

Drone Racing Looks to Go Mainstream Amid Major Sports Void

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Key Insights:

With major sports leagues shut down for the foreseeable future, an up-and-coming futuristic sport is looking to help fill the void with a particularly social distancing-friendly type of competition.

The Drone Racing League has seen a 200% uptick in viewership in the past year—a trend that has accelerated since the start of the coronavirus pandemic lockdown. It's also seen a 90% rise in pilot participation and a 60% increase in social media following.

As a game that involves remote-controlled drones whizzing through rings at 90 miles per hour or faster, the league is particularly well positioned to take advantage of the current moment, when other contact sports still risk exposing players to Covid-19.

The organization appointed former longtime NBA executive Rachel Jacobson as its new president this week as it looks to break further into the mainstream. Adweek spoke with Jacobson about navigating the lockdown era and the future of drone racing as a sport.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Adweek: What are some of your plans for your first day on the

job?

Jacobson: Being that I'm starting at a unique time, our sport authentically blends the digital with the real. So with fans already calling us a real-life video game, now more than ever, we're leaning into the organic virtual side of our thrilling robotic sport to really bring sports competition, entertainment and innovation to fans at home.

We didn't have to pivot too far [as] we already had deep roots in the esports community. We actually just wrapped our esports tournament, the 2020 DRL Simulator Tryouts, earlier this month with great distribution on Twitch and YouTube, and we've been continuing to stream historic races on Twitter. And we're also gearing up for a new virtual drone racing series that'll be on a national broadcast television partner, and we'll be able to share that with you in the coming week.

Traffic was already on the rise when this sports shutdown started to happen. Have you been able to separate its specific impact from that overall trend?

We've been seeing unbelievable growth in viewership and participation: 200% average viewership, 90% increase in virtual drone racing participation, and 60% fan base growth across social and media over the past year. So to your point, we've definitely been on the rise. And now more than ever, when so many sports fans are struggling to connect with the sports they love, we've been able to bring in a new audience by intersecting the amazing technology that we have with a thrilling sport of drone racing.

What we're finding is that some people have little to no awareness of DRL, and they can quickly get up to speed on the sport—they understand how the races work, they've gotten to know our pilots up close and personal with some behind-the-scenes content that we're pushing out through our social. So we've been able to really use the time to continue that

positive momentum and really increase our fan base as well with these new broadcasts and social distribution during a time that so many other sports may be on pause.

“Now more than ever, when so many sports fans are struggling to connect with the sports they love, we’ve been able to bring in a new audience.”

-Drone Racing League President Rachel Jacobson

How has the lockdown changed your overall marketing strategy?

It’s been a good opportunity for us to just reevaluate all of the areas that have built this tremendous growth in the last year to help us put partnerships in place for the future. So I wouldn’t say that the marketing has changed radically, but you will definitely see us doing more in the philanthropic space. So we’ve been able to use our position as a global sports property for the greater good of supporting communities. We’ve been part of things like the [food insecurity fundraiser] #AllIn challenge, where we’ve used our pilots and giveaways to raise incredible funding to help those in need.

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