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Oh, those zany flying machines

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Abstract (Document Summary)

Tomorrow afternoon marks Canada's first Flugtag, German for "flying day." Started in Austria in 1991, the sport crossbreeds the Wright Brothers' shaky flying style with the Marx Brothers' slapstick sensibility. The competition is organized by Red Bull, the energy-drink company that has sponsored Flugtags everywhere from Arizona to the United Arab Emirates. Now, it's Canada's turn.

Full Text (555 words)

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Pigs may not fly, but giant lobsters, poutine wagons and sushi will soon take wing over False Creek -- and promptly belly-flop.

Tomorrow afternoon marks Canada's first Flugtag, German for "flying day." Started in Austria in 1991, the sport crossbreeds the Wright Brothers' shaky flying style with the Marx Brothers' slapstick sensibility. The competition is organized by Red Bull, the energy-drink company that has sponsored Flugtags everywhere from Arizona to the United Arab Emirates. Now, it's Canada's turn.

Teams from across the country have built zany "aircraft" powered by up to four valiant pushers and one intrepid pilot. They must perform a two-minute skit and then launch the contraption off a seven-metre ramp.

Points are awarded for style (ingeniousness, showmanship and, above all, outrageousness) as well as for substance (how far the craft travels before the inevitable wet landing). Winners can hone their aviation skills through prizes of pilot, skydiving or paragliding lessons -- or scurry off with cash equivalents.

A merry band of siblings and significant others led by Sorrel McDonough has recreated the General Lee, the iconic car of *The Dukes of Hazzard*, out of PVC piping, zap straps and laundry baskets. "I saw Flugtag on TV and thought, hey, this is the kind of contest I can actually enter," McDonough says.

"My family was always making weird stuff." They aim to win the contest with a simple strategy: "We're just in it to look as stupid as possible."

Fatherhood drove the Air Hockey team to build their entry: a winged, monster-sized skate. "We don't see each other as much since we had kids," team member Tristan Jackson says, "so this was a great excuse to get together, drink beer and have dumb arguments."

Competition at the inaugural Canuck Flugtag should be as stiff as a drink of caffeine-and-sugar-loaded Red Bull. Crews of glider pilots and aeronautics instructors will try to best the Flugtag world record flight of 59.4 metres.

As for showmanship, teams paying homage to *Grease*, *Snoopy* and Magnum P.I.'s mustache will vie with Canadians such as *Trailer Park Boys*, the Last Saskatchewan Elevator, Stompin' Tom and Vancouver's own

"Flying" 99 B-Line.

Meanwhile, Team Air Guitar hopes to set another world record by getting the entire audience to pseudo-strum along to their launch routine.

It all sounds like harmless fun, and a welcome escape from relentless news of missile attacks and terrorist plots. But not so fast. Red Bull, marketed as the drink that "gives you wings," has hit turbulence of its own this year. Health regulators in various countries have raised concerns over the drink's high caffeine content (three times that of Coke) and the safety of a main ingredient, the amino acid taurine.

Though Health Canada requires Red Bull to print the warning "not recommended for children" on each can, the beverage is a hot seller in the preteen set, who have no trouble buying Red Bull at convenience stores. Such issues are clearly at odds with the Flugtag event's carefully contrived, family-oriented image.

With that in mind, Flugtag as you see fit -- but beware the giant nose-diving sushi.

The Red Bull Flugtag takes place Saturday at Concord Pacific Place next to Science World on False Creek. Doors open at 12 p.m. Free. For more info, see www.redbullflugtag.ca.

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