

High flier

Flying remote control planes over the beautiful Somerset countryside inspired a Taunton schoolboy to become a five-time world champion drone racer

WORDS: Jeremy Blackmore

What started as a hobby has provided Luke Bannister with a full-time job in the drone industry, as well as the opportunity to compete in tournaments in spectacular locations around the world.

Now aged 20, he films drone footage for top global brands and works with the NHS to make crucial medical deliveries.

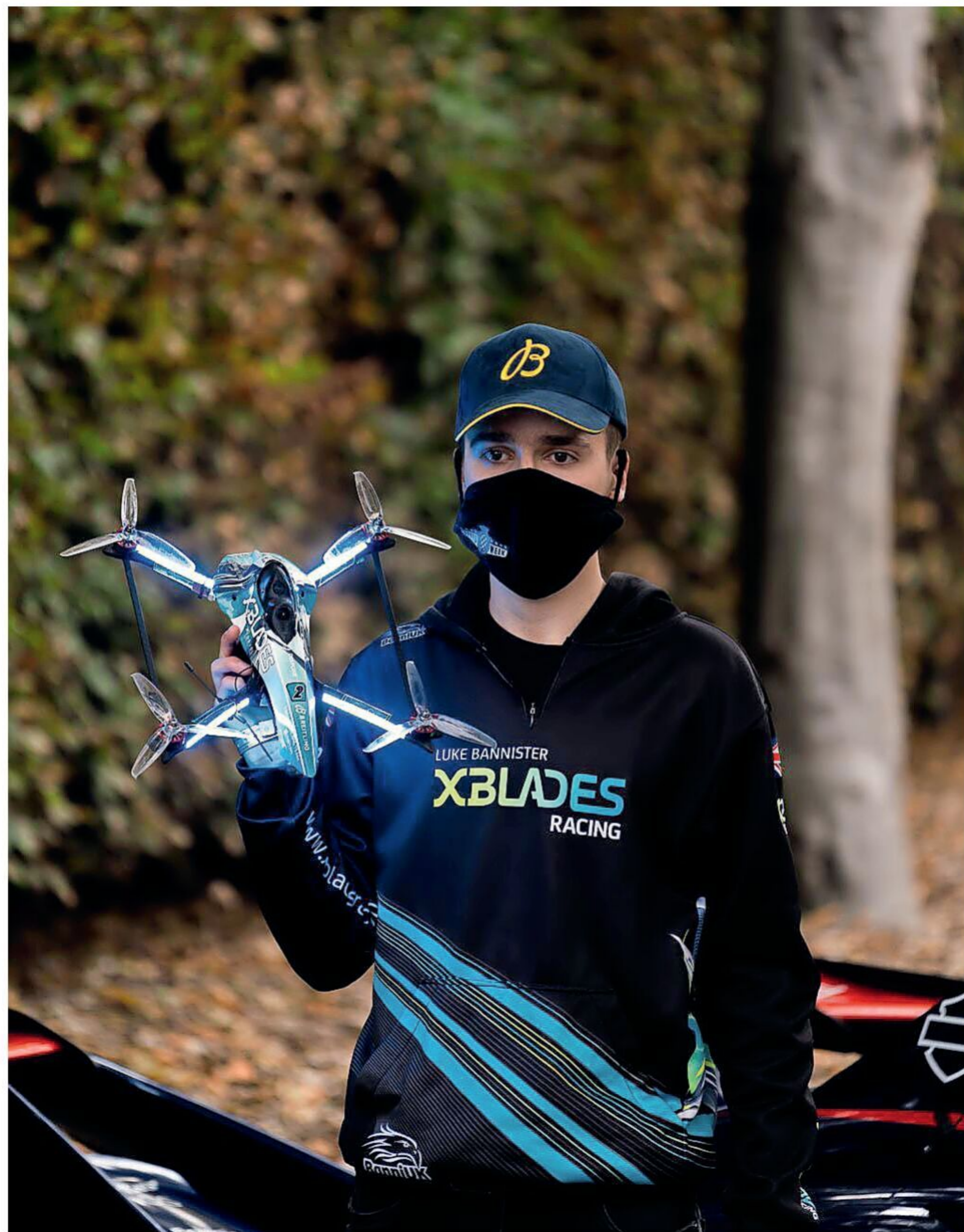
As a young boy at Taunton School with a dream of becoming a pilot, his love of flying began at Christmas 2010 after being given small polystyrene planes for indoor flying.

The family joined Webster Flyers, who fly from Taunton Vale Polo Club close to the racecourse. Here Luke learnt to fly remote control planes, quickly becoming competent, and he built his first simple polystyrene plane at the age of 11. When Luke was 14, he discovered virtual reality goggles known as FPV (first person view) on the internet and persuaded his parents to give him a pair for Christmas. He became fascinated by the prospect of having a bird's eye view of the world and started to use the technology on his planes.

FPV involves mounting a small video camera and transmitter on a remote-controlled aircraft and flying by means of a live stream displayed on the goggles.

'I was always interested in flying,' says Luke. 'I always wanted to be a pilot when I was older. Flying remote control planes gave me easy access to get to the sky.'

'It started from there and moved to FPV, because then it was the next level for me, I could fly as if I was inside my plane. Then I saw the race drones. I



Photos: Breiting

Luke films drone footage for top global brands and works with the NHS to make crucial medical deliveries

saw their manoeuvrability, how fast they were, the freedom to explore. You can fly 70mph or stop on a dime and have a look at something or fly through a tree. So, that really piqued my interest.'

Luke set up his own courses of hoops and homemade gates incorporating trees, playground equipment and goal posts as obstacles near his home. Occasionally other club drone pilots came to Webster Flyers for a day of drone flying and racing.

It was there that he was spotted by an older drone pilot, James

Bowles, who introduced him to the British First Person View Racing Association and he was invited to fly as the youngest competitor at the Weston Park International Model Show in 2015.

Much to Luke's surprise he won the event and was later asked to join the XBlades Racing team as one of 11 pilots taken to the inaugural World Drone Prix in Dubai in March 2016. Swapping the green fields of Somerset for the deserts of Dubai opened him up to the emerging world of

competitive drone racing. That first tournament in Dubai was a challenge in more ways than one for Luke as he battled a chest infection and bloodshot eyes, but one he describes as an amazing experience.

His victory over a field of 150 competitors put him firmly on the radar for sponsorships and ambassadorial roles with multinationals such as Pepsi-Co and AirHogs while media channels were clamouring for interviews and shoots.

‘It was definitely a turning point in my life,’ he reflects. ‘Being the first World Drone Racing Champion at 15 meant that other great opportunities came my way to go semi-professional and I had to juggle in my drone activities around my school studies.’

He has now won the world title five years in a row, competing in front of large crowds, apart from 2020 when the event was held virtually due to the pandemic.

The opportunities kept coming as he competed around the world, taking part in the first big drone racing event in the US, competing in the Drone Champions League and various national championships, as well as becoming European champion.

The skills he has developed in the process have seen him become one of the leading content creators with drones. From starting his own YouTube Channel in 2014 to share clips with other FPV enthusiasts, he became more and more interested in aerial photography and filming and the multitude of positive uses that drones can be put to.

‘You can fly 70mph or stop on a dime and have a look at something or fly through a tree’

‘I morphed into a professional drone pilot soon after finishing my schooling. I may well take on further education in order to train as a real-life pilot, but currently I am focusing on building my aerial photography and filming business (X-AERIAL)



ABOVE: Luke films drone footage for top global brands and works with the NHS to make crucial medical deliveries

of extreme and fast sports to earn a living while continuing with drone racing as a hobby.

‘When I fly, we often have to pick up the track very quickly, and then we have to race on it. Or when I’m filming, I have one take to get a shot, I have to pretty much pop up, have a look around, and then from that work out, where can I fly, where my signal is going to be good or bad. And then work around that. So, it’s almost like you build a 3D image of the environment in your head.

‘But you always have to relate that to where you’re standing. You have to maintain line of sight with the drone. So, from there you build an image from what you’ve seen walking up and from what you see flying the drone, to work out where you can and can’t fly.’

Luke believes the possibilities are endless for the use of drone technology. He says the biggest challenge facing the industry at present is integrating autonomous drones into the airspace with full-size aircraft.

Like the work he has done for the NHS, he believes there are many positive uses for drones including transport (parcels/

medical deliveries), agriculture (crop spraying/fire-fighting), conservation, construction, survey/mapping and surveillance sectors, remote control active defence and as a sport for the disabled.

‘I feel that stigma towards drones is easing off a bit,’ he says, ‘because people are realising the good use of drones. For example, the company I work for, we work on doing medical deliveries for the NHS between island communities in Scotland.’

What would Luke advise someone who wants to become a professional drone pilot?

‘It’s now a very competitive world and drone usage is evolving into many different sectors. You will need to train hard and market yourself. Lots of people are jumping on to the band-wagon – particularly young men as they are attracted by the racing and the adrenaline pumping action.

‘Entrants into the sport of racing are now able to start learning drone piloting skills at a very young age, from five or six, so have a huge advantage on those whose first access to drones was in their teens upwards.’ ♦