



March 2024 | Vol. 27 • Issue 12

Print Edition

Wait list leads to show floor expansion

2024 Amusement Expo show planners expect banner year for Las Vegas event

AT: Pam Sherborne
psherborne@amusementtoday.com

LAS VEGAS, Nev. — Show officials of the 2024 Amusement Expo International (AEI), set for March 18-20, had to do a quick pivot last month to expand the trade show floor after seeing an increase of more than 10 percent in booth space demand.

The numbers steadily climbed toward the 700-space reservation mark, a new record for the event that will be held at the Las Vegas Convention Center, Las Vegas, Nevada.

"Based on the energy, enthusiasm and attendance figures, which have already surpassed last year's numbers, it looks like it'll be another successful event," said Luke Adams, AEI show board chairman. "Each year, we receive feedback from show attendees and exhibitors. I think AEI's continued growth proves that we've heard, we've listened and we continue to give the industry what it wants."

The AEI is unique in that it is owned and hosted by two leading professional associations, the Amusement and Music Operators Association (AMOA) and the American Amusement Machine Association (AAMA). AEI brought on the Billiard and Home

Leisure Expo in 2022. It is owned by the Billiard Congress of America (BCA).

The AEI show is managed by W. T. Glasgow Inc.

According to feedback from previous attendees, the accessibility to games and services, as well as the company leaders who represent them at AEI, is vital. The hundreds of exhibits feature the latest product and service innovations for the out-of-home entertainment industry, which includes virtual reality (VR), amusement arcades, family entertainment centers (FECs), digital music and much more.

Feedback from exhibitors also is positive. In 2023,

93% of exhibitors reported new concrete sales leads after the 2023 event.

This year, during the three-and-a-half-day event, professionals representing all areas of the out-of-home entertainment industry will discuss the most pressing issues facing the industry. Sessions will highlight unique perspectives and approaches to new game technologies, such as pinball, jukeboxes and virtual reality, as well as customer acquisition and retention strategies, space design and new markets for family entertainment centers.

► See VEGAS, page 6



Planners of the 2024 Amusement Expo International, set for March 18-20, had to expand its trade show floor last month to eliminate or at least reduce the number of exhibitors on a wait list, adding they hoped to eliminate the wait list entirely. This year's event will be held at the Las Vegas Convention Center, Las Vegas, Nevada. AT/JOHN W.C. ROBINSON



Big Al's calls its wristbands "tap to play wearables."
COURTESY BIG AL'S

Big Al's FEC partners with Embed's new GoTrain program

AT: Tim Baldwin
tbaldwin@amusementtoday.com

VANCOUVER, Wash. — Along the West Coast, the first of Big Al's family entertainment centers opened 17 years ago. Today, the company has five facilities — two in California, one in Oregon, one in Idaho and the original location in Vancouver, Washington.

"There are little differences," said Bob Wentz, facilities director. "The first location, here in Vancouver, is the biggest single-story building; it's 65,000 square feet. We have 42 lanes and about a hundred arcade games and a big sports bar. The Beaverton and Meridian locations are the same. Those are two stories and 67,000 square feet. The arcades in those two stores are on the top floor and have about 120 games. They have an additional bar upstairs that we call a Sky Box. The two California locations are smaller. They have fewer lanes, but we expanded the arcades there to about 130 games."

Wentz believes the quality of the facilities and the quality of service have been keys to the company's success.

"What sets us apart is our CEO doesn't really like to call us a family entertainment center, even though that is what we kind of fall under," Wentz told Amusement

► See BIG AL'S, page 8

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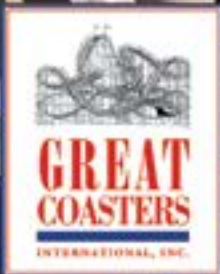
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- Six Flags Darien Lake: Predator
- Michigan's Adventure: Wolverine Wildcat
- Beech Bend: Kentucky Rumbler
- Fun Spot: White Lightning
- Europa-Park: Wodan



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AMUSEMENT VIEWS



AT NOTEBOOK: John W.C. Robinson, jrobinson@amusementtoday.com

FLINT'S VIEW: Bubba Flint

You've come a long way...



Robinson

I was a child when video arcades and pumping quarters into games (besides pinball) was fairly new. I can even remember my mother giving me a dollar to go play in the arcade while she shopped and saying: "Make it last!" — completely unaware that she had just paid for four games at most that, sadly, would exhaust my three lives each in really no time at all.

It was not too long before Chuck E. Cheese and Showbiz Pizza start bringing branded, chain arcades to many major suburbs. Combined with privately-owned facilities, family entertainment centers were quickly becoming a trend. As their popularity grew, FECs would add laser tag arenas, Whirley Ball, mini golf and more. They found homes in shopping malls, strip malls and just random standalone operations. Small but mighty, kids would find escape in the (literal) fun and games.

During all of this, the home video game market exploded — Atari, Nintendo, Sega and now Microsoft and Sony — and, with a system in nearly every home, video games have just become an integral part of our popular culture.

