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Breaking news: Rocket Racing League test-drive!

By Jason Silverman  October 26, 2007 | 6:42:34 PM Categories: [Space](#), [X Prize 2007](#)

Just had lunch with Granger Whitlaw, the president and CEO of the [Rocket Racing League](#), who, at the X Prize Cup's opening press conference, mentioned that his team had test-flown the first RRL rocket yesterday. On his digital camera, he showed me photos (the plane looks like a cute little fighter-jet toon) and a few seconds of video. The racer spent just a few seconds in the air, but those few seconds obviously left Whitlaw, who has been trying to launch the RRL for several years, very, very stoked. He even gave out a little whoop that turned a few heads in the banquet hall.



Over our steaks and ice tea, Whitlaw told me he calls his rocket Bam Bam, after his eight-year-old son, but the official name is Thunderhawk. His pilot flew it three times yesterday at Mojave, and he said the last rocket plane to fly three times in one day was back in 1945. His engineers have figured out a way to refuel in minutes, rather than hours, as rocket fuel once necessitated.

The league, [described](#) by Wired's Michael Belfiore as "NASCAR in the Clouds," has been beset by delays, but yesterday's launch may be the preseason warm up for what, at least on paper, looks like a *Jetsons*-inspired 21st-century sport. The league features a number of teams flying a two-mile course outlined with digital markers. At the X Prize Cup press conference, held at the Holloman Air Force Base, Whitlaw intro'ed members of three teams -- mostly led by former fighter pilots, and all displaying *Top Gun* good looks and bravado. "We've got nowhere to go but up," one said. "You are looking at the future of racing here."

Whitlaw's got sterling racing credentials -- two of his racecar teams have won the Indy 500. Despite being badgered during the dessert course, Whitlaw wouldn't pass over any photos to Wired, but promised us we'd get an invite when he holds a media event sometime in the next month or two.

Out on Holloman's tarmac, we got a glimpse of a RRL prototype, which still has its prop engine, instead of the rocket-powered one. Paul Novacek, the crew chief of the [Santa Fe Rocket Racing](#) team, and Nick Mowery, a pilot for the Thunderhawk team, showed us the plane inside and out, including the snakeskin-accented upholstery.

(photo credit: Chris Jonas)