

# He won a trip to space. Then he gave it away to a friend

January 27 2022, by Marcia Dunn

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This photo provided by Kyle Hippchen shows him, right, with Chris Sembroski near launch complex 39A in Cape Canaveral, Fla., on April 21, 2021. Hippchen says Sembroski is the one person "who lives and breathes" space stuff like he does. Credit: Courtesy Kyle Hippchen via AP

He told his family and a few friends. He dropped hints to a couple of

colleagues. So hardly anyone knew that the airline pilot could have—should have—been on board when SpaceX launched its first tourists into orbit last year.

Meet Kyle Hippchen, the real winner of a first-of-its-kind sweepstakes, who gave his seat to his college roommate.

Though Hippchen's secret is finally out, that doesn't make it any easier knowing he missed his chance to orbit Earth because he exceeded the weight limit. He still hasn't watched the Netflix series on the three-day flight purchased by a tech entrepreneur for himself and three guests last September.

"It hurts too much," he said. "I'm insanely disappointed. But it is what it is."

Hippchen, 43, a Florida-based captain for Delta's regional carrier Endeavor Air, recently shared his story with The Associated Press during his first visit to NASA's Kennedy Space Center since his lost rocket ride.

He opened up about his out-of-the-blue, dream-come-true windfall, the letdown when he realized he topped SpaceX's weight restrictions of 250 pounds (113 kilograms) and his offer to the one person he knew would treasure the flight as much as himself. Four months later, he figures probably fewer than 50 people know he was the actual winner.



Kyle Hippchen, a Florida-based airline captain, poses for a photo in front of a SpaceX Dragon capsule at the Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex in Cape Canaveral, Fla., Friday, Jan. 21, 2022. Hippchen, the real winner of a first-of-its-kind sweepstakes, gave his seat on a SpaceX flight to his college roommate. Though his secret is finally out, that doesn't make it any easier knowing he missed his chance to orbit Earth because he exceeded the weight limit. Credit: AP Photo/John Raoux

"It was their show, and I didn't want to be distracting too much from what they were doing," said Hippchen, who watched the launch from a VIP balcony.

His seat went to Chris Sembroski, 42, a data engineer in Everett, Washington. The pair roomed together starting in the late 1990s while

attending Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University. They'd pile into cars with other student space geeks and make the hourlong drive south for NASA's shuttles launches. They also belonged to a space advocacy group, going to Washington to push commercial space travel.

Despite living on opposite coasts, Hippchen and Sembroski continued to swap space news and champion the cause. Neither could resist when Shift4 Payments founder and CEO Jared Isaacman raffled off a seat on the flight he purchased from SpaceX's Elon Musk. The beneficiary was St. Jude Children's Research Hospital.

Hippchen snapped up \$600 worth of entries. Sembroski, about to start a new job at Lockheed Martin, shelled out \$50. With 72,000 entries in the random drawing last February, neither figured he'd win and didn't bother telling the other.



This selfie photo provided by Chris Sembroski shows him, right, with Kyle Hippchen on April 21, 2021. Hippchen says Sembroski is the one person "who lives and breathes" space stuff like he does. Credit: Chris Sembroski via AP

By early March, Hippchen started receiving vague emails seeking details about himself. That's when he read the contest's small print: The winner had to be under 6-foot-6 and 250 pounds (2 meters and 113 kilograms).

Hippchen was 5-foot-10 and 330 pounds (1.8 meters and 150 kilograms).

He told organizers he was pulling out, figuring he was only one of many finalists. In the flurry of emails and calls that followed, Hippchen was stunned to learn he'd won.

With a September launch planned, the timeline was tight. Still new at flying people, SpaceX needed to start measuring its first private passengers for their custom-fitted flight suits and capsule seats. As an aerospace engineer and pilot, Hippchen knew the weight limit was a safety issue involving the seats, and could not be exceeded.

"I was trying to figure how I could drop 80 pounds in six months, which, I mean, it's possible, but it's not the most healthy thing in the world to do," Hippchen said.



Kyle Hippchen, a Florida-based airline captain who was the winner of a SpaceX sweepstakes, poses for a photo at the Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex in Cape Canaveral, Fla., Friday, Jan. 21, 2022. Hippchen and Chris Sembroski roomed together in the late 1990s while attending Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University. They'd pile into cars with other student space geeks and make the hourlong drive south for NASA's shuttles launches. They also belonged to a space advocacy group, marching to Washington to push commercial space travel. Credit: AP Photo/John Raoux

Isaacman, the spaceflight's sponsor, allowed Hippchen to pick a stand-in.

"Kyle's willingness to gift his seat to Chris was an incredible act of generosity," he said in an email this week.

Isaacman introduced his passengers at the end of March: a St. Jude physician assistant who beat cancer there as a child; a community college educator who was Shift4 Payments' winning business client; and Sembroski.

Hippchen joined them in April to watch SpaceX launch astronauts to the International Space Station for NASA, the company's last crew flight before their own.

In gratitude, Sembroski offered to take personal items into space for Hippchen. He gathered his high school and college rings, airline captain epaulets, a great-uncle's World War I Purple Heart and odds and ends from his best friends from high school, warning, "Don't ask any details."



In this photo made available by SpaceX, from left, Chris Sembroski, Sian Proctor, Jared Isaacman and Hayley Arceneaux sit in the Dragon capsule at Cape Canaveral in Florida on Sunday, Sept. 12, 2021, during a dress rehearsal for the upcoming launch. Sembroski offered to take personal items into space for the original winner, Kyle Hippchen. Hippchen gathered his high school and college rings, airline captain epaulettes, a great-uncle's Purple Heart, and odds and ends from his best friends from high school, warning, "Don't ask any details." Credit: SpaceX via AP



Kyle Hippchen, a Florida-based airline captain, poses for a photo at the Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex in Cape Canaveral, Fla., Friday, Jan. 21, 2022. Hippchen, the real winner of a first-of-its-kind sweepstakes, gave his seat on a SpaceX flight to his college roommate. Though his secret is finally out, that doesn't make it any easier knowing he missed his chance to orbit Earth because he exceeded the weight limit. Credit: AP Photo/John Raoux



By launch day on Sept. 15, word had gotten around. As friends and families gathered for the liftoff, Hippchen said the conversation went like this: "My name's Kyle. Are you The Kyle? Yeah, I'm The Kyle."

Before climbing into SpaceX's Dragon capsule, Sembroski followed tradition and used the phone atop the launch tower to make his one allotted call. He called Hippchen and thanked him one more time.

"I'm forever grateful," Sembroski said.

And while Hippchen didn't get to see Earth from orbit, he did get to experience about 10 minutes of weightlessness. During Sembroski's flight, he joined friends and family of the crew on a special zero-gravity plane.

"It was a blast."

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