

AGGIELIFE

Page 3 • Monday, September 6, 1999

The Battalion

Catching Air

Students learn to fly at Austin Air Sports' grand opening

SUSAN OVERCASH
The Battalion

When Niki Patel, a senior petroleum engineering major, opened her eyes early on Saturday morning, she had no way of knowing the new perspective she would gain that day.

"I was really excited, and I didn't know what to expect," Patel said. "I wasn't really nervous, but I did have a hard time sleeping. I didn't go out Friday night. I think that's how you know you're excited about something, when you give up your Friday night for it."

Instead of starting her weekend with a party, Patel opted to stay home and get ready for an early Saturday morning of hang gliding. About 8 a.m., Patel made a quick trip through the small Texas town of Hearne to the runway of Hearne Municipal Airport.

Over Labor Day weekend, Austin Air Sports, a Houston-based operation offering instruction in foot launch, wench tow and aero tow hang gliding, opened a new full service facility in Hearne.

Steve Burns, Austin Air Sports' chief pilot and instructor, said that because of a lack of steep inclines in the Hearne and Bryan-College Station area, the Hearne location of Austin Air Sports concentrates on wench tow and aero tow launches, instead of foot launches.

In a foot launch, the hang glider sits on the pilot's shoulders as the pilot moves down an incline. When the glider catches wind and begins to lift off the pilot's shoulders, the pilot rotates the glider bar forward and unclashes the glider.

"We've been looking for hills around here," Burns said. "We even

considered the big hill out at Texas Motor Speedway, but that didn't work out."

Austin Air Sports offers flights in tandem (with an instructor) or solo. Tandem flights may go as high as 3,000 feet, where solo flights can be towed up to 6,000 feet.

Patel's hang gliding experience was in Austin Air Sports' motorized hang glider, an Antares Trike, with Burns.

The Trike is a weight-shifted, ultralight motorized hang glider. Instead of a tow or foot launch, the pilot and student are strapped into the Trike's small buggy, and the Trike takes off and flies independently, powered by a 65 horsepower motor.

"It looked like something out of an Inspector Gadget movie," Patel said. "I was a little nervous as we took off because it gets really steep, but it didn't last for more than a second or two."

The Trike is also capable of aero tow launch, the newest form of hang gliding, which involves towing the hang glider and pilot into the air behind an ultralight aircraft.

In an aero tow launch, the pilot and glider lay "proned-out," or horizontal, on a triangular-shaped dolly attached by a tow line to the tug plane. The glider pilot holds the glider's cross bar and a safety line as the aircraft moves down the runway. When the glider catches air and begins to lift, the glider pilot lets go of the safety line and lifts off behind the plane. When the glider catches a thermal, or rising pocket of warm air, the pilot releases the tow line and rides the thermal.

Wench tow, the third method of hang gliding, involves towing behind a truck, with the glider and pilot attached to the

SEE GLIDING ON PAGE 5.



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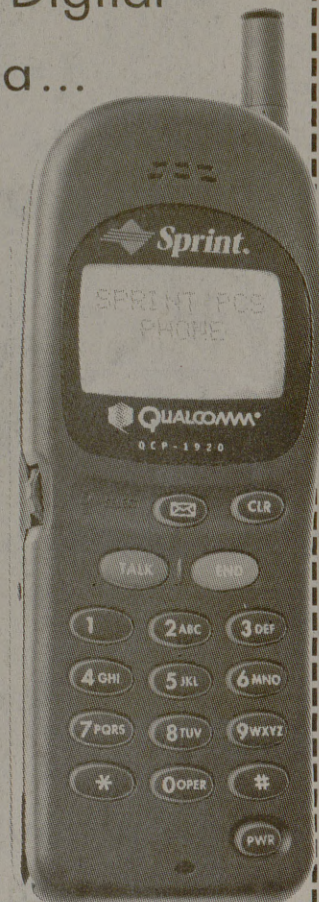
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