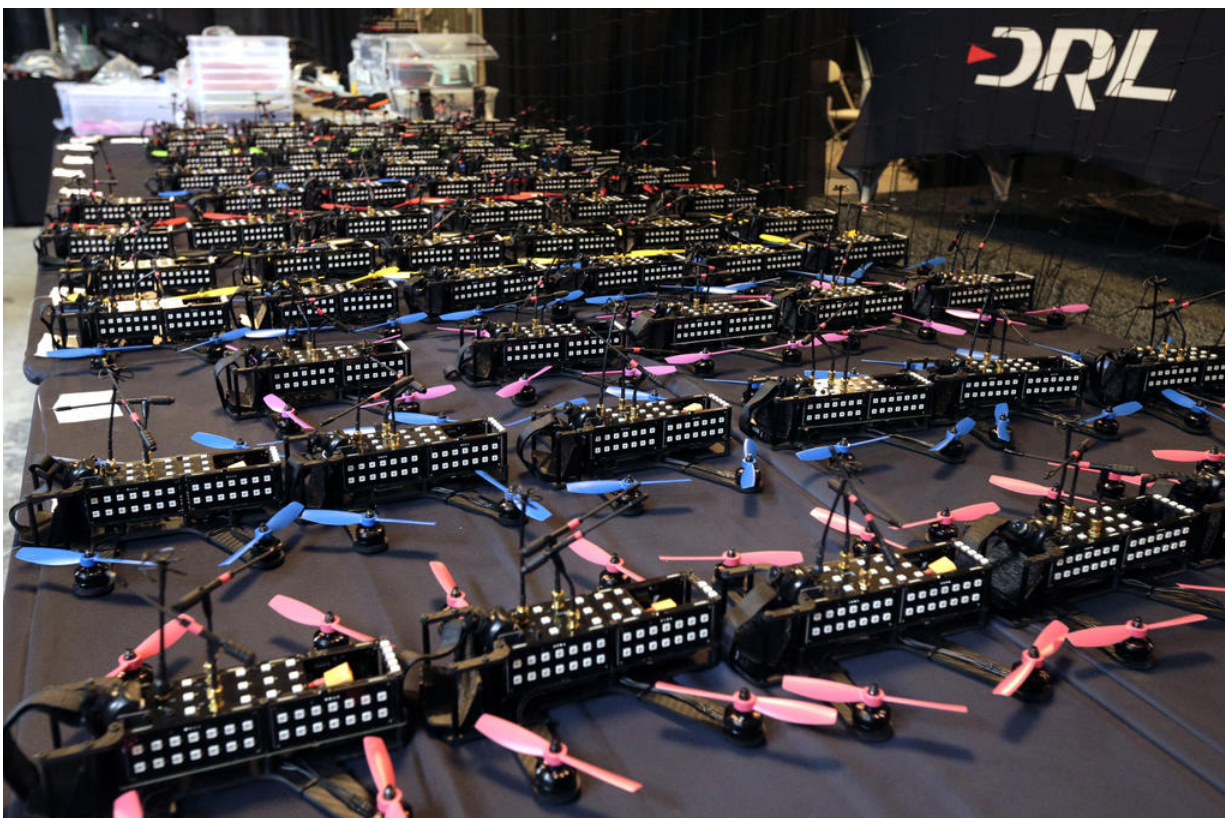


Meet the next sport of the modern age: Drone racing

May 4 2016, by By Ryan Nakashima



This Friday, March 18, 2016, photo shows drones readied prior to races held by the Drone Racing League at a vacant mall in Hawthorne, Calif. In drone racing, a crash means bits of plastic go flying, a replacement is grabbed, and no harm done. For now, bragging rights are the main stakes. Drone racing leagues would love to follow sports like poker into the mainstream with big TV audiences and sponsorships. But getting sponsors and fans is also a race against time. (AP Photo/Nick Ut)

Decked out in high-tech goggles, pilot Steve Zoumas dives low and sees the final gate zooming toward him: a 20-foot-tall metal-framed box ringed with neon. Boom! His sight goes black. The crowd lets out a collective "Whoa!" as pieces of his aircraft, which has just smashed into a concrete barrier, go flying.

Zoumas is just fine, though; it's his drone that's toast. The pilot takes off his goggles and crosses to the pilots' lounge for the replay. Once again his quadcopter drone, a buzzing machine roughly the size of a loaf of bread, zooms daringly around obstacles and through hairpin turns; once again, it meets its demise.

"I was pushing it that lap," says Zoumas, a 31-year-old construction company owner. "I just wanted to put on a show for the crowd."

Welcome to drone racing, a would-be sport in which men, and a few women, fly remote-controlled drones against competitors at up to 80 miles per hour along looping courses with hairpin curves and drops. Many races take place in open fields, but here, racers and spectators have gathered in an abandoned, rubble-strewn mall set up with course-marking gates across two floors.

Fans sit on bleachers behind protective mesh, passing around antenna-equipped goggles to see the pilot's view. Big-screen TVs show off unique camera angles while glowing copters whizz by, emitting the high-pitched hum of weed whackers on steroids.



This March 20, 2016 photo provided by the Drone Racing League shows drones taking off from their launch pad for a race at a vacant mall in Hawthorne, Calif. Drone racing leagues would love to follow sports like poker into the mainstream with big TV audiences and sponsorships. But getting sponsors and fans is also a race against time. (Michael Brian/Drone Racing League via AP)

Racing is a labor of love for many pilots. Many are born tinkerers, and spend hours customizing their drones with new parts or building them from scratch. Some say they've spent more than \$10,000 on frames, motors, batteries, propellers and camera mounts.

