

OVER The Top?



To be vertical or not to be vertical?
That **SHOULD** be the question

Most recreational 4-way teams should ask themselves the question of whether to perform blocks vertically or not. Yet this seems to be one that many don't even consider when they first start to train together. In my observations as a coach I have found that very few teams doing less than around a 13 average are actually capable of doing most blocks vertically with any kind of real consistency. They often take this inconsistency into various meets (including Nationals) and generally either perform the block really slowly due to being over-cautious, or over-amp it completely, even having a funnel. Doing a block confidently on level is usually much more effective and faster overall than doing it vertically with what could be a 50-75% success rate at most. Hoping for the best with potentially unreliable vertical blocks during a meet won't help any team's confidence or level of calm!

Vertical frenzy

The FS population today seems to have gone into a sort of 'vertical frenzy', with many teams getting very frustrated and even hurting team members while trying to achieve vertical status. One of the big mistakes that can be made by less trained teams is to watch teams like *Airspeed*, *Sinapsi PD* or *Deland Fire* and decide to copy **everything**

that they do, from key speed and engineering to vertical transitions, hoping this will produce a great average. This rarely works; teams need to utilise methods appropriate to their own level. Their average will naturally increase through building a solid base of skills. In skydiving, as in any sport, it makes sense to walk before you run; trying to copy the top teams too soon can actually hinder performance.

Flat may be where it's at

The first 4-way team to achieve a 21 average (*Arizona Airspeed* in the mid-90s) did not do most of their blocks vertically at the time, so it stands to reason that teams don't **need** to do all their blocks vertical to achieve a good average. However, the option of training a block 2-dimensionally seems to be something that many teams have either never heard of, or have forgotten completely.

Some teams are better off not doing verticals at all as they will achieve a higher and more consistent average through keeping their blocks 'flat'. The A class blocks 2, 4, 6, 19 and 21 can be done quite well with no need for any verticals; these should only be attempted if individual and team skills allow it. Most of the AA class blocks such as 11, 18, 20 and 22, as well as blocks 3, 5, 10 and 17 (AAA) can also

Block 17: Danish Tee - Murphy

Airspeed by Wendy Smith



This is how Airspeed do it. They average around 800 training jumps and 50 hours tunnel time a year

South Parc by Michael McCowan



This is how easy it is to overdo the move if your team does not have the training time to achieve consistency

Block 6: Stardian - Stardian

Perris Airkix by Andy Wright



Vertical transitions for block 6 are a good choice if you have the skills and tunnel time to ensure consistency

Army 4 by Michael McCowan



Teams should be wary of getting too much separation between pieces

Block 5: Opal - Opal

Airspeed by Michael McCowan



For trained teams, the less height difference in the vertical the better

Block 11: Photon - Photon

Bodyflight Storm by John Baggaley



Starting off flat for less trained teams ensures a good close

be done quite quickly and with a high degree of consistency without any vertical at all. As the saying goes: "Consistency WINS!" For the majority of teams, consistency and confidence will be of more benefit to their performance than being able to pull off a sketchy vertical transition.

This is not to say that **all** teams should do **all** blocks on the flat and never go vertical until achieving a 21 average. But there is a time and a place for verticals and getting into vertical frenzy too soon could actually stall out a team's progression and lead to many other issues. Even if a team can perform the actual vertical transitions well, often the close can be unpredictable and the team wastes valuable time handling a lock-down, or takes the resulting sense of panic or frustration into the next random or block. The saved time in running some blocks vertically is not always worth it.

To vertical or not to vertical?

So, how could a team work out if verticals should or shouldn't feature in their continuity plan?

You first need to ascertain whether the team members have the individual skills to make verticals even an option. This can be tested in a tunnel simply by starting off doing vertical transitions with two members.

If an individual cannot perform a good vertical in a tunnel then that person probably will not do very well in freefall wearing a rig. This skill can be built on later as a 4-way by attempting some of the vertical-friendly blocks such as 5, 6 and 21.

For teams deciding to take the vertical route for the first time, coaching on technique is essential. I strongly advise getting hands-on coaching, with one or even two coaches flying with you as piece partners, until the individuals gain confidence in verticals. This approach can fast-forward a person's, and hence the team's, path to vertical success.

Teams who decide to avoid many of the possible vertical transitions entirely may well find they end up with a better average come the meet, even against teams who are performing verticals. Confidence in predictable, solid blocks makes a big difference to most teams' performance under pressure, where it really counts. Running most of the blocks flat was good enough for Airspeed's 21 average not so long ago – don't let pride get into the way of putting up really good scores!

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