

Skydive from Edge of Space a Success for Baumgartner

ROSWELL, N.M. (AP) — Felix Baumgartner stood alone at the edge of space, poised in the open doorway of a capsule suspended above Earth and wondering if he would make it back alive. Twenty four miles below him, millions of people were right there with him, watching on the Internet and marveling at the wonder of the moment.

A second later, he stepped off the capsule and barreled toward the New Mexico desert as a tiny white speck against a darkly-tinted sky. Millions watched him breathlessly as he shattered the sound barrier and then landed safely about nine minutes later, becoming the world's first supersonic skydiver.

"When I was standing there on top of the world, you become so humble, you do not think about breaking records anymore, you do not think about gaining scientific data," Baumgartner said after the jump. "The only thing you want is to come back alive."

The tightly-orchestrated jump meant primarily to entertain because much more than that in the dizzying, breathtaking moment — a collectively shared cross between Neil Armstrong's moon landing and Evel Knievel's famed motorcycle jumps on ABC's "Wide World of Sports."

It was part scientific wonder, part daredevil reality show, with the live-streamed event instantly capturing the world's attention on a sleepy Sunday at the same time seven NFL football games were being played. It proved, once again, the power of the Internet in a world where news travels as fast as Twitter.

The event happened without a network broadcast in the United States, though organizers said more than 40 television stations in 50 countries — including cable's Discovery Channel in the U.S. — carried the live feed. Instead, millions flocked online, drawing more than 8 million simultaneous views to a YouTube live stream at its peak,

YouTube officials said.

More than 130 digital outlets carried the live feed, organizers said.

It was a last hurrah for what some have billed as a dying Space Age, as NASA's shuttle program ends and the ways humans explore space is dramatically changing. As the jump unfolded, the space shuttle Endeavor crept toward a Los Angeles museum, where it will become nothing more than an exhibit.

Baumgartner, a 43-year-old Austrian, hit Mach 1.24, or 833.9 mph, according to preliminary data, and became the first person to reach supersonic speed

without traveling in a jet or a spacecraft. The capsule he jumped from had reached an altitude of 128,100 feet above Earth, carried by a 55-story ultra-thin helium balloon.

Landing on his feet in the desert, the man known as "Fearless Felix" lifted his arms in victory to the cheers of jubilant friends and spectators who closely followed at a command center. Among them was his mother, Eva Baumgartner, who was overcome with emotion, crying.

"Sometimes we have to get really high to see how small we are," an exuberant Baumgartner told reporters outside mission control after the jump.

About half of Baumgartner's nine-minute descent was a free fall of 119,846 feet, according to Brian Utley, a jump observer from the FAL, an international group that works to determine and maintain the integrity of aviation records.

Baumgartner said traveling faster than sound is "hard to describe because you don't feel it." The pressurized suit prevented him from feeling the rushing air or even the loud noise he made when breaking the sound barrier.

the massive balloon, as it rose gracefully above the New Mexico desert. Baumgartner could be seen on video, calmly checking instruments inside the capsule.

The dive was more than just

a stunt. NASA is eager to improve its blueprints for future spacesuits.

Baumgartner's team included Joe Kittinger, who first tried to break the sound barrier from 19.5 miles up in 1960, reaching speeds of 614 mph. With Kittinger inside mission control, the two men could be heard going over technical details during the ascension.

"Our guardian angel will take care of you," Kittinger radioed to Baumgartner around the 100,000-foot mark.

After Baumgartner landed, his sponsor, Red Bull, posted a picture to Facebook of him kneeling on the ground. It generated nearly 216,000 likes, 10,000 comments and more than 29,000 shares in less than 40 minutes.

On Twitter, half the worldwide trending topics had something to do with the jump, pushing past seven NFL football games. Among them was this tweet from NASA: "Congratulations to Felix Baumgartner and Red Bull Stratos on record-breaking leap from the edge of space!"

This attempt marked the end of a long road for Baumgartner, a record-setting high-altitude jumper.

He already made two preparation jumps in the area, one from 15 miles high and another from 18 miles high. He has said that this was his final jump.

Red Bull has never said how much the long-running, complex project cost.

Although he broke the sound barrier, the highest manned-balloon flight record and became the man to jump from the highest altitude, he failed to break Kittinger's 5 minute and 35 second longest free fall record. Baumgartner's was timed at 4 minutes and 20 seconds in free fall.

He said he opened his parachute at 5,000 feet because that was the plan.

"I was putting everything out there, and hope for the best and if we left one record for Joe — hey it's fine," he said when asked if he intentionally left the record to Kittinger to hold. "We needed Joe Kittinger to help us break his own record, and that tells the story of how difficult it was and how smart they were in the 60's. He is 84 years old, and he is still so bright and intelligent and enthusiastic."

Baumgartner has said he plans to settle down with his girlfriend and fly helicopters on mountain rescue and firefighting missions in the U.S. and Austria.

Before that, though, he said, "I'll go back to LA to chill out for a few days."



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