



photos by KEVIN POWELL

Lori Lynn Ross has to be careful doing her routine like hanging upside down during a roll. One wrong step and she could break through the fabric covering the wing of Walt Pierce's biplane.

Walking the wings of Ol' Smokey

Stuntwoman has firm grip on aerial life

By Sue Mason
staff writer

You could say Lori Lynn Ross is a drag, not a big drag, but a drag nonetheless. Just ask Walt Pierce. He drags her around on and off.

It's not that she doesn't like fun. Hey, this woman has done fire dives. We're not talking going through a fiery hoop, but rather setting herself on fire and diving into a pool 30 feet below.

At 4 feet 11½ inches tall and 98 pounds — "I'm little but I'm strong," — she's a bit of a drag on the wing of Pierce's 1940 Stearman biplane, "Ol' Smokey." Ross, when not working as a stuntwoman in Hollywood, occasionally does the air show circuit with Pierce as his wingwalker.

"I really have a fun time because I enjoy performing," said Ross, a former Southfield resident. "I really have good time out there and when I get off and see that the people have had a good time, it makes it all the better."

Not quite what you'd expect from a woman who at one time studied to be an elementary school teacher and was a high school cheerleader and member of the girls' softball and basketball teams at Southfield High School.

But she admits she's always been adventurous. She began skiing and riding motorcycles at the age of five and on her way to a career in Hollywood picked up rock-climbing, SCUBA diving and high diving.

The 25-year-old Ross was working at a store, selling climbing equipment, when a stuntman mentioned that with her experiences she should consider stunt work. About two months later, while studying for final exams at the beach, she met another stuntman who said the same thing.

SHE DECIDED to heed their advice and, after graduating from California State University at Northridge, she signed on with the U.S. Professional High Diving Team and marketed herself as a stuntwoman by doing the fire dives, not to mention clown dives, ladder diving and, shades of Acapulco, cliff diving.

Ross, who will team up with Pierce for AirMichigan '91 at Willow Run Airport in Ypsilanti this weekend, has been a stuntwoman for about nine years.

A member of the United Stuntwomen's Association, her stunt work has included such feature films as "Terminator II," "Karate Kid II," "Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure" and "Edward Scissorhands" to name a few. She also has done stunts for such TV shows as "Rescue 911," "Falcon Crest," "Life Goes On" and "The Outsiders."

"I love my work," said Ross. "I started out doing dance and sports as a kid and never thought of being a stuntwoman or dreamed of being a wingwalker."

ROSS HAS been wingwalking for about six years, having learned the art from legendary wing walker



Stuntwoman Lori Lynn Ross does a one-legged stand on the wing of Ol' Smokey as part of her wingwalking performance.

Johnny Kazian. She was originally recruited Jim Franklin who wanted a female wingwalker.

"He figured with my diving experience, I could handle the acrobatics and with my rock-climbing experience, I could climb around the plane," she said.

Wingwalking is no easy task. The plane travels at between 80 and 180 miles per hour, so Ross has to be careful how and when she moves around the plane, especially since she wears a safety strap for only about 20 percent of her 20-minute routine. She wears no such strap when walking around on the wing of the plane, but dons it for acrobatic fly-bys.

"It takes a lot of strength to hang on," Ross said. "What people don't realize is that when I move from the upper to the lower wing behind the propeller, I'm in the most vulnerable position. Walt has to power back the plane so he doesn't blow me off the wing."

Ross' routine is very choreographed, very precise. It is learned on the ground before it's done in the air. There are no verbal commands between Pierce and Ross. Communication is by hand signals and eye contact.

Her hardest routine is doing a headstand on the upper wing. She has to flip her body upside down and hang on to a post. With the speed of the plane, she is "literally plastered to the post to where I can't move."

OTHER ROUTINES include hanging on to the plane and shaking hands with the pilot, doing backflips and hanging off the back part of a post on the upper wing.

Her favorite maneuver is doing a cartwheel in the air.

"I walk out to the end of the struts and get to see the crowd as we fly by," she said.

And when it comes to the acrobatics, she is for a "wild ride."

"My body is used to spinning and twisting in the air," she said. "With the loops and rolls, I get to see

the earth and the crowd waving at me. It's a wild and exciting time."

But the hardest part is the five-minute or so wait on the ground before the plane takes to the air. She has a one-inch bar that she stands on the balls of her toes. One step the wrong way and she could end up putting a foot through the wing's fabric skin.

Because of her stunt work, Ross has limited her wingwalking to just three air shows this year. She picked AirMichigan '91 because "Detroit is special for me."

"I HAD SO many wonderful experiences growing up in Michigan," she said. "It's a good time to get back and reminisce, a really fun time."

Married, Ross describes her husband Dan, who builds custom homes in mainly Beverly Hills and Malibu, as "pretty adventures." He shares her interest in rock- and ice-climbing, windsurfing and skiing.

But as exciting as her life is, safety is foremost in Ross' mind. She is as picky about who she performs with as she is about what stunts she will do. She doesn't take jobs she doesn't think she can do. As a result her worst injuries have been a few cuts and bruises.

She likes flying with Pierce. He is "a great guy... he's at the top of the list," she said.

"Safety is very important to me," she added. "I try to keep my safety record at 100 percent. So far my training has paid off... and I've been a bit lucky, too."

Ross' career continues to expand — she plays the part of the mermaid in the soon-to-be-released film "Rocketeer" — and she jokingly blames her parents for it. It's their fault for letting her water ski and ride a motorcycle at the age of five, she said.

But she adds: "I'm glad I had the opportunity to try out different sports. I think it makes me a better stuntwoman."

SEEING THE SHOW

WHAT: AirMichigan '91, the Wayne County Air Show
WHEN: Saturday and Sunday June 8-9. Gates open at 9 a.m.; feature show starts at 1 p.m.
WHERE: Willow Run Airport, I-94 at Belleville Road (Exit 190)

WHO: Feature acts include U. S. Navy Blue Angels; Holiday Inn Aerobatic Team; Lori Lynn Ross, wingwalking; Walt Pierce, Ol' Smokey solo aerobatics; Patty Wagstaff, Extra 320; First Lady of Aerobatics; Otto, the talking helicopter; Miller Sky Diving Team; and military flying demonstration, fly-by and display aircraft. An Air Force F-117A Stealth fighter will also be displayed.

The World War II B-24 will return to Willow Run Airport as part of its 50th anniversary celebration, and the Yankee Air Force will have its collection of vintage World War II aircraft on display.

There also will be a fly-by and displays by the Michigan Helicopter Association, which along with the Radio Control Club of Michigan will demonstrate radio-controlled aircraft. There also will be demonstrations of hang gliding by the TNT Hang Gliding Club.

TICKETS: Adult \$8 in advance and \$11 the day of the show; children (5-11) \$5 in advance and \$8 the day of the show. Reserved box seat \$15 (specify day). Advanced tickets available through the air show office by calling 482-6888. Tickets also available through all Ticketmaster outlets for the advance price plus a service charge. There also is a \$3 charge for parking.

LOOKING AT LORI

Name: Lori Lynn Ross **Age:** 25 **Height:** 4 ft. 11 1/2"
Weight: 98 lbs. **Home:** Encino, Calif. **Marital Status:** Married **Career:** Stuntwoman/actress
Skills: Mountaineering - rock, ice and building climbing and rappelling

U. S. High Diving Team - Fire diving, clown diving, ladder diving, cliff diving (80 feet) and competitive dives on 3, 4- and 10-meter boards and platforms. Air shows: Airplane wing-walking and sky diving stunts; plane and motorcycle freewall crashes; plane, motorcycle, car and boat transfers, and helicopter pick-ups.

Also proficient in windsurfing, whitewater rafting, water skiing, jet skiing, SCUBA diving, precision diving, snowmobiling, ice, roller and blade skating, racquetball, volleyball and baseball.