It's 2024. Video game franchises — such as *Five Nights at Freddy's* and *Borderlands* — are popping up monthly at the local cineplex. A streaming TV show based on *Halo* was featured in a commercial during the recent Super Bowl (a time slot which easily cost millions of dollars).

And — most importantly — family entertainment centers have become the fastest growing portion of IAAPA's membership. FECs are drawing in crowds of families, expanding into rides and virtual reality, trampoline parks are becoming active additions within their walls, and chains are adding new locations every day.

No longer a novelty, the arcade — the original FEC — has quickly evolved into a vital part of the amusement industry ... and pop culture.



INDUSTRY VOICE: Laura Cañellas, Party Center Software

Marketing plays major role in FEC success

Family Entertainment Centers generate an estimated \$10 billion annually, catering to families seeking shared experiences.

In this engagement-driven industry, a robust marketing strategy is crucial. Effective marketing isn't just about attracting more visitors; it's about crafting an experience that resonates with the very essence of what families seek when they set out for a day of fun. Strategic promotion can turn visitors into loyal fans, boosting a family entertainment center's longevity and success.

Families aren't merely the customers of FECs; they are the centerpiece. A great marketing team must understand their dynamics, anticipate their needs and curate events and promotions accordingly.

Marketing is an investment. Memorable,



Cañellas

branded experiences and engaging campaigns ensure the magic doesn't fade once families leave.

How much should an FEC allocate towards marketing? The U.S. Small Business Administration suggests businesses allocate 7-8% of their revenue toward marketing. However, this can vary based on specific circumstances. For start-ups or new centers, investing closer to 12% can build brand awareness quickly. Established centers with a loyal customer base can allocate around 7-10% of total revenue. In high-competition areas, a budget leaning towards 10-12% can help a business stay ahead.

By prioritizing marketing efforts, FECs secure their place in the hearts and calendars of families, laying the groundwork for their center to bring joy and wonder to many generations.

Amusement TODAY
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Amusement Today is an independent, privately-owned trade news-based publication for the greater amusement, theme and water parks industries, published by Amusement Today, Inc., P.O. Box 5427, Arlington, Texas 76005. Amusement Today publishes 14 issues per year (distributed digitally); EXTRA! EXTRA! Desktop Edition (daily digital news); Amusement Today.com (information based website) and posts as needed on social media platforms. Amusement Today, Inc. conducts an industry survey, with numerous categories, and releases results during the awards ceremony and on GoldenTicketAwards.com (website for Golden Ticket Awards).

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2 MINUTE DRILL



AT: Janice Witherow

Steven Wooley, VLocker North America

Anyone who knows **Steven Wooley** can attest to the energy, strategic planning abilities, engaging sense of humor and attention to detail he brings to the job. As COO of **VLocker North America, LLC**, a leading company of locker system worldwide, Steven has a skill set that includes new business development, operations and event management and leadership. His favorite quote is "Make memories worth repeating" by **Dolly Parton!**

Title: Chief Operations Officer.

Number of years in the industry: 32.

The best thing about the industry:

Observing its continuous innovation and growth and the creation of new experiences for families. Our collective effort is aimed at bringing joy to their faces every day.

Favorite amusement ride: I am an adrenalin junkie and love the highest, fastest, longest, with lots of flips! I have not found a ride I didn't like yet! Hard to pick just one!

If I wasn't working in the amusement industry, I would be ... Dead!

Biggest challenge facing our industry: The amusement sector has consistently strived to stay ahead of changes and challenges related to safety and economic factors.

The thing I like most about amusement/water park season is ... Not only the opportunity to spend time with my family and friends, but also witnessing the positive effect our business and products have in ensuring guests have a safe and secure experience.

All-time favorite sitcom: *Big Bang Theory*. Growing up a little on the dorky side I can relate to many of the jokes.

Coolest Superhero: Captain America.

Last obsession: Trying to keep my pickup truck clean. I know it's a truck, but inside it looks like new!

In one word, my desk is ... Headquarters.

On the way to work, I always ... Try not to fall into the pool as I commute to the backyard!

People say I do this a lot: Even on challenging days, I have a knack for bringing joy to others.



During his more than 30 years in the amusement industry, **Steven Wooley** has become known for his fun and witty personality. COURTESY VLOCKER

When I am in a hurry, I fix this for dinner: Toasted sourdough bread, with salami, turkey, bacon, provolone cheese, lettuce, tomato, with a hard fried egg and light mayo.

You are at the bookstore. What section do we find you in? Do-it-yourself.

In a meeting, I like to ... Have an agenda, identify action items quickly, note these and move on to next task.

If someone were to play you in a movie, who would it be? Tom Hanks.

Last moment of self care: I have a short nature trail on my property, and after work many evenings, I like to take a walk around the property to reflect prior to going to the house to be with the family.

Favorite place to unwind: I relish tranquil evenings by the campfire with my friend Jack, sipping a bit of Coke and reminiscing about the day.

My next big splurge will be ... A new boat for the family to enjoy the summer on the water.

