



PHOTOS BY DENNIS WALL/ORLANDO SENTINEL

Mark Hager soars through the air over fire and several parked cars Wednesday at Kissimmee Gateway Airport. The 35-year-old Belle Isle resident is a stunt-car driver who spends his time blowing up cars and jumping or crashing them.

STUNT DRIVER IS FLYING HIGH

Mark Hager of Belle Isle makes a living doing things most people wouldn't dream of.

By DANIELLE DE PARI
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

KISSIMMEE — For most people, a car wreck is bad news. For Mark Hager, it's how he makes his living. And he's having a blast.

The 35-year-old Belle Isle resident is a stunt-car driver, who spends his time blowing cars up and jumping or crashing them. He's made a career out of doing things most people wouldn't even dream of.

Hager spent three days last week filming stunts at Kissimmee Gateway Airport. The footage will be edited for inclusion in an upcoming DVD about car stunts, *Brotherhood of Destruction*.

He started doing stunts professionally when he was 18, working on Italian television shows that were filmed in Miami. But he said his interest in stunts



Stunt-car driver Mark Hager prepares to perform several car jumps Wednesday on a closed runway at Kissimmee Gateway Airport.

began long before, doing BMX tricks.

"I knew I wanted to be a stunt guy when I was a kid," Hager said Thursday before an afternoon of filming dangerous stunts. "But it has been for different reasons at different points in life. Now, I like it because it is a nice career and I get to travel around."

But he said he originally became a stunt driver for the adventure.

"I am a terrible spectator. I am the type of person who wants to do stuff, not watch something done," he said.

After three years in the stunt business, he saw a car stunt performed on television and spent a year looking for the driver. He became a protégé of that driver, Brian Carson, and learned the finer points of stunt driving.

PLEASE SEE DRIVER, K11

Belle Isle stunt driver's career flying high

DRIVER FROM K1

But don't be fooled into thinking the work isn't intimidating.

"When I first car-jumped, I almost backed out," he said. "I remember sitting in this car thinking 'There is no way I can do this.'"

But he said he had talked about it so much, he hypnotized himself into pressing the gas pedal and getting it done.

It's not that the nervousness goes away either. Hager said the penalty for failure is severe, and his injury list is extensive. He has suffered a bruised heart, broken back and fractured neck, among other injuries.

His wife, Vicki Brian Hager, said she has learned to deal with the nervousness that comes with every jump or crash.

"With his stunts, I probably break praying records," she said.

Brian Hager works with her husband, doing the marketing for his company, Dangerous Moments Inc. The two also have an apparel company, Concussions. They met when she marketed a stunt for his company.

But not everyone in his family deals with the anxiety of his trade so easily. Hager said his father has refused to watch his stunts after a close friend was killed in a stunt-driving accident in 1997.

Hager spent this summer touring and has performed in Chicago and Michigan among other places. He performs at races and other events.

In 1995, he said he set a world record by jumping a school bus 213 feet.

He spent last year helping



DENNIS WALL/ORLANDO SENTINEL

Stunt driver Mark Hager lands on a car and flips over Wednesday at Kissimmee Gateway Airport. The stunt was being filmed for use in 'Brotherhood of Destruction,' an upcoming DVD about car stunts.

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— MARK HAGER

to train drivers in the MGM "Lights, Motors, Action!" show.

Hager has also gone Hollywood. He jumped the car known as the General Lee in the recent summer film *Dukes of Hazzard*, among dozens of movie and TV credits.

Currently, Hager is making plans for a career shift. He plans to open a stunt-driving school somewhere in the area, possibly at Kissimmee Gateway Airport. He plans to launch it with French driver Rom Sunny, who came to Central Florida to help design Hager's stunts.

The school will teach stunt-driving techniques to theme-park employees and others and also will host corporate events to teach evasive driving.

Hager said he realizes he can't sustain the driving part of his career forever.

"I'm 35, but I have the body of a 135-year-old," he said. "You can walk away or be carried away."

Sunny said he and Hager speak the same language.

"He's not a crazy stunt guy," he said. "This business isn't for crazy guys at all."

Others may disagree. Kissimmee Golf Club patrons and an airport employee lined up Thursday to watch Hager perform his first stunt of the day, the "pyramid."

Hager proceeded to speed up a ramp, jump three cars and land his car on its roof on top of 20 other cars that exploded into flames. He got out unscathed.

But that's all in a day's work.

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