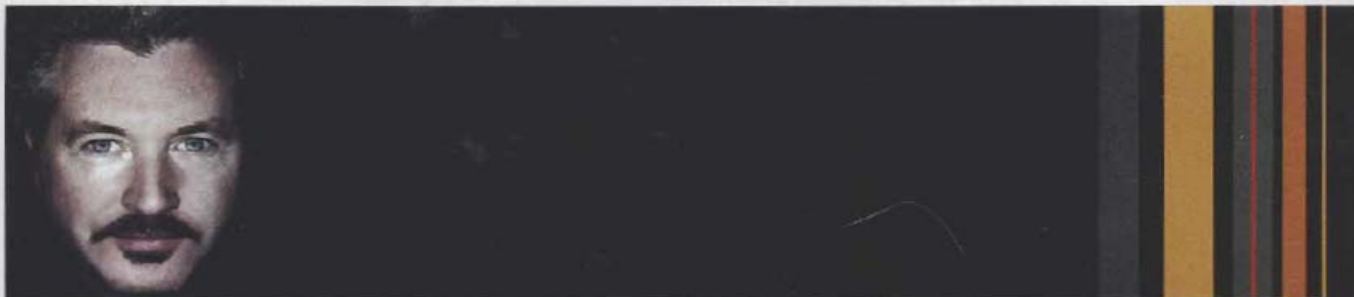


MOTOR TREND

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(the asphalt jungle) arthur st. antoine



flash jeff gordon

These racers will be driving rockets.
Might you be one of them?

■ photograph **lionel delay**

LIKE OUT-OF-CONTROL NASCAR machines, they'll fly off the asphalt and pirouette into the sky—except it'll be intentional. At full speed, they'll leave Indy cars in the dust. Like Formula 1 racers, they'll battle for the checkered flag on tracks kinked like your lower intestines. Although the tracks will be in 3-D. And invisible.

Welcome to the Rocket Racing League (www.rocketracingleague.com), the brainchild of X Prize founder Peter Diamandis. If Diamandis and league co-founder Granger Whitelaw—a venture capitalist and two-time Indy 500-winning team partner—succeed in bringing their vision to life, in 2007 we'll be watching futuristic, rocket-powered "X-Racers" duking it out in the skies like Alonso and Raikkonen after drinking way too much Tang.

Diamandis isn't some starry-eyed dreamer in a

"Yoda Rules" T-shirt. His résumé includes undergraduate and graduate degrees in aerospace engineering from MIT and an M.D. from Harvard Medical School. One of his first companies, Space Adventures, helped get private citizens Dennis Tito and Mark Shuttleworth to the International Space Station.

I met Diamandis briefly at the 2004 Reno Air Races, where he was taking journalists up in a modified Boeing 727-200 cargo aircraft to showcase his newly launched Zero Gravity Corporation (www.nogravity.com), which offers the public "weightless" parabolic flights that mimic the astronaut-training flights of NASA's famed KC-135 "Vomit Comet." Diamandis impressed me then with his vision, seemingly limitless energy, and hands-on style.

A month later, he handed *SpaceShipOne*

designer Burt Rutan a \$10 million check for winning the Ansari X Prize, which Diamandis had set up to recognize the world's first private spacecraft to successfully complete two consecutive flights to the edge of space.

And now comes the RRL. The X-Racers—expected to cost about \$1 million each—will initially be based on the XCOR Aerospace EZ-Rocket, a modified Long-EZ aircraft (also designed by Burt Rutan). Power will come from liquid-oxygen and kerosene motors developing about 1800 pounds of thrust, enough for top speeds in the 250-mph range. Though races are expected to last for an hour, the X-Racers will carry fuel for only four minutes of powered flight—meaning pilots will need to switch the rockets on and off, gliding over part of the course, firing up to overtake a competitor, and even landing to refuel before rejoining the fray. The pilots will use differential GPS technology to follow individualized airborne "tracks" that viewers will be able to see on TV. A recipe for spectacular racing action? For sure. A ridiculous sci-fi pipe dream? Based on Diamandis's track record, don't bet on it. Indeed, an RRL exhibition race is scheduled for October 2006.

Diamandis has a bonus feature that could give other race-series bosses chills: Using video-game links, RRL viewers will be able to fly their own "virtual" X-Racers, competing in real-time against the actual pilots.

You always wanted to be world champion, didn't you? ■