For me, a perfect moment is ... Having a room full of friends and family all relaxing together!

I am most afraid of ... Large groups of people and public speaking.

THE INDUSTRY SEEN

Cowabunga for Valentine's Day



GIBSONTOWN, Fla. — On Valentine's Day morning during the 2024 IISF Trade Show & Extravanza, Leanna Muscato (Knoebels Amusement Resort) shared a little valentine cheer giving out Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles tattoos. Getting in on the fun were (l to r) B. Derek Shaw (*Amusement Today*); Stephanie Moore (McGowan Allied Specialty Insurance); Gary Slade (*Amusement Today*); Joe James (McGowan Allied Specialty Insurance); Leanna Muscato and Sue Nichols (5centride). AT/GARY SLADE

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▶ EXPO

Continued from page 1

Sessions take place the first day and a half of the event, with the trade show open the last two days.

Topics planned for the first day of sessions include People Management... Keys to Creating a Highly Effective Team, VR Arcade Game Summit, Marketing Trends for FECs, The Power of Connecting Games, "I Have Space, Now What?" and Game Room Design.

After the conclusion of the sessions on that first day, there will be a VR Reception that evening.

Educational topics for Tuesday, March 19, begin in the morning. They include Advanced Arcade Operations; Games, Card Systems and Redemption; Payment Options for Your Street Locations; VR Arcade Game Summit; AI 101: A Beginner's Primer for the Amusement Industry; BCA Expo: Brunswick Gold Crown 6 Training; ATM Update



2024/What You Need to Know; Food and Beverage Concepts for FECs; Laser Tag Operator Perspectives; A Roundtable Discussion; VR Arcade Game Summit and rounding the day off with Industry Roundtables.

The keynote presentation will take place on this day from 12:15-1:15 p.m. It will be delivered by **Herm Edwards**. In his address, Edwards will shine a spotlight on how small accomplishments help execute vision in tackling everyday goals. As an ESPN football analyst and former NFL and college head coach, Edwards will take attendees through his unique football journey as a player and coach to uncover the life lessons learned along the way.

To better understand the teams' roles and re-



The hundreds of exhibits at the AEI show feature the latest product and service innovations for the out-of-home entertainment industry, which includes virtual reality, amusement arcades, family entertainment centers, digital music and much more. Seen in 2023 and plan to be back for 2024 are Intercard, Bay Tek and Apple Industries. AT/JOHN W.C. ROBINSON

sponsibilities, participants will experience a "huddle" to emphasize teamwork, communication and collaboration required to execute a successful game plan.

Later on Tuesday, there will be a BCA Expo-Brunswick Dealer Reception from 3:30-7 p.m. and the All-Industry Gala Reception from 5:15-7:15 p.m.

The ribbon cutting ceremony for the 2024 AEI trade show is set for 9:45-10:45 a.m., Wednesday, March 20. The exhibit hall is open that day from 10 a.m.-5 p.m.

AEI's focused show floor is designed to meet all the needs of owner/operators within entertainment and amusement venues, along with prospective entrepreneurs.

The Beers and Cheers Reception along with the Industry Awards Presentation is set for 5-6 p.m.

A BCA Party is set for 5:30-8:30 p.m., this day.

Thursday, March 21, kicks off with the AMOA Breakfast and Membership Meeting.

The BCA General Membership Meeting/Breakfast is set for 8:30-9:30 a.m.

The exhibit hall is open from 10 a.m.-4 p.m.

AEI brings a huge added value to attendees and exhibitors, with collocating partnerships with the Na-

2024 Amusement Expo schedule of events

Monday, March 18

10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. - Registration open
11:30 a.m. to 12:15 p.m. - Education Session Luncheon
1:00 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. - Education sessions
6:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. - VR Reception

Tuesday, March 19

7:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. - Registration open
9:00 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. - Education sessions
11:30 a.m. to 12:15 p.m. - Education lunch
12:15 p.m. to 1:25 p.m. - Keynote presentation by **Herm Edwards**
1:15 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. - Education sessions
5:15 p.m. to 7:15 p.m. - All-Industry Gala Reception

Wednesday, March 20

7:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. - Registration open
9:30 a.m. to 10:00 a.m. - Ribbon-cutting Ceremony
10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. - Exhibit Hall open
5:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. - Beers & Cheers Reception and Industry Awards Presentation

Thursday, March 21

8:30 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. - Registration open
10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. - Exhibit Hall open



AEI's trade show runs for two days. This year those dates run March 20 and 21. Semnox Solutions LLC (above) and Embed (below) were on hand during the 2023 show and will be back this year. AT/JOHN W.C. ROBINSON



tional Bulk Vendors Association and the Laser Tag Convention, which continues to strengthen opportunities for all in attendance. These events naturally complement each other and deliver an even stronger platform for attendees and exhibitors.

AMOA is a national trade association that promotes and strengthens the currency-operated machine industry. It unites operators and other profes-

sionals beyond the scope of amusement machines, providing the tools and support to help businesses grow and thrive.

