

## ‘BROTHERHOOD FOR LIFE’

# An electrifyingly good time



DANIEL SANDLIN MIN/TIMES-DISPATCH

Barry Stephenson of Oklahoma City (foreground, left) and Daniel Williams of Detroit compete during the 2018 Electric Football World Championships and Convention, which is taking place at a hotel near Richmond International Airport.

Electric Football World Championships again held in Richmond area

**BY JIM MATTINGLY**  
RICHMOND TIMES DISPATCH

Washington Redskins training camp isn't the only football in Richmond.

On Saturday inside a hotel near Richmond International Airport, about 50 players were competing in the electric football world championships. There was yelling and strong competition. But above all else, there was fun.

The 2016 Electric Football World Championships



The tabletop game was created in 1947 and has been popular since. More than 40 million units have been sold





DANIEL SANDLIN MIN/TIMES-DISPATCH

**Anthony Nabill (left), 8, of Richmond and Brodie Kalista, 6, of Spartanburg, S.C., try their hand at electric football. As the games are played, there's talk among the adults about taking grandchildren to Disney World, the upcoming football season (a lot of players are Dallas Cowboys fans) and catching up on how one another's families are.**

and Convention is in the Richmond area for the second straight year. It's a weekend that brings players from all over the country to compete in a game that many of them have played since childhood and crowns the champion of electric football. The convention at the Four Points by Sheraton hotel started Friday and ends today with the championship games and an awards ceremony.

The game is played like regular football - 11 players on each side, with the goal of scoring a touchdown. But while a normal football field is made of grass or artificial turf, an electric football field is made of metal - and it vibrates. Players don't run in straight lines, instead, they are programmed by

their coaches to move certain ways. That doesn't always happen as designed, depending on a coach's skill and how the board vibrates.

Davis Nickles, playing with his favorite Oregon Ducks received a kickoff from Daniel William's Philadelphia Eagles. The return lanes were open, but Nickles' player began running sideways and ran out of bounds at the 5-yard line.

"That's the beauty of electric football," said referee Vance Warren Sr., of Washington.

The tabletop game was created in 1947 and has been popular since its inception. More than 40 million of the games has been sold, said Doug Strohm, the president of

Tudor Games, the company that created the game.

The game has evolved in its seven decades of existence, said Strohm, who added that technology has been one of the biggest changes. People have turned to video games for their football fix, but there's still a strong following of electric football players, he said.

Coaches, like Nickles and Williams, are the ones who physically play the game - calling plays, positioning the players and making the in-game decisions. It's an intense game that requires precision and knowledge of the two teams and the rules.

"It's sort of a cross between Strat-O-Matic and three-dimensional chess," said Strohm, refer-

ring to the popular baseball board game.

Some of the players have complete team sets and keep their rosters up to date. Others play with old teams from their childhood. The sets are painted with great detail by painters like Chris Bopst of Richmond, who helped organize the convention. The players' characteristics, some all the way down to their tattoos are painted on and showcased.

"I love football, and I love art," Bopst said.

The dedication to the game and the art is something to behold, he added.

Warren, the referee, played the game as a boy but gave it up before returning a few years ago, a story many players share.

"Most of us played as kids, then life, kids, girls, jobs took all that away," he said. "Then we came back to it."

The 47-year-old travels the country to referee games and or-

ganize tournaments. There are six tournaments total every year, with the culmination at the world championships.

As the games are played, there's talk about taking grandkids to Disney World, the upcoming football season (a lot of players are Dallas Cowboys fans) and catching up on how one another's families are.

The fandom is on full display when the players see together. Players wear their favorite team's jersey. They wear their favorite team's shorts and have special game accessories made with their favorite team's logo on it.

That support for favorite teams was on full display during Nickles and Williams matchup.

Nickles, who has played for more than 50 years, drove nine hours from Oxford, Ala., donned a bright yellow Oregon Ducks jersey. His counterpart wore a Philadelphia Eagles No. 12 Randall Cunningham jersey despite being

from Detroit.

With Nickles' team on offense and Williams' on defense, Nickles bent over and began to yell out a play.

"Blue 17, Mario, be patient, 26 open up the door," Nickles said to his players.

The switch was flipped to start the play, and Nickles completed a pass that brought his team 30 yards from a touchdown. On the next play, his team scored six points, which prompted joyful shouts. But on the ensuing kickoff, Williams returned it for a touchdown of his own.

There was no pouting or shouts of frustration after either touchdown. Instead, there was a high five between the two players.

"This is like a family reunion," said Nickles, who emerged victorious. It's a brotherhood for life. There is one common bond, the love for electric football.

**jmattingly@timesdispatch.com**