



Steve Moore, a former futures trader, enlisted the help of friends, experts and customers when he stepped from the fire engine into the heat of the leisure market  
TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER JACK HILL

## Trebles all round at darts club where technology makes its mark

Steve Moore overcame a problem Hawk-Eye hadn't solved to make his venture a success

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A tendency towards plotting quixotic adventures, sometimes over a few drinks, is nothing unusual. What sets Steve Moore apart is his willingness to act on his flights of fancy, even if it's against all prevailing advice.

Take the time he told his dad that he was considering completing a circumnavigation of the globe in a fire engine. Perhaps understandably, Moore Sr, a former firefighter, warned him it was a terrible idea.

“My instinct when someone says that is, ‘OK, it must actually be a brilliant idea’,” says Mr Moore.

In 2011 he led a team of 24 friends who took turns driving a modified fire engine 31,663 miles across 28 countries and five continents, raising more than £100,000 for lung cancer charities in the process. They hold a Guinness world record for the longest journey by fire engine, with Mr Moore returning to Greenwich 294 days after he started.

Parts of the journey were “awful”, he recalls, but he reckons he's put even more work, and certainly more money, into his next weird and wonderful mission, this time to reinvent the the sport of darts.

His business, Flight Club, runs three venues in Britain which host what the company calls “social darts” — faster, simplified group games based loosely on the traditional sport.

The first site opened in Shoreditch, east London, three years ago. It brings in millions of pounds a year, and there's a six-month waiting list to play on the most popular nights.

There's another venue in west London, one in Manchester, a franchise operation in Chicago and a further site in the capital opens this month. The company may have quickly hit the bullseye once it started trading, but Mr Moore says he and his co-founder and friend Paul Barham suffered during its three-year gestation.

The idea came to the co-founders over a pint six years ago while they watched a group of young people playing "killer", the knockout darts-based game. "I thought, why don't more people do that any more?"

"I spent two years just doing the business plan in a shed in my garden. I had no idea about commercial property, bars or leases or employing people," says Mr Moore, 41, a former futures trader.

One of the trickiest aspects, he says, was developing the advanced camera-based "vision" system that tracks darts as players throw them, scores them and instantly displays results and action replays on a large screen next to the board.

He could have much more easily employed a custom dart board with sensors in it, but that would have meant abandoning his wish to use traditional boards.

"We wanted to have real dart boards because they're iconic. Like a red telephone box, it feels good. A plastic dart board just isn't the same. So we had this vision problem to solve which turned into a passion."

Mr Moore says he discovered that even Hawk-Eye, the sports technology company which has developed adjudication systems for tennis, cricket, rugby and football, hadn't cracked the problem.

"You need to make a billion calculations for three darts; it's ridiculous. There's an almost infinite number of combinations and angles a dart can land on. Tennis and football is easier because you've got this sphere to follow; a thin dart gives terrible information. By the time the third dart comes in the system can be blindsided [by the other darts]."

The solution was to forecast based on following the players' throw and the dart in the air, but Mr Moore admits he wouldn't have known where to start. Instead, he enlisted Jason Dale, a computer vision expert who had worked on a Nasa project to develop autonomous in-flight refuelling systems. "He didn't care about darts but he realised the maths was really difficult really quickly."

The system makes an error about once every 10,000 throws. "The customers probably don't notice."

Other Flight Club recruits have been enlisted from companies ranging from Disney to Credit Suisse.

"Be the most stupid person in the room," Mr Moore advises. "You start off doing everything in a start-up and gradually you hire better people for each aspect. I've called everyone I know who I thought could be useful. Now when I call they say, 'Oh is it my turn to come and work for you?'. I don't know how I've convinced people to leave good jobs and mothball their companies to come and work on this."

When *The Times* visits the Shoreditch Flight Club the cry of “let’s play darts” — familiar to aficionados — can be heard, but other than the free-flowing booze, there’s little to comfort the purist.

Across the venue as many as 288 people can be playing at once, and it’s not uncommon to see a dozen players in a group game on one board. Winners don’t even need to finish on a double, a key rule of the real thing.

“We got rid of that pretty much straight away,” says Mr Moore. “Our minimum number of players is six and a darts player doesn’t want to play with so many people. It makes no sense to them. We respect them, but our paths don’t really cross.”

Customers have been as important as Mr Moore’s network in developing the idea, he says. The co-founders held about 250 painstaking four-hour focus groups with players before the first site opened. “The customers made the business and that’s why it works. That took a lot of time,” says Mr Moore.

Some modifications happened by accident: for example, Flight Club’s option of three different oches, or throw lines — easy, medium and hard. “Everyone was having an amazing time in one of the focus groups. We realised we’d put the [oche] too close to the board. People enjoyed it more. So we’ve given players three lines.

“We find that normally the boys who played once when they were 16 insist on throwing from the ‘pro’ line and girls who haven’t played much before sensibly go to the front line, and win. It’s 39 per cent easier [from the first line to the last] so non players generally win, which is fun.”

The lengthy research stage meant the start-up had a large database of potential players before its launch and Mr Moore says the first site has been operating at capacity almost every night since it opened.

Flight Club has raised £12 million in equity finance and borrowed £5 million, says Mr Moore. Sales last year were £7.4 million, with a gross profit of £4 million.

The trick to the healthy margins has been making the game affordable, which Mr Moore says means punters spend much more on food and drink, which can be ordered to playing areas at the tap of a button.

“The activity itself is £30 per playing area, so it’s about £3 each typically. People come, enjoy themselves and spend more because the offer’s good. The food and beverage spending is insane. Everyone walks back and picks up their drink or eats something after a throw. You could put 19 pizzas out and they’ll go.”

The company made a small pre-tax loss last year as it poured funds into expansion and upgrades.

“The team are spending all our profits and so they should. It’s all about reinvesting and adding more venues now. We have refurbished the [first venue], redone our graphics engine, come up with new games. There was no need to because we have such strong demand but you need to invest on the way up rather than the way down.”

## Fires kept burning after round-the-world adventure



The fire engine held up well on its round-the-world trip because the team nurtured it

Attempting a circumnavigation of the globe in a Mercedes fire engine sounds like a pretty silly pursuit, admits Steve Moore. “They’re only supposed to go five miles at a time.”

Mr Moore had the idea to raise money for charity through the trip while his father, Garth, a former firefighter at Wimborne Fire Station in Dorset, was suffering from lung cancer.

When Garth died in 2009, Mr Moore felt he had to go through with the plan and organising the strange journey quickly became an obsession, he says.

“I got addicted to it. I’d be spending 20 hours a day on it, I didn’t sleep properly for months. I learnt Russian, some mechanics, had some trauma training. Just getting into China took 18 months of planning and a lot of diplomacy.”

The water tank was taken out of the truck to make space for storage, including a spare for every critical component. “She held up well because we looked after her.”

He says the record-breaking journey was “enjoyable but equally pretty unenjoyable at times”. Crossing the Pacific Ocean in a cargo ship was a particular low. “We weren’t really supposed to be on it. That was awful, no positives. It was weeks of vomiting.”

However, Mr Moore says he “lived more in a week, every week, than some people do in a lifetime” during the adventure.

“All the Russians were phenomenal. In Kazakhstan people were so nice. China was crazy, we were like rock’n’roll stars there. The before and after photos are funny; I’ve got a beard and long hair and I aged so much [in the latter].

“I was so ill when I got back. I don’t think I’ve ever quite got over it. I wasn’t doing too well four or five months. I was staring into space. But it was a hell of an achievement and I met some fantastic people.”

He even believes the trip, which took about nine months to complete, helped to blood him for the trials of getting Flight Club off the ground.

“It completely prepared me for starting this business, otherwise there was no way I’d have considered it. I had a whole new skillset. It helped in raising money too; if I could get a fire engine around the world, investors were sure I could open a business.”

What happened to the storied truck? “It’s in a museum. I grew really attached to it. But I saw it six months ago and I felt quite sick.”