

Opening night at the Erie County Fair



John Normile / Special to The Sun

A look from above at the 180th Erie County Fair as it opened its gates to large crowds and beautiful weather Wednesday. The fair runs through Aug. 18 at the Hamburg Fairgrounds.

Local helps bring drones to fairgrounds

Aumer, Fair producers prepare for North American Masters Race

By Benjamin Blanchet
SUN CORRESPONDENT

Bill Aumer spent his summers with his grandfather, William Rofo, building and flying RC aircraft during the late 1990s.

Rofo would pick up Aumer, a 1999 Hamburg High School graduate, and head down to the Nike Base missile site off Lakeview Road to see their projects soar the skies.

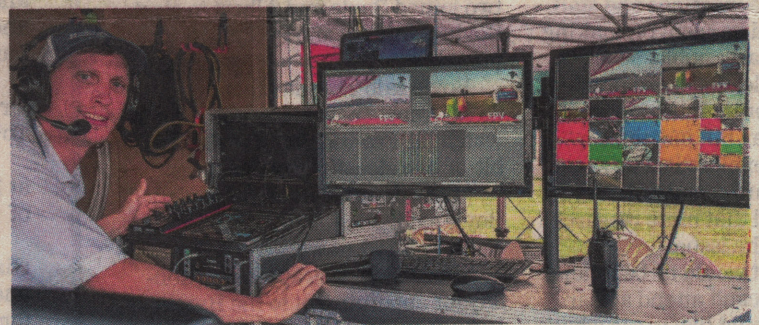
Now, roughly two decades

later, Aumer's aerial productions are set to be a spectacle for international competitors and thousands of onlookers this weekend.

Aumer, of Boston, is producing the Erie County Fair's upcoming North American Drone Masters Race on Saturday and Sunday.

The race, a masters level event under the international drone racing league MultiGP, will showcase high speed drones flown by pilots from around the world competing for thousands of dollars in prizes.

According to Aumer, the race will feature some of the fastest pilots in the world who are too



Contributed photo

This weekend's event producer, Bill Aumer of Boston, runs race operations throughout the northeast including at Ohio's Flite Fest.

young to fly drones in the professional Drone Racing League.

"Last year's MultiGP champion was too young, so he was

ineligible for a DRL contract, so you're going to see all these younger pilots at [the fair] who

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Weekend races to 'lay foundation' for similar future fair entertainment

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are crazy fast, and in a couple years, once they start getting into DRL, it's going to be a whole other level."

Aumer, event producer with Empire State Customs, began working with drones in 2014 while with Clarence-based arcade company Innovative Concepts in Entertainment.

His work in the drone industry has since led to movie shoots in the Buffalo area along with leading a drone race, Buffalo Bando, showcased at Buffalo Riverworks last year.

"People from Canada and Texas came here last year and said, 'Hands down, this is the best thing we've ever seen,'" Aumer said. "We came in and set up the course on the side of the silo [there] and they were blown away with it. Now we're building off that success, hosting this masters, which is a higher level competition, but people are coming back again to Buffalo."

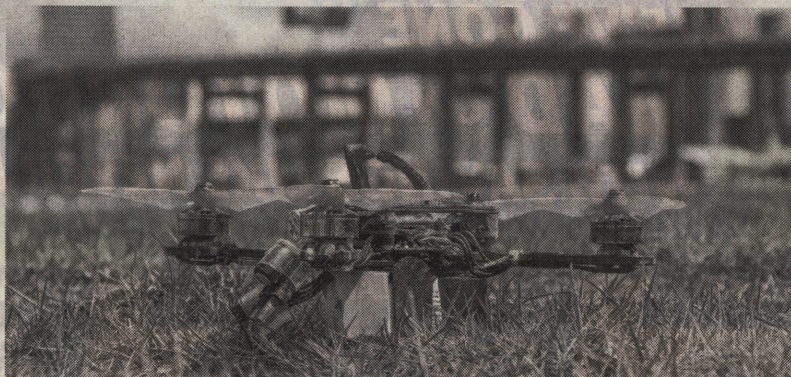
This weekend's race in Hamburg will feature pilots as far away as South Korea, according to Aumer. The grandstand will be equipped with two tracks, a qualifying track in the infield along with a finals track MultiGP brought from a prior race in Ningbo, China.

"The finals [track] is all inflatable arches, obstacles and a special feature which is a gigantic quarter pipe that's something new for this race that everyone's excited to see," Aumer said.

Aumer said fairgoers can expect to see participants destroy their drones as crashing is guaranteed.

During track testing, he said drones were going as high as 106 miles per hour in front of the grandstand.

"But, the way that I do production is the tracks are not terribly complicated. That way we strike a balance between everybody having a good time and the spectators being able to follow the action,"



Contributed photo

A drone sits outside Buffalo Outer Harbor, where pilots flew for world rankings in May during a MultiGP Global Qualifier event.

Aumer said. "So, by making the obstacles a little bigger and stretching the track out, that means that they're going to be going really fast."

Aumer said the drone industry has evolved over the past few years, adding last year's equipment is "outdated" compared to this year's drones.

MultiGP allows anyone to become a pilot and join races, he said, and the league has a championship in November where the winner gets a DRL contract to race on NBC.

According to Aumer, the structure of this weekend's masters level race has a "more expensive ticket" and a limited number of passes for pilots.

The event brings the classic "need for speed" concept which has been quintessential to the fair experience, according to Marty Biniasz, marketing manager for the Erie County Fair.

Biniasz said whether it was harness racing in the mid-19th century or barnstormers who criss-crossed the fairground at the turn of the 20th century, there's always been a stress on racing at the fair.

He added this year's competition will lay the foundation for building this type of entertainment.

"The racing of machines has been part of the fair for a really long time, so this race is sort of a natural progression of keeping up to speed with changes in technolo-

gy," Biniasz said.

"We're about to debut something that's very new in the fair industry. For our first year out of the box, bringing drone racing of this style and level to the Buffalo-Niagara region, we're very fortunate that our race is being held up there on the world standards."

MultiGP will livestream the race to its social media channels and fairgoers can follow along, too, with first-person views from the drones on the video walls in front of the grandstands.

Aumer said the fair is the "perfect" place to showcase the value of MultiGP to newcomers and people not familiar with drone racing.

"The audience is built in and you can bring the show to them instead of getting them to come see your show," Aumer said. "We can bring it and deliver it to the audience and even an American fair, growing up in Hamburg, it's part of life. It's there every summer and it's always been there but for people in different countries, an American fair is something they've never seen before."

The North American Drone Masters Race will include Saturday's qualifying round and Sunday evening's final round at the Gusto Grandstand. The race is free with fair admission and veterans, active military and auxiliary members can receive free admission on Sunday with proper ID.