Ken Loo, a 31-year-old pilot known as "Flying Bear," says he and his wife even put off having kids so he can spend more time racing. He says

he'd give up his high-paying Silicon Valley job in a heartbeat if he could figure out how to fly drones for a living.

Of course, that's the sticking point. Drone racing is still something of a guerrilla sport, even though ESPN has agreed to air a drone special on its ESPN3 channel this fall. Money is tight, and most pilots have to keep their day jobs. While high-profile races such as the World Drone Prix, held in Dubai last March, pay out as much as \$250,000 to the winning pilot, such affluence feels very distant here in the shell of the Hawthorne Plaza mall.



In this March 19, 2016, photo, Ken "Flying Bear" Loo watches a drone race with other pilots during a Drone Racing League event in Hawthorne, Calif. Loo, an engineer for a Silicon Valley technology giant, says he's burned through vacation days, lunch hours and weekends flying drones. (AP Photo/Richard Vogel)

That could change if drone racing hits it big, attracting a mass audience and the sponsors who want to sell them stuff. Serial entrepreneur Nick Horbaczewski, who founded the Drone Racing League last year, thinks he knows how to pull that off.

The trick, he says, is making the audience feel the same thrill as the pilots. That's why his league lights up each quadcopter and its pilot's goggles with matching colored LEDs, which help spectators track the tiny speeding drones. It's also why pilots wear T-shirts emblazoned with nicknames like "KittyCopter," "Rekrek" and "Zoomas." Pilot backstories and slick editing build up the drama for videos put online.

The fast-talking 35-year-old helped turn "Tough Mudders," a quirky half marathon in which people pay to slog through artificial quagmires, into a \$100-million-plus business as its chief revenue officer. He sank his own money into the drone league last year, though he also raised \$8 million from the likes of Miami Dolphins' owner Steve Ross, the talent business Creative Artists Agency and media giant Hearst.



In this March 18, 2016, photo, Steve Zoumas, from Wading River, N.Y., poses for a photo with his drone at a vacant mall in Hawthorne, Calif. Drone racing leagues would love to follow sports like poker into the mainstream with big TV audiences and sponsorships. But getting sponsors and fans is also a race against time. (AP Photo/Nick Ut)

But there's plenty of turbulence ahead. Similarly promising quasi-athletic leagues have crashed and burned before. Take professional paintball, which seemed like a sure-fire winner at its peak in 2005. A sport in which combatants shoot at one another across an obstacle-strewn field promised a built-in audience of gun enthusiasts and video-gamers.

Paintball thrived for several years, airing its own show on ESPN3 and

drawing sponsors like Budweiser, Monster energy drinks and the U.S. Army. Then manufacturers of paintball equipment consolidated and cut back on ad spending. Interest in the sport dwindled, and its main league folded in 2014.

Further complicating things, multiple drone-racing leagues are vying for attention. Horbaczewski's major competition is the International Drone Racing Association, which last month announced it'll have a special on ESPN3 in the fall. There are a handful of other big leagues around the world, and grassroots races pop up all the time.



In this March 19, 2016, photo, Drone Racing League pilots Shaun Taylor, from Albuquerque, N.M., left, Zach Thayer, from Laguna Niguel, Calif., center, and Steve Zoumas from Wading River, N.Y., operate their drones during a DRL competition at a vacant mall in Hawthorne, Calif. (AP Photo/Richard Vogel)

The hodgepodge of organizations has bewildered would-be sponsors, frustrating some who found the experience of backing a race a sinkhole for time and money. Multicopter Superstore, a Santa Cruz, California-based online retailer of drone parts, already sponsors pilots like Loo with discounts and access to new gear at grassroots events.

But owner Michael Silveira says he spent \$20,000 sponsoring the IDRA's U.S. National Drone Racing Championships last year, to disappointing results. His company's logos weren't displayed as agreed at an after-party he helped pay for, he says. That would have stung more had promised crowds actually turned up for the event. Attendance was less than 100, although he'd been told to expect 10,000 fans.

"That hurt quite a bit," Silveira says. "Now we're a little hesitant about doing things."



In this March 19, 2016, photo, Dasher Petranek watches drones race at a Drone Racing League event at a vacant mall in Hawthorne, Calif. The antenna-mounted goggles enable him to see the pilot's view. (AP Photo/Richard Vogel)



In this Saturday, March 19, 2016, photo, pilots from the Drone Racing League watch a race on a large TV backstage at a vacant mall in Hawthorne, Calif. Drone racing leagues would love to follow sports like poker into the mainstream with big TV audiences and sponsorships. But getting sponsors and fans is also a race against time. (AP Photo/Richard Vogel)



This March 19, 2016, photo shows Drone Racing League founder and CEO Nicholas Horbaczewski at the vacant Hawthorne Plaza mall in Hawthorne, Calif. Horbaczewski is betting he can the transform drone racing from a throw-down among hobbyists into a mainstream spectacle. "To translate from a participatory sport to a professional sport that has a widespread audience, you have to put a lot of thought into how you're going to do that. And that's what we really focus on here at DRL," he said. (AP Photo/Richard Vogel)



In this March 19, 2016, photo, a Drone Racing League production crew walks through the race course prior to a race in a vacant mall in Hawthorne, Calif. Pilots race against each other and get points for every gate they successfully navigate, plus more points the faster they finish. (AP Photo/Richard Vogel)

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