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A fledgling sport is ready for lift-off

Feb 13th 2016 | SAN FRANCISCO | From the print edition

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SOME sports, such as wrestling and sprinting, claim long histories. They were portrayed in cave paintings thousands of years ago. Others are just lifting off. The racing of drones is, thus far, a niche activity, but several firms are betting on it. “Every person under the age of 13 either has a drone or wants one,” says Nick Horbaczewski of the Drone Racing League (DRL), a startup. “We are going to raise a generation of pilots.” The DRL has gathered in \$8m from investors, including Stephen Ross, the owner of the Miami Dolphins, an American-football team, and CAA, a big agency that represents film and sports stars.

Drone-racing began as an amateur sport in Australia only a couple of years ago, and spread with the aid of social media as pilots shared videos of their contests. Racers navigate at speeds of up to 100mph (160kph) through a course of illuminated checkpoints, getting a drone’s-eye view of their aircraft’s position through video goggles.

The sport has had to work out some technological kinks, such as eliminating the “latency” that delays the live video feed to the pilot, which could cause a drone to miss a turn and crash. Races require special drones that are swifter than those mass-produced for consumer use by firms like DJI of China. DRL makes its own.

As drones have become more affordable, the sport has gained enthusiasts. This year perhaps 3m drones will be sold in America, generating around \$950m in revenue, according to the Consumer Technology Association, an industry group. Once people buy one they want something more exciting to do than just hovering it over their houses, says Scot Refsland of RotorSports, which organises drone races and is in talks with a broadcast network to air a championship race later this year. Drone races, sometimes called “rodeos”, are becoming more frequent: in January events were staged in Las Vegas and Ontario.

The big money will come in once people get into the habit of watching rodeos on television or over the internet. Optimists believe that drone-racing could follow the trajectory of e-sports, in which increasing numbers of people watch other people p

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video games. However unlikely it may sound, e-sports have turned into a large business, earning \$194m in revenues worldwide in 2014, according to Newzoo, a research firm. Amazon validated the sport's financial prospects in 2014 when it bought Twitch, a website that streams people playing video games, for \$1.1 billion.

If it succeeds, the DRL will be a prime example of how the money to be made in drones may largely come not from manufacturing them but from services associated with them. It is also possible that drone-racing fails to capture the imagination of enough punters—and ends up like robot combat, which was briefly popular in the 1990s and 2000s on television. Drones may be in the ascendant, but not every sport flies.

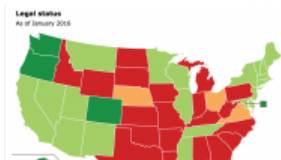
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