



Digital Rules

## Why We Need Goofy Contests

Rich Karlgaard, 11.14.05, 12:00 AM ET

Beside the war in Iraq and the scrap over the President's Supreme Court nominee, last month's announcement of the Rocket Racing League--the what?--came off as comic relief. What's this, a new Jetsons movie? Or could George Plimpton be risen from the dead and writing spoofs? The Rocket Racing League, though, is no put-on. It's real, the brainchild of Dr. Peter H. Diamandis, M.D., the private-space-travel entrepreneur, and Granger B. Whitelaw, entrepreneur, venture capitalist and two-time Indy 500 team winner. Diamandis was the force behind last year's Ansari X Prize, won by Burt Rutan's SpaceShipOne for kissing the boundary of space twice within two weeks.

The Rocket Racing League's races will operate much like auto races--except that the "track" is up in the sky. The league's Web site says the rocket planes, called X-Racers, "will take off from a runway both in a staggered fashion and side-by-side and fly a course based on the design of a Grand Prix competition, with long straightaways, vertical ascents and deep banks. "Upon takeoff, onlookers will easily follow the race as the rocket planes remain in view and sport 20-foot rocket plumes. Fans can also track their favorite pilot's progress via large-screen televisions and handheld GPS tracking devices using Wi-Fi to stream video of the cockpit, live 'on-track' shots, side-by-side views and wing-angle views."

Now admit it. The idea of Nascar fans watching pod racers at 5,000 feet makes you laugh, right? But such contests, mixing science, innovation and derring-do--even the nuttier ones--are good for society. They lead to economic advance.

### From Rocket to Lindy . . .

In 1829 the proprietors of the Liverpool & Manchester Railway held a contest to determine whether horses or locomotives could better transport industrial revolution goods. Andy Kessler tells the story in his wonderful book about innovation history, *How We Got Here* (Collins, 2005). "This was the drag race of the time," writes Kessler, "but with a real purpose, as many still believed that horses should pull trains on the line."

Four engines entered the contest for a prize of £500. Kessler notes: "A fifth entry named *Cycloped* was powered by a horse running on a belt--think of a horse on a treadmill--but was withdrawn when the horse fell through the floor."

Students of the industrial revolution know the rest of the story. George Stephenson's *Rocket* won, with speed runs of 25, 30 and 36mph. During the next year *Rocket's* successor, *Arrow*, carried 1,200 people on the Manchester-Liverpool line. Just five years after that traffic had grown to a half-million people. In other words, a corny contest gave England cheap public transportation. It also put legs or, rather, wheels under the industrial revolution.

In 1919 a pair of £10,000 prizes were awarded to airplane pilots. One was for crossing the Atlantic Ocean, awarded by the *London Daily Mail*. Britons John Alcock and Arthur Whitten-Brown accomplished the feat in June, flying a Vickers Vimy biplane from St. John's, Newfoundland to Clifden, Ireland. In December the Australian government awarded its prize to Aussie brothers Ross and Keith Smith, who flew another Vimy from England to Australia in less than 30 days. These contests awoke the world to the possibility of commercial air travel.

Charles Lindbergh, of course, won the most famous aviation contest of all. In June 1927 he and his St. Louis backers collected the \$25,000 Orteig Prize--named after the New York hotelier, Raymond Orteig, who put up the money--for completing the first solo transatlantic flight, from New York to Paris.

### **. . . and JFK to Bush**

"I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the Moon and returning him safely to the Earth." It was President John F. Kennedy's genius to make a sporting contest out of an urgent need. Indeed, Kennedy's speech was called a "Special Message to the Congress on Urgent National Needs" and was delivered to a joint session of Congress on May 25, 1961. That was six weeks after the Soviet Union's Yuri Gagarin had orbited Earth. Kennedy knew the score. "If we are to win the battle that is now going on around the world between freedom and tyranny, the dramatic achievements in space which occurred in recent weeks ... in many ways may hold the key to our future on Earth."

Contests are not only fun. They can also be key to our survival.

If President Bush is serious about rekindling NASA--a worthy idea--I have a suggestion. NASA's annual budget is \$16 billion. Within that budget NASA sets aside \$20 million for prizes to reward real accomplishments, not just paper proposals. That's wa-a-a-ay too little. In fact, it's a puny one-eighth of 1% of NASA's budget.

Why not bump up the annual prize figure to \$2 billion? The U.S. would get a lot more bang than it gets now for that \$16 billion. NASA, alas, seems paralyzed. The agency's new goal of putting a man on the Moon by 2018--13 years from now, and we've already been there--proves its weak vision. NASA's execution is poor, too. The agency has already spent billions of dollars on the National Aerospace Plane, the X-33, X-34, X-37, X-38 and the Orbital Space Plane. None of these has flown. Meanwhile, Burt Rutan's SpaceShipOne was built for less than \$40 million.

President Bush wants to fire up his presidency. Here's a way: Commit America to big, gaudy, public contests in space travel and energy. These will fire up an entire country.

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