

The Final Frontier

An inside look at the deal to bring drone racing to ESPN

BY PATRICK SHERMAN

The story you are about to read is true—a reminder made necessary by the particular facts of this extraordinary tale, which might otherwise be mistaken for the plot of an overreaching movie of the week. Without some assurances, no one would believe that in a single year, a sideshow at the California State Fair would be anointed as the first new sport of the 21st century by ESPN, a powerhouse network reaching 95 million American households.

Furthermore, none of the names has been changed to protect those who are responsible, foremost among them: Scot Refsland, chairman of the International Drone Racing Association (IDRA) and architect of this improbable sequence of events.

The first question I asked him was "How did all of this happen?" Scot responded, "There really is something bigger driving it, and I personally think it is a combination of three different factors. First, human beings share an inherent love of flight, and drone racing allows you to instantly become a superhero. Second, the up-and-coming generation is extremely interested in new forms of broadcasting: They want to be participants, not spectators. Third, everybody wants to see what a new sport looks like in this hyperconnected, multiscreen world."

The Art of the Deal

The global explosion of interest in drone racing came at precisely the right moment for ESPN, according to Scot. "Right now, they are struggling to find a solution to the quick drop-off among the next generation of viewers," he said. "They see the trend of cable cutters coming up on them pretty quick. Although they've been a huge cash cow for Disney, they recognize that eSports and drone racing are one new way to regain that audience that is hungry for emerging sports."

Of course, everything is fun and games until the lawyers get involved. And when that happened early in Scot's negotiations with ESPN, it very nearly put an end to the show before it could even get started.

"When we started talking to them in earnest, we got on the radar of the risk-management guys, and that went all the way up to Disney corporate," he recalled. "All they had on their books for liability and risk management that pertained to drones was aerial photography. We had to rewrite the book from scratch."

"That took several months. It was a pretty formidable hurdle to get over. I am proud to say that we blazed the trail for other folks who will come along later."

Once the legal questions had been settled, Scot faced another challenge: The sport of drone racing was evolving so quickly that it was hard to finalize a contract that reflected nearly minute-by-minute changes that have occurred over the past year.

International Drone Racing Association chairman Scot Refsland enjoys a quick trip around the course—a welcome respite from his eight-month negotiation with ESPN, which will bring drone racing to the network this summer.

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Scot Refsland, organizer of the U.S. National Drone Racing championship, is bringing the event to Governors Island in New York harbor and to the 95 million American households that receive ESPN.

"As those changes started happening, suddenly they were interested in a multiyear deal, then an international distribution deal," he said. "That's why it took eight months to negotiate this contract: Every time it got bigger, it got bigger in our favor, but it took time to sort all of it out."

"They're trying to figure out how to make AR work with traditional sports, as well—like football and NASCAR—but those are legacy sports that are locked into traditions that have been established for decades," Scot said. "Drone racing is a brand new sport, so it's a blank slate that will allow for this type of experimentation."

Another unique feature will be multiple online broadcasts, which will be occurring simultaneously with the main feed on ESPN, with multiple crews providing real-time updates from around the island.

"We're also talking to a 360-degree camera company about installing their systems at different locations around the track—in the freestyle area, even in the pits and the pilot's flying booth," Scot added. "That way, people can choose what they want to see, and using a pair of virtual-reality goggles, they can actually look around the environment, like they are actually standing right there."

An Unexpected Journey

The extraordinary pace at which all of this has come about is especially remarkable to me because I was at the first U.S. National Drone Racing Championship last year in Sacramento, California, and hosted the online coverage of the event. Although I had the same goal as Scot has laid out for Governors Island—to help the people who couldn't be there physically feel as if they are part of the event—the tools at my disposal were comically low tech by comparison.

The first few hours of the broadcast were run through a cell phone when the fairground's Internet server failed, and our live feed from the aircraft on the course

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Above: A racing quad "turns and burns" at one of the qualifying racing events being held across the United States in the run up to the Nationals, being held in August. (Photo by C. Tyler Foley)

Above right: Pilots from across the United States and around the world came together in the pits at the 2015 U.S. National Drone Racing Championship in Sacramento, California. At this year's event on Governors Island in New York City, you might have the opportunity to experience that same atmosphere via virtual reality. (Photo by Ruben Jauregui)

Traction from Interaction

The coverage on ESPN will be like nothing that has ever been seen before, according to Scot, who draws on the 1987 Arnold Schwarzenegger camp classic *The Running Man* as well as *The Hunger Games* series in an effort to characterize how the audience will participate in the event—whether on Governors Island, the site of next year's U.S. National Drone Racing Championship, or 10,000 miles away. "It really doesn't matter where you are," he explained. "The problem is how do you make a bunch of gnats flying around a football field exciting? We consider every single fan to be a remote fan."

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was provided by—I'm not making this up—pointing a video camera at a 5.8GHz monitor draped with a piece of black fabric to eliminate glare. The course timing system worked inconsistently, and the weather was brutally hot.

In spite of the problems, however, there was an undeniable energy that you could feel walking around the pits and the staging areas, where the racers were preparing for their heats. It was like a family reunion, a gathering of kindred souls from every corner of the earth. People I had met online or watched in YouTube videos were suddenly standing right in front of me—and we just talked with the easy familiarity of friends.

Scot, who organized that first event and asked me to host the coverage, is promising to deliver that same experience to the entire world, and I, for one, couldn't be happier to be taking the journey with him. ✈️