The AAMA is an international not-for-profit 501(c)(3) trade organization representing the manufacturers, distributors, suppliers, professional service providers and location owner/operators of the coin-operated amusement industry.

•amusementexpo.org

Amusement Expo International 2024

March 18-21, 2024, Las Vegas, Nevada — Exhibitor Listing

A.E. Schmidt	1353	Fish Game Kings	2127	Predator	1513
A&A Global Industries	1027	Flagship Carpets	2432	Presidential Billiards	1405
Activate Entertainment	1800	Flatline Corp.	1137	Primero Games	1715
Adrenaline Amusements	1827	Fun Express	853	Prominent Games	1927
Alan-1	1705	Funovation	300	Promotex USA	2340
Allpoint Wireless / Wireless ATM Store Inc	501	FunTrax LLC	1104	Pucker Powder by Creative Concepts	605
Allstar Vending	1140	GameBox Builders, LLC	1847	Pyramid Technologies, Inc.	1709
American Alpha, Inc.	1901	Genmega Inc.	1811	Quattronics	1747
American Amusement Machine Association (AAMA)	2409	GLD Products	1415	QubicaAMF Bowling Products	843
American Changer	353	Good Stuff, a Division of Basic Fun, Inc.	1853	RAM Game Room	1605
AMI Entertainment	527	Hero Zone VR	1939	Redemption Plus	405
Amusement & Music Operators Association (AMOA)	2431	HF Cloth	1609	Redplum Games	2101
Amusement Connect	510	Hoffman Mint	350	Replay Magazine	900
Amusement Products	2118	Hologate GmbH	2317	Rhode Island Novelty	101
Amusement Resource Connection / AmusementRC	142	HOT GAMES TAIWAN	2006	Rilix	2047
Amusement Source International LLC	607	Huizhou Double Star Sports Goods Co., Ltd	1644	River City Amusements	2001
Amusement Today	2313	Hytix Ticketing	400	Rocket Amusements	653
Amusement X	2315	IAAPA	940	Rocket Ball LLC	1552
Andamiro Co.,LTD.	1115	iCOMBAT Laser Tag	1805	Roller	953
Andy Cloth	1545	Ideal One Amusement Software	749	S & B Candy and Toy/St. Louis Game Company	2327
Apex Commercial Capital /Firstlease	748	IGPM DISTRIBUTING	2015	Sacoa Cashless System	847
Apple Industries	715	Imperial International	1727	SafeparkUSA	1909
Approvely	610	Incredible Technologies	627	Seasons Amusements	2245
Arachnid 360	313	Incredivend	516	SEGA Amusements by Kaizen Entertainment	227
Ardosia Nacional	1639	INNOVATIVE CONCEPTS IN ENTERTAINMENT, INC.	414	Semnox Solutions LLC	1047
Ardosias Santa Catarina LTDA	1549	Innovative Technology Americas	913	Service First Processing	2410
Art Attack	850	INOWIZE	2227	Shaanxi Zhongsheng Tianze FRP Tech Co., LTD	1641
Arti Grafiche Julia & RFID Canada	1052	InterCard	917	Shaffer Distributing	744
AstroSystems Inc.	453	International Currency Technologies Corporation	518	Shenzhen Insovision Technology Co., Ltd.	250
ATM Merchant Services	842	iPlayCO	401	Shot Darts	1708
Attrackt	136	Ivey Promotions LLC	1917	Signature Systems, Inc.	1743
AVS Companies	509	Iwan Simonis Inc	1531	Skee-Ball	1444
Axes.ai	905	J. Pechauer Custom Cues	1341	Skeech Games, LLC	1453
AZ Amusement Pros LLC	2037	Jazwares	600	SkillGameKiosk.com	2008
Badass Skill Games / Horizon Software Technology	2009	Jenka Lab	1913	Skyscraper NoveltyLLC	2202
Bandai Namco Amusement America, Inc.	127	Jet Games Corporation	813	Smart Charging Technologies	1802
Banilla Games	2117	JK Coin Supply	805	Smart Industries Corp	111
Baton Lock & Hardware Co., Inc.	134	JVL	1911	Smart Software	138
Battle Company	2203	Kestell Furniture	1349	Square Entertainment, LLC	1947
Bay Tek Entertainment	727	Kettler International, Inc.	1741	SSM Vending	1236
Beechmont Product Solutions	2112	KioPlay By KioSoft	937	Standard Change-Makers - RKU Standard Inc.	942
Benchmark Games International	141	Klopp: Money Handling Equipment	941	Stern Pinball, Inc.	213
Betson Enterprises	327	Koda Sports	1615	Sunstar Vending	1036
Big Daddy Games, LLC	1815	Komuse	1007	Sureshot Redemption	837
Blacklight Attractions / Halloween Productions	301	LAI Games	439	Sureway Games	743
BMI Leisure	1804	Laser Tag Arenas by ARC Studios / ARC Studios	2004	Suzohapp	2236
BMI Merchandise	537	LaserBlast	1111	Sweet Robo	2010
Bowling Center Management	700	Laserforce	1953	Team Play, Inc.	1015
Brand Vending Products	1127	Lasertag.com by Zone	1905	The Really Big Crane Company, LLC	505
Brunswick Billiards Group	1305	Legacy Billiards	1401	The TerraBall Table Company	1447
Brunswick Bowling Products	201	Lock America Inc.	520	Tigapo Nayax	936
California House	1527	Lockdogs	2311	Tiger Products, Inc.	1546
Calplush Toy Corporation	1050	Longoni Cues	1736	Tokens Direct	2235
candymachines.com	1131	Lou Powered by Evosus	1636	Toltec	1551
Captains Auction Warehouse	103	Lucky Core Inc.	2108	Top Vending Machine Electronics Co., Ltd.	153
Cardinal Distributing	1132	M3t	1807	TouchMagix	209
Cardinal Xpress	2205	Managed Installation Services Group LLC	1635	TouchTunes	827
CashCardKiosk / Kiosk Prepaid	2200	McDermott Cue Mfg., LLC	1227	Toy Factory	2135
CenterEdge Software	1910	Metaagrow	500	Trainertainment	2430
Championship Billiards	1645	Meucci Cues	1630	Trestle	947
Characters Unlimited Inc.	2331	Moss Distributing, Inc.	105	Triotech Amusement Inc.	404
Coast to Coast Entertainment	237	Mr. Billiard International	1600	Tweeten Fibre Co., Inc.	1548
Coastal Amusements	513	Mueller Recreational Products	1601	UIC Payworld	1904
Coin Tech Cashless System	354	NanoOptix Inc.	2013	UNIS Technology (Canada) Ltd.	705
Complete Signs	608	National Dart Association	2240	UNIS Technology (Canada) Ltd.	701
Concord Confections	1141	NBVA Scholarship Booth	1040	United L&R	1240
Core Cashless	704	Neon Warehouse	1700	Uplay America, LLC	144
Cornilleau Game Tables	1501	Night Heron Entertainment	1837	US Bowling Corporation	146
Cotton Candy Factory / Modern Vending Solutions	1252	Nodor International Inc.	1653	US Fun Machines	2105
Creative Works	1906	North American Dart Organization (NADO)	2238	Valley Dynamo	427
Cue Lees	1400	Olhausen Billiard Mfg., Inc.	1427	Valo Motion	1900
Cuestix International	1541	Olhausen Billiard Mfg., Inc.	1327	VapeTM	2234
Cypress powered by Paramount Management Group	1753	Omega Carpet Patterns	602	Venco Business Solutions	110
Daiwa by U.s Jaclean, Inc.	1852	Omega Games	2027	Viking Cues	1627
DARAFEEV	1345	Padishan International	1637	VR 360 Action LLC	2012
Delta Strike USA	2120	PAI / Payment Alliance International, Inc.	901	VRPark	2139
Diamond Billiard Products Inc.	1441	Paradise Distribution of Wyoming	148	VSR Industries, INC.	251
Diamonds Arcade Supply	1936	Party Center Software	1005	Watch Time Inc	1138
Digital Centre America, Inc.	1150	Patriot Gaming & Electronics	2114	WDD - We Do Digital	2434
Dong guan Chuangsheng Trading Co., Ltd	1652	Peek-A-Boo Toys a Division of BMI Merchandise	753	We Create Entertainment	1841
DSM Sales & Manufacturing, Inc.	1702	Phoenixdarts USA INC	1208	Western Equipment Finance	943
Elaut	245	PIA Products	601	Wizard Tag	846
Embed	637	Pipeline Games	1035	World Plush Inc.	205
Eomac Ltd.	2414	Plank & Hide	1505	WPA/BCA/PBIA	1649
exA-Arcadia	553	Play4Promo	2005	WTIwireless	1808
FECFIN - The FEC Financial Group	1109	Player One Amusement Group	1105	Z-Lite	1301
Fire Phoenix/Online Platforms Software Supplier	2239	PLAYMIND	1147		

►BIG AL'S

Continued from page 1

Today. “We try to be a place for everybody; it’s not really a place geared toward kids like a lot of family entertainment centers are. We try to have really nice buildings that other kid-friendly places don’t. Our construction, furniture and equipment — it’s kind of a premium product.”

Big Al’s has partnered with Embed for its operating system in its arcades since the beginning. That now includes the Mobile Wallet app.

“[Embed] recently launched this GoTrain [program] for Mobile Wallet,” said Wentz. “We were shown this program because we went through our three oldest locations and upgraded our swipers and kiosks, which now have the ability to use the tap function. My facility’s team worked a lot with Embed throughout that process.”

Big Al’s was among the first to experience the GoTrain program training.

“We were interested in using Mobile Wallet. It’s a cool thing for guests. Everyone’s got their phone all the time. You kind of live and die by your phone,” Wentz joked.

“The GoTrain program is an in-person gamified learning event designed to educate and empower our FEC customers to champion Mobile Wallet with their guests,” said Sara Paz, chief marketing officer, Embed. “A dedicated and experienced team travels to our customers’ venues to conduct this experience-based training that provides Mobile Wallet ‘101’s, tips and tricks, best practices and hands-on learning on guest engagement and driving the digital, contactless benefits of



Big Al’s team members and Embed staff pause from GoTrain instruction to capture a group photo. COURTESY EMBED

Mobile Wallet.”

With Mobile Wallet, Wentz noted Embed provided signage for free.

“This support is offered at no cost to our Embed family; it includes valuable offerings such as best practices sharing, payment gateway consulting, continuous training, marketing resources in the form of creative kits, and limited-time complimentary access to SaaS solutions like STATS (a cutting-edge business intelligence dashboard powered by Amazon Web Services) and the award-winning Mobile Wallet,” Paz told AT.

Wentz said Big Al’s sent out materials, such as small stickers applied to games that help guests interact with the Mobile Wallet app.

Embed feels the GoTrain on-site program is a fun experience.

“The entire training session wraps up with a multi-round gameshow to reinforce the learnings,” Paz noted. “The training is available to our Mobile Wallet customers

at no cost. When our FEC partners are able to drive uptake of Mobile Wallet amongst their customers, they can optimize the benefits and experience transformative results. We are already seeing this in actual practice — the 2022-2023 Mobile Wallet metrics from Embed customers across single and multiple locations show a 5x increase in average reload value (\$50.57) compared to cash (\$9.90) and credit card (\$31.95), with 60 percent of these transactions happening before guests enter the venue.”

The goal of the program is to create ambassadors among staff to optimize all the benefits of Mobile Wallet and enable guests to have more fun, with ease and speed by using the product. This drives increased revenue and operational efficiency.

“It was a pretty good deal for both Embed and Big Al’s to go through this process,” Wentz said. “Embed came in with a good structure, and they worked in person with key folks on our

staff. They had good presentations and came in prepared with [materials] specific to us.”

Amusement Today asked if working with Big Al’s enabled Embed to refine the program. “Absolutely!” said Paz. “GoTrain was piloted with two of our customers, one large multi-location (Big Al’s) and the other a smaller location. The program content was very well-received by the supervisors and leadership team that attended the sessions. With survey feedback and in-the-moment conversations, we quickly incorporated the feedback we received and implemented those into our recent sessions and delivery has been even better. Learning is two-way, a continuous cycle of improvement for the learner and our GoTrain team!”

“The benefit is that our staff has gone through this themselves,” said Wentz. “They thought it was pretty easy and can now communicate that to the guests.”

The GoTrain program excites Paz on a personal level: “Getting to meet our customers in person from all around the country gives us unique insights into what’s really going on in the field. It lets us experience the similarities and differences across all sizes and types of FECs and gives us the powerful ability to cater to the unique needs of each locale instead of a one-size-fits-all training solution,” she said. “Ultimately, seeing the attendees’ excitement, watching the ‘light-bulb ah-ha’ moments and sharing of new technology is a rewarding and magical experience for the participants and us. The end goal of helping our customers grow and succeed in their business is rewarding!”

With Mobile Wallet, lines at kiosks to check balances are a thing of the past, as customers can do it right at the game.

“It’s a quicker reload,” said Wentz. “I compare it to a restaurant. If you are thinking about that second drink after dinner and the server doesn’t make it there in time, you might not do it and just ask for the check. We’re hoping we will see that — adding 10 more dollars or 20 more dollars — if the guest doesn’t have to look at a line and get turned off.”

“We are looking into new training platforms, methods and incentives (like certifications), and we can’t wait to evolve our GoTrain training sessions and elevate them to the next level!” Paz said.

Embed also provided Big Al’s with significant marketing material.

“Our customers transcend mere partnerships to become esteemed members of the Embed family, an elite community of fellow trailblazers — the best of the best FECs that shape our industry today,” said Paz. “Presently, the industry lacks proactive customer success initiatives, and there’s no greater testament to true customer-centricity than our commitment to assembling a dedicated team, known as the Success Squad, focused solely on assisting customers in optimizing their Embed systems.”

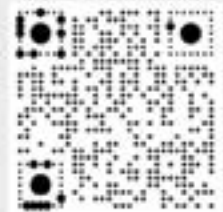
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The sports bar and grill in the Big Al’s Beaverton location has the appearance of a premium product (above left). Bowling is a component of all five Big Al’s properties (above right). COURTESY BIG AL’S



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► GCI builds Mad Racers for China's Fantasy Valley — page 14 / IAAPA FEC Summit 2024 recap — page 24

Spectrum Sports International continues to build its own success

AT: Pam Sherborne
psherborne@amusementtoday.com

LOGAN, Utah — A successful company is one that grows, changes with the times, continues to improve both products and the manufacturing of those products and knows to pivot when the need arises.

Spectrum Sports International comes to mind quickly when thinking of a list of those successful companies.

Spectrum, a manufacturer and distributor of interactive and adventure products, came on the scene in the mid-1990s when adventure and extreme sports started to grow in popularity with those who wanted to create their own levels of entertainment and challenges.

Spectrum Sports International was there when the demand was greater for mobile climbing walls than the speed at which they could be manufactured. The company built on that craving and created the first mobile zip line. By



Above are some of the Spectrum Sports International's climbing wall panels being produced. The company has installed thousands of climbing walls since its inception first as Rebound Action Sports in 1996 and then as Spectrum Sports International in 2006. At right is an example.

COURTESY SPECTRUM SPORTS; AT/GARY SLADE

adding the Auto-Belay safety system to the Mobile Zip Line with the Auto-Retract safety system, Spectrum set new safety standards.

The company moved forward and even found a successful way to pivot during the COVID-19 pandemic. Called the **AntiShanty**, that COVID-created shift is now its own company and is still successful.

In the mid-90s, extreme

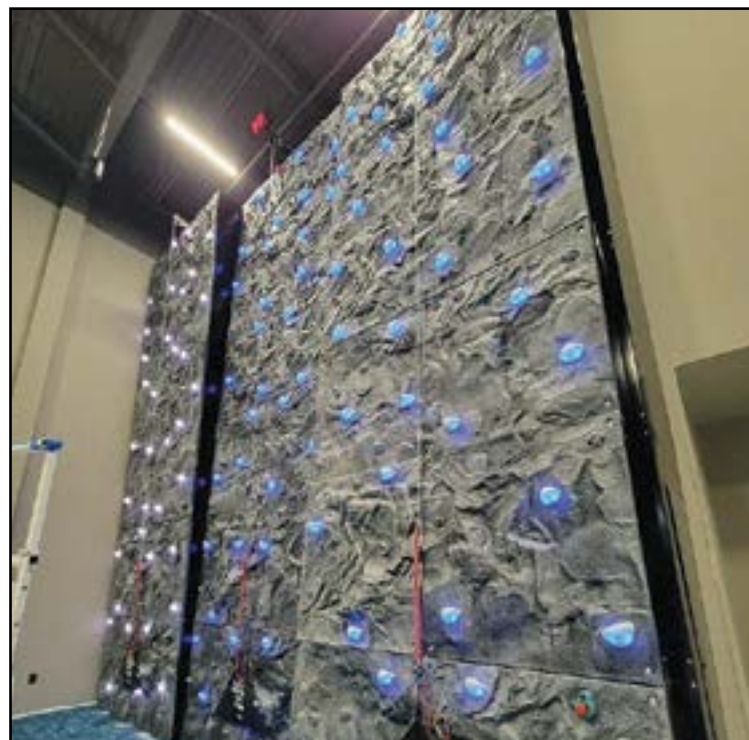
sports were becoming all the rage.

"A small group of ambitious minds collaborated to create the world's first portable climbing wall," said **Corey Hyer**, sales and marketing, Spectrum Sports International. He joined the company in 2006.

Rebound Action Sports was born.

"It was the right product at the right time," Hyer said. "Climbing walls couldn't be built fast enough. This early history was tumultuous with business partners parting ways, off-shoot companies becoming competitors and several changes of ownership."

In 2004, former Spectrum sales manager, **Rod Leishman**, acquired Rebound Action Sports and renamed it Spectrum Sports International to reflect the growing focus on interna-



tional opportunities.

In 2010, Spectrum purchased and moved into a 20,000-square-foot facility in Hyde Park, Utah.

Then in 2011, Spectrum released the industry's first mobile zip line, earning the **International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions (IAAPA)** Best New Product award.

In 2013, the Stunt Jump was released, but, soon thereafter, was discontinued.

In the next year, Spectrum Sports reentered the bungee trampoline market with the introduction of the V4 Ultimate Bungee.

Hyer said in the early 2010s, European climbing wall builders and **Clip 'N Climb** began to influence a change in the aesthetic of climbing walls. The market began to shift to geometric shapes and fun designs.

"We embraced that approach with our Klime Wallz line, and we made it mobile, which had never been done," Hyer said.

In 2016, Spectrum Sports released the Klime Wallz line-up with configurable climbing walls. The company, once again, received the IAAPA Best New Product award.

The company's growth continued, and in 2019, Spectrum purchased and moved into a 32,000-square-foot building in North Logan, Utah.

At the end of 2019 and as 2020 rolled around, with shutdowns due to the COVID pandemic, Spectrum Sports looked for ways to continue to move forward and keep employees working.

AntiShanty was launched, debuting a

► See SPECTRUM, page 11



Spectrum Sports International moved from a 20,000-square-foot building in Hyde park, Utah, into its current 32,000-square-foot location in North Logan, Utah. AT/GARY SLADE



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AT: Pam Sherborne
psherborne@amusementtoday.com

Lake Compounce in Bristol, Connecticut, is receiving a five-year, 50% tax break from the town of Southington, Connecticut, to aid in its ongoing improvement projects, which include the retracking of the Wildcat and Boulder Dash roller coasters. Wildcat is scheduled to reopen this season.

America's first amusement park will offer a full season of events as it celebrates its 178th season as the longest-running amusement park in the country. Weekends in June will feature Kids Fest, offering activities for tots, tweens and everyone in between. July and August bring live music and entertainment to the park's new floating lake stage. Visitors are encouraged to enjoy their favorite tunes during the park's all-new Beach Bash every single weekend in July and August. Plus, the park's beloved fireworks show light up the night July 4, 5, 6 and every single Saturday in July. Lake Compounce will close out the season with Phantom Fall Fest beginning Friday, September 21 and Holiday Lights returning on Friday, November 29.

Arnolds Park Amusement Park, Arnolds Park, Iowa, has officially announced the lineup for this upcoming season's Live at the Lake Concert series.

The outdoor concert series kicks off Saturday, May 26, at Preservation Plaza, with the first band of the season being **Xpedition**, a tribute to **Styx**, **Kansas**, **Journey** and **Foreigner**.

Arnolds Park Amusement Park CEO **Jon Pausley** said this performance will be followed up with **Smash Mouth** on June 1. Other groups on the calendar include **Everclear**, **Brule** and the **Rolling Stoners**.

Pausley said this year's free concerts are made possible by presenting sponsor **C and B Operations**.

The company that runs **Lakemont Park** located in Altoona, Pennsylvania, under a long-term lease from Blair County won't operate any rides there this season because it has become financially unsustainable, according to Lakemont Partnership President **Andrea Cohen**.

The partnership will continue to offer access to the four batting cages, four basketball courts, two volleyball courts, two mini-golf courses and 10 pavilions, in

keeping with its transition several years ago from a classic amusement park with lots of rides to a facility primarily for active recreation, Cohen told the county commissioners last month.

With declining attendance and high insurance costs, the park is losing money overall, although the partnership hopes to reverse that by attracting more patrons to those recreational facilities; booking more events like music festivals, craft and car shows and fundraising walks; and especially by working with businesses and community organizations on creative new proposals.

Atlantic City Aquarium in New Jersey, which has been closed for almost four years, has once again postponed its reopening after getting a federal grant for external building upgrades. More details about the aquarium's future, including when it will officially reopen, were to be revealed at a later date.

The Skyride attraction opened last month at **Busch Gardens Tampa Bay** in Florida. The **Von Roll** cable car experience gives riders a chance to view the theme park's attractions, including the Serengeti Plain while ascending to heights of 50 feet above the ground. Differing from previous years is that the attraction is now a \$5 upcharge, but it is still free for season pass holders.

Six Flags Great Adventure in Jackson, New Jersey, is preparing to reopen for its 50th anniversary season on March 16. This year, the amusement park will add new attractions, such as a glamping-style safari resort and a roller coaster called **The Flash: Vertical Velocity**.

GulfQuest in Mobile, Alabama, is set to rebrand as the **National Maritime Museum of the Gulf of Mexico** when it reopens in October 2024, following major changes. The changes include the appointment of a new director and the addition of two new exhibits.

The International Spy Museum in Washington, D.C., is unveiling a new exhibit about the iconic James Bond.

According to the museum's website, **Bond In Motion** "is a celebration of six decades of 007 vehicles."

The exhibition, which opens March 1, features 17 iconic pieces from the **EON Productions Archive** and the **Ian Fleming Foundation**. Props, scale models and clips from the films are also on show alongside cars, motorcycles, submarines and more.

Playland Park in Rye, New York, announced it will open for the season on May 18. The amusement park has an array of new games and rides, including **Jack the Puppeteer**. New restaurants and food stands are also set to open this year, like the fast-casual **Burger Barn**.



AntiShanty
— featuring
an A-frame or
birdhouse design
— caters to the
overland crowd.
AT/GARY SLADE

► SPECTRUM Continued from page 10

unique design that catered to the overland crowd and to those who wanted more than a tent.

"We had been doing some contract manufacturing work for a small adventure trailer company as early as 2016," Hyer said. "That company went out of business, but we had several employees that retained a strong interest in that market. In 2019 those employees began a side project to create this wildly unique camper design with a fold-out roof that looks like an A-frame or a birdhouse."

The design was a hit, said Hyer, and AntiShanty was spun off into its own company.

"When the pandemic hit, the demand for new amusement rides dropped and the demand for adventure trailers skyrocketed," he said. "Within a year, it had grown as large as Spectrum Sports. Today we share a building and some admin costs, but it's largely a stand-alone company."

Also, during the pandemic, Spectrum Sports started building utility trailers such as car haulers and dump trailers. That has remained a small but steady part of the business.

Another thing that hap-

pened during 2019-2020 was that the manufacturing arm of the company splintered off into **Ikon Coatings** and moved into neighboring buildings in the complex.

Ikon Coatings specializes in powder coat, Cerakote and fiberglass manufacturing. All of those processes were subcontracted to vendors before the pandemic.

"We wanted more control over the quality, and we needed to be able to complete those steps quicker in order to bring manufacturing lead times down," