

Drone pilots gather on NYC island for racing championship

August 5 2016, by Michael Balsamo



A pilot flies a small racing drone through an obstacle course on Governors Island, a former military installation in New York Harbor, Friday, Aug. 5, 2016. Drone pilots are gathering in New York City to compete in the National Drone Racing Championship. (AP Photo/Richard Drew)

Tyler Brennan is training to be a pilot in the Air Force, yet this weekend he'll be vying to be top gun at the National Drone Racing Championship.

The 22-year-old Air Force lieutenant traveled from Colorado Springs, Colorado, to compete in the tournament, which is being held in New York City this weekend. Brennan is one of more than 100 pilots vying for a \$50,000 prize.

"I found it on YouTube and I was hooked immediately," Brennan said of the sport, which is still finding a following. "My first time, I was like, 'I got it. I am hooked here' and I crashed almost immediately . But that split second that you get has you hooked for life."

Dozens of pilots gathered for a practice event Friday on Governors Island, a former military installation in New York Harbor.

With spectators watching from a viewing stand, the pilots donned headsets that gave them a cockpit view as they remotely directed their drones—most no larger than a paperback book—through an obstacle course of gates and flags at speeds up to 60 mph.

The competitors fly using first-person view headsets, which allow them to see as if they were inside the tiny drones, said Scot Refsland, the founder and chairman of Drone Sports Association, which is helping to put on the tournament.



Pilots fly their small racing drones through an obstacle course on Governors Island, a former military installation in New York Harbor, Friday, Aug. 5, 2016. Drone pilots are gathering in New York City to compete in the National Drone Racing Championship. (AP Photo/Richard Drew)

A small mesh net is the only thing separating the spectators from the action. Spectators stood on the side lines, their smartphones in hand, capturing video of the small crafts whizzing by. Participants needed to pass through qualifying competitions in order to race.

The tournament, which is being broadcast on ESPN3, draws competitors of all ages.

The youngest racer, 12-year-old Sorell Miller, of Boise, Idaho, will face off against dozens of other racers, including his father, Conrad.



Competitor Tyler Brennan, a 22-year-old Air Force lieutenant from Colorado Springs, Colo., works on a quad copter before flying his racing drone through the obstacle course on Governors Island, a former military installation in New York Harbor, Friday, Aug. 5, 2016. Drone pilots are gathering in New York City to compete in the National Drone Racing Championship. (AP Photo/Richard Drew)

Brennan says he hopes the competition persuades people that they shouldn't be afraid of the craft, which tend to make news headlines only when someone is using one improperly.

"Nobody here will you see flying in airspace they aren't supposed to be, flying near a wildfire or doing anything they aren't supposed to do," he said. "I hope this introduces drone racing and can show people that drones aren't something that sits outside your window and spies on you—not at all in any way, shape or form. This is a sport."

After this, he said he's going to focus on preparing to fly much bigger machines.

"This is my real hurrah," Brennan said. "After this, I'm concentrating on flying for the Air Force and this will remain a side sport."



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Course designer Scot Refsland, center, schools pilots before they fly their small drones through the obstacle course on Governors Island, a former military installation in New York Harbor, Friday, Aug. 5, 2016. Drone pilots are gathering in New York City to compete in the National Drone Racing Championship. (AP Photo/Richard Drew)

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