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Quidditch meets Robot Wars as drone soccer flies into Britain

A couple who discovered the South Korean sport on holiday hope it can tempt children away from gaming consoles

Last summer Sarah Lockley and Peter Overton were at a campsite in the south of France with their young son. “We looked down the itinerary for the day and one of the things was drone soccer. Never heard of it. Never seen it. So we thought we’d pop along and have a look. We all had to go, and really enjoyed it,” Overton said.

The fast-growing e-sport, which originated in South Korea, is essentially quidditch with drones. The object is simple: fly your “striker” drone as many times as you can through a hoop, a little like the broom-based game from the world of Harry Potter.

The contest is between two teams of either three or five players. While each team’s striker attempts to score, the others defend their goal and seek to block off the opposition.

“I particularly like it as I beat Pete,” Lockley, 40, said. “He usually beats me on every other physical level. And I beat him hands down. It was really fun. That was great.”

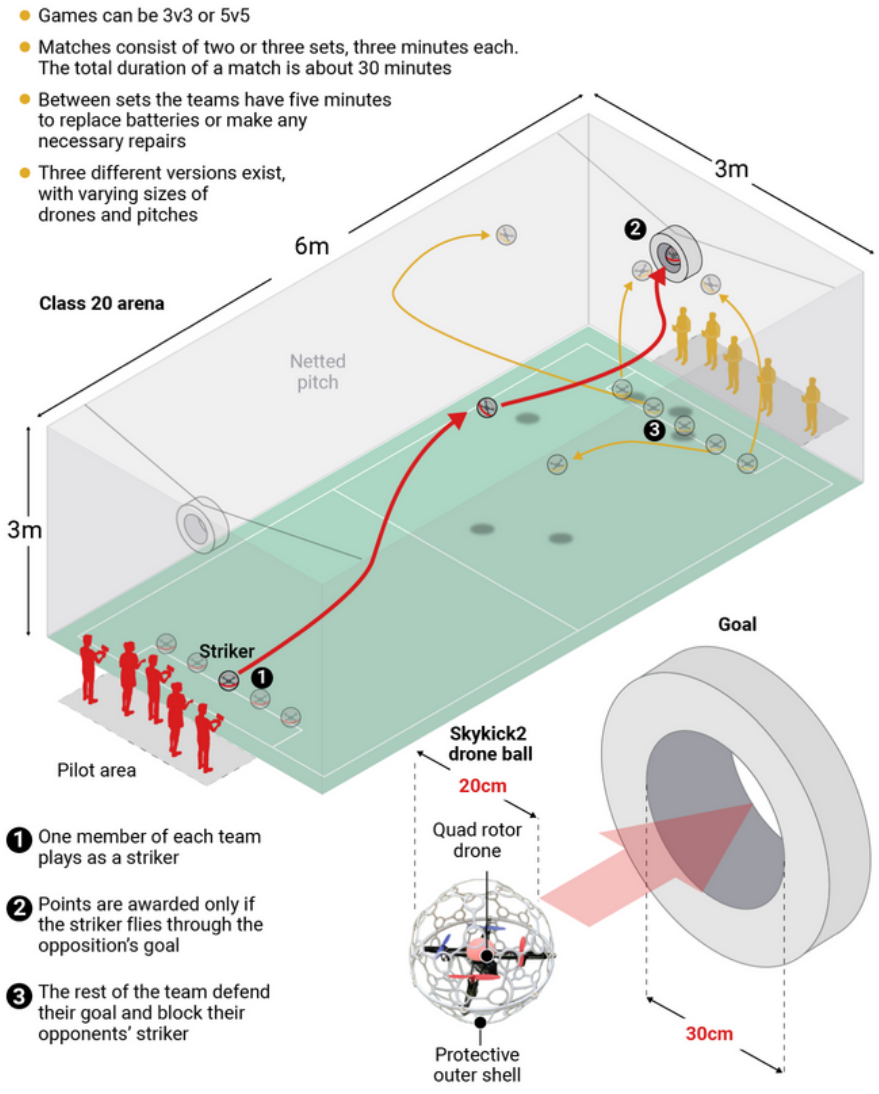
The couple were hooked, but on returning from holiday they couldn’t find anywhere to play — so they set up the UK Drone Soccer Association to introduce the sport to Britain and entice a new generation of flying wizards to do battle with their quadcopters.

“Kids spend so much time on screens that to have a sport that gets them out of the bedroom — but [is also] gaming — for me is great,” Overton, 58, said.

The couple’s main objective is to get drone soccer into schools and universities, where they believe it can help with the science, technology and engineering curriculum.

Lockley roped in her cousin-in-law, Nic Lockley, to be president of the sporting association, while Overton is a director of Drone Soccer Ltd, a company that will handle the commercial side.

How to play



They believe that playing drone soccer could lead to jobs in high places. “In America they definitely have got pilots that are coming out and are flying gliders and planes and hopefully going down the astronaut route,” said Nic Lockley, 50. They have already had interest from a school in Cambridge.

None of the trio has a background in drones, so the learning curve has been steep. “I’m a clinical psychologist,” Sarah Lockley said. “So one of the things that struck me straight away is how inclusive the sport is. People with disabilities, without disabilities, can engage in this activity. Other countries have found populations, such as people with ADHD, people with dementia ... it’s really successful.”

Drone soccer was the brainchild of Lee Beom-su, a former soldier and firefighter from the city of Jeonju. It is well-established in South Korea, with 2,000 teams and ambitions to build a $25 million stadium for the sport’s first world cup in October 2025 in Lee’s hometown.

“I wanted to make a game that would connect people,” he has said. “It wasn’t complicated at all. We were just trying to make something fun to play and to watch.”

Last month the UK association put on a demonstration at the University of Birmingham, which was also hosting an indoor drone-racing competition, called Tiny Whoop. Some of the racing pilots tried their hands at drone soccer and made flying through the hoop look remarkably simple, when it is anything but.

A first try on one of the simpler Skykick drones (which cost about £200) takes a little orientation, although with practice there is improvement. Some pick it up quicker than others, especially the younger generation. The more sophisticated Flyball (£700) requires skill — or natural talent.

Matt Snell, the organiser of Tiny Whoop, said the experienced pilots “loved having a go” but had to adjust to flying without goggles and a camera, as is typical for small drones.

Nic Lockley, her husband Dan and Peter Overton, right, hope their families can grow the sport in the UK

PHYLLIS AKALIN FOR THE TIMES

"Most people's favourite part was the ability to deliberately crash into each other," he said. "We spend all our concentration and use all our skill trying not to crash our drones, so deliberately crashing for a change was really fun.

"Several guys said they would be keen to do it again and would be looking out for the UK team try-outs."

Chris Bradbury, a drone pilot for TV and film and a support officer at the British Model Flying Association, called the sport "a great new addition" to the field.

"I can see it being a great way to get a younger generation involved in both flying drones, but also the science and technology of building, running, and being creative ... and help build a future generation of engineers in aviation."

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