15-YEAR-OLD PILOT FROM ENGLAND WINS DUBAI'S WORLD DRONE PRIX

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A team led by a 15-year-old pilot from England took first place Saturday in the World Drone Prix, a new contest hoping to take flight both in this Mideast country fascinated by the technology and with sports fans worldwide.

Luke Bannister of Somerset led Tornado X-Blades Banni UK to win a $250,000 purse, part of $1 million in prizes handed out in the inaugural edition of this race as a Cabinet-level minister announced the start of the World Future Sports Games in December 2017.

Those contests next year will include robotic swimming, running, wrestling and car racing, as well as drone flying, as this city of futuristic skylines yearns to be ahead of the curve.

"We are trying to bring the future closer to us," said Mohammed al-Gergawi, the United Arab Emirates' minister for Cabinet affairs.

At the World Drone Prix, four pilots at a time sat in racing-style seats, their eyes covered by goggles allowing them to watch a feed from a camera on their drone. The drones raced on a course behind them, zipping along a white track that occasionally reached up to pinch at the speeding aircraft for 12 laps with the skyscrapers of the Dubai Marina behind them.

The pilots wore the white racing jumpsuits familiar to Formula One, but racers have to worry about

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what's above and below them as they fly their drones, said Zachry Thayer, a 25-year-old pilot for Team Big Whoop of Fort Collins, Colorado. But the onboard camera puts a racer into the action like nothing else, he said.

"That's what's making it explode," Thayer said. "Anybody can go out and all of a sudden, they're Superman,"

The crafts flown more resembled Erector Set creations, with one team using a cheap disposable lighter to solder a wire. The races themselves looked at home in the science-fiction film "Tron" — glowing fluorescent lights guiding the way around the 591-meter (650-yard) track.

Racers had to take at least one pit stop in the race, with crews leaning down to change out batteries. Pilots also had to decide whether to take short cuts, sometimes seeing their drones crash into the ground or into each other to the shouts of spectators.

Dubai, once a sleepy desert port city now home to the world's tallest building and the long-haul airline Emirates, has embraced drones. Dubai's ruler, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, has given the $1 million Drones for Good Award over the last two years.

Government agencies across the larger United Arab Emirates, ever-eager to be seen using new technology, use drones in activities as varied as inspecting buildings to calming a frantic Abu Dhabi window-washer in 2014 caught 10 stories up after his scaffolding got stuck. Small hobby drones for sale sit on display in electronics stores in the country's many luxury malls, while Al-Dhafra Air Base hosts some of the U.S. military's unmanned aircraft flying missions over Iraq and Syria targeting the Islamic State group.

But the proliferation of hobbyist drone pilots has caused problems here as elsewhere in the world. Dubai International Airport, the world's busiest for international travel, has seen drones fly into its airspace and halt its flights.

Since February, drone owners have been required to register with the UAE's General Civil Aviation Authority. Authorities also ban hobbyists from putting cameras or lasers on their drones.

"It is not merely a flying game, but a sport that requires mental focus and accuracy to enable users to harmonize mental commands and hand movements to fly their drone," Saif Mohammed al-Suwaidi, the aviation authority's director-general, said in a statement at the time.

That focus — as well as having competitors fly an aircraft they're not actually in — makes many compare the sport to that of competitive video game playing. Already, so-called eSports revenue was nearly $750 million worldwide in 2015, with sponsorships and advertising accounting for $578 million, according to the New York-based gaming-research firm SuperData.

"Obviously, there's a crossover with gaming, as you can see with the HD goggles," said Nigel Tomlinson of Manchester, United Kingdom, who was the manager of Luke's team.

Those millions, as well as Dubai's single-minded determination to always be ahead, likely inspired authorities to announce the World Future Sports Games, tentatively scheduled for Dec. 28-30, 2017. Officials hope to hold the games once every two years after that.

On Saturday night at the World Drone Prix, the novelty of the competition seemed to hold the audience's attention as the drones buzzed around the track. After winning, Tomlinson said the 43 team members of Luke's team would share the prize money.

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Luke himself also seemed happy, rocking back and forth on his heels atop the winner's podium.

"The lights were awesome," he shyly said afterward, as his team cheered.

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