



Buenos Aires Herald



El diario argentino escrito en inglés

Founded 1876
117th Year — 6103 (new series)

BUENOS AIRES, MONDAY, AUGUST 9, 1993

20 Páginas - Including Sports supplement
Precio: \$ 0,80 - Recargo envío interior del país \$ 0,20
Precio: Uruguay \$U 6,50

Local News

Monday, August 9, 1993

Bungy jumping docks at port today

by Diego Zorrilla
IF TODAY, at about 1.30pm you happen to be around Puerto Madero and you see somebody jumping from a helicopter, his feet tied to a cord, don't think you are witnessing an original suicide attempt. It ain't a commando landing on Buenos Aires either. It will just be AJ Hackett performing another of his bungy jumps, an exciting challenge but an example of planning, research, accuracy and safety as well.

What is bungy jumping exactly? Nobody can provide a better answer than AJ Hackett, a 35-year old New

Zealander, who experimented and perfected the modern bungy jumping, and president of Bungy International Limited, operating bungy sites in his homeland as well as in Australia, France, Britain and the United States.

AJ Hackett is currently in Buenos Aires to study the potential of Puerto Madero as a permanent bungy jumping site in Argentina.

"Bungy has been sort of going for hundreds of years, but in a different way to what we do it now" says AJ Hackett. "In the New Hebrides and in Vanuatu (in

the Pacific) they traditionally practiced jumping from towers with vines tied around each end. It was about ten years ago that some English guys saw this and they decided to try it with elastic. They used Army shock cords and used them to jump."

How did AJ Hackett, who had always liked risky activities such as speed skiing or mountain climbing, get involved with bungy? "A friend of mine came to New Zealand about eight years ago and I helped them to sort out how to jump with rubber. We invented the first bungy cords to specialize just for bungy jumping. We analyzed various different rubber, and found the latex that we use today. What we basically decided was: if it was predictable and consistent, we could make it safe."

In order to make bungy jumping available to the public, it was necessary to be sure it was safe. "Very quickly we understood that it was consistent and exact," says AJ. "Provided you knew the height and weight of the person, you could calculate the size of the bungy and the distance the person was going to travel. That's where it really began globally."

However, AJ decided to experiment it himself before offering this breathtaking jump to the public. "I embarked in a three-year

period of experimentation around the globe. I worked a lot in France, in various temperature ranges, from different heights and structures until we were very comfortable and sure. Then we introduced it to the public, about five years ago."

The "safety first" policy has proved a great success as well. Over 300,000 jumps have been performed from Bungy International Limited sites with NO accidents registered. Even paraplegic and quadriplegic people have bungy-jumped. AJ and partner Henry van Asch have also worked hard to develop a code of practice, which is certified by a Standards Association.

The success of bungy jumping was as phenomenal as the experience of jumping. After initial success in Australia and New Zealand, new sites opened, and AJ wants Argentina to be one of the few countries with a Bungy Centre. "Together with Tom Manning — of Manning Group Limited — we've been searching for suitable sites. We considered Bariloche, but the most interesting was definitely Puerto Madero. We presented a proposal to the port authorities, and if everything is good we'll be open in December this year."

Today's jump will allow the port authorities and a



• AJ Hackett in Puerto Madero, studying the silo building which may be the location of the first permanent bungy jumping site in Argentina. (Herald photo by Pilar Bustelo)

selected group from the press to understand how bungy works, and feel a bit more comfortable about it."

"It will be a great feeling" says AJ about today's jump. He currently holds the record height jump, a 390-metre leap from a helicopter (helibungy). He has also performed several spectacular jumps, such as one from the Eiffel Tower, and has also starred in many ads. And he is considering a project to jump from much higher.

Why do people choose this adrenalin-free-flowing experience? "I believe it's an interesting new challenge for people. When most people look at it they just say, 'Oh no, it's crazy, it's stupid.' But once they understand what's happening they normally change their minds. The result is amazing to people's self-esteem. Doing an extreme thing for which you need a sound mind and

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Computers for kids



• The 101st anniversary of the founding of the Patronato de la Infancia was recently celebrated with the opening of a new computer room for the children housed there.

say 'I can do it!'"

AJ Hackett is confident bungy will also be a success among people in Argentina. "The site is an interesting one for us — it will be our first city site. The location is perfect (the site would be atop one of the silos in the old port area — see photo)." And at the same time, "there will be a lovely marriage between our project and other projects to develop the area." There will be a big structure on top of the silo building (45 metres high) from where people will jump above a pool. The jumper will be facing the city.

AJ Hackett lives in Normandy, where he relaxes doing a lot of gardening, with his wife Caroline and three-year old son Dean. Do they jump as well? "Caroline jumps, but my son is a bit young yet. He'll surely jump, but only when he wants to. People are never pushed, they must push themselves."