selecting a kite with her grandson. They talk about kites with Jon; a phone call interrupts their conversation. It is about a shipment of kite tubes and fabric going to a kitemaker on

the East Coast. The woman and boy are amazed that anyone would spend \$100 on a kite, but they are entranced by the colors of the nylon and the feel of the organza. In the end, they decide on a \$20 kite and the grandson is given a balsa glider. They get decades of knowledge with that



kite, and grandma leaves with something to think about for Christmas if this kite is a hit with the kid. As they are leaving, Gary Maynard of the Windjammers Kite Team comes in the door. He finds some Premier LED tail lights. Another woman in the store has Jon assemble a 'modern art' yard spinner and asks everyone in the store what they think, though she buys a pinwheel design instead. Stocking products for all phases of the kite industry has helped this kite store survive by serving all its customers' needs.

The recent success of the Fulcrum at the 2017 AKA Convention has fired up the kite marketing machine again. A "mom and pop" kite company followed their instincts, negotiated and compromised, engaged their experience, and continue to be a vital part of the evolution of the kiteworld. They still spread the joy of kites at festivals worldwide.

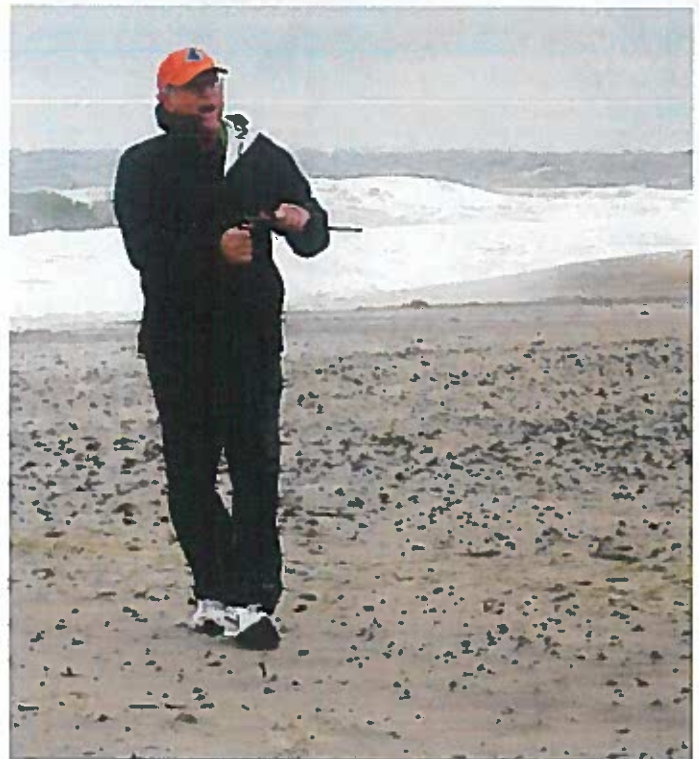


CHERRI MCDUGALL

From 1987 to today, Kites and Fun Things is a true family business.

Marianne can generally be found at the computer or with scissors and a roll of tape in her hands at the cutting table. Jon can usually be found on Wednesday afternoons, listening to music and soul flying on the field during Michigan's kite season. ▼

Taking first place in Masters Multi-line Ballet in Ocean City.



RICK AGAR