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Life

Getting big air (video)

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By Justin McAneny, Staff Writer

Halloween may have come and gone but after the holiday ended, pumpkins were still flying around. And they weren't flying out of windows, off porches or into trash cans: Some pumpkins flew out of cannons.

Shooting pumpkins out of cannons isn't anything new. It's a competition, known as The World Punkin Chunkin Competition, that started 25 years ago outside of Georgetown, Del. The competition grew over the years with competitors coming from all over. As competition grew, so did the distance that pumpkins flew through the air.

In 1998 though, a group, including members from the area, began competing. The group, comprised of a few engineers, felt confident that they could win that first year, in what Ralph Eschborn described as engineers verses farmers. Eschborn, a wastewater engineer and co-founding team member from Pennsbury, said that original group felt very confident. However, their confidence went splat. The group took seventh and lost to the farmers.

The group wasn't discouraged. They redesigned their cannon and returned a year later. In the groups second-ever competition, they took first place.

They continued competing and still do. But they couldn't stop thinking about holding the world record for the pumpkin fired farthest out of a cannon. The record had been more than 4,000 feet.

Over the years the group did their research. They designed a cannon that is 10 inches in diameter and 90 feet in height. They sorted through all sorts of pumpkins to find out which types were the best to shoot and which types were the roundest. You want

the roundest and densest pumpkins possible, usually white or green ones, according to Verne Weidman, a group member and retired engineer from West Bradford.

Then, in 2006, Weidman discovered that a University of Florida professor had created a hybrid pumpkin from those found in tropical regions. They were exactly what the group was looking for. "We finally found a perfectly round pumpkin," Weidman said. Round pumpkins fly through the air better than those that aren't. If they aren't round, they wobble.

"The pumpkin is the most important thing," said Alex Eschborn, Ralph's son, from Thorndale. And they were able to find multiple pumpkins that they were happy with because they aren't reusable. "Once you shoot it," Alex joked, "it's all done."

So, in 2009, the group still led by Eschborn and which had grown to include both his sons, Eric of Chadds Ford, and Alex, set out to shoot a pumpkin farther than anyone had ever shot a pumpkin out of a cannon before.

Although the World Punkin Chunkin Competition is held in Delaware, where the competition originated, that is not the best place to fire a pumpkin if you are going for distance.

According to the Eschborns, you want warm temperatures. And second, you want to shoot from a higher elevation where the air is thinner. Georgetown, Del. is out because its close to sea level where the air is denser.

The group chose Moab, Utah, in 2009. Moab is 5,000 feet above sea level and the desert air is supposed to be warm. Plus, Moab is home to a regional Punkin Chunkin competition.

In Moab, shooting from a base elevation of 5,000 feet they broke the first world record. However, weather was not on their side. While there in late October of 2009, it was the coldest week for that period in 45 years and there was 4 inches of snow on the ground -- not the warm weather they were looking for.

Although they broke the previous record by shooting a pumpkin 4,623.43 feet, beating the previous record of 4,491 feet and earning a spot in the "Guinness Book of World Records," "we still weren't happy with that," Alex said.

They weren't happy because it hadn't broken, what Ralph described as "the holy grail." No one had shot a pumpkin 5,280 feet -- one mile.

They made plans to return this year and went over Labor Day weekend 2010 hoping to take advantage of warmer weather. And returning brought more adventures.

Getting there again though, had its challenges. They have to not only transport a 90-foot cannon 2,000 miles, they had to transport the 12 pumpkins they had chosen and to keep them from rotting. Doing that meant building a specially designed preservation container, sort of like a big modified cooler. And there was the one pumpkin that was part of Alex's carry on luggage when he flew to Utah.

It wasn't just the pumpkins that had an interesting ride. While driving the cannon through a Midwest state, the truck was pulled over by police. It turned out a trailer that size hauling a giant cannon will get you pulled over. Those in the truck, including Weidman and Eric, told the police officer that the cannon was farm equipment. They were allowed to proceed but couldn't use the interstate.

On the first day shooting their pumpkins this year, that Friday before Labor Day, shooting a pumpkin at close to the speed of sound, the group broke their own world record and captured that "holy grail."

"The conditions were favorable," Alex joked. The pumpkin traveled 5,545.43 feet. "We didn't just reach a mile," Ralph said. "We crashed past it."

Shooting the pumpkin requires people on both ends though -- those that fire it on one end and those that are where it's expected to land on the other. That, Eric explained, "it's like hunting." He said you sit around and look busy and you make sure you have

your running shoes on. The pumpkins land within 100 yards of each other but it's good to keep your head up. The pumpkins smash into the ground causing small craters, littering the ground with chunks. "You try and not be where it's going to come down," Alex said.

Even though the world record belongs to the group, they don't plan on stopping competing at the World Punkin Chunkin competitions. They took third at the competition which was held last weekend.

"We enjoy the community and the competition," Ralph said.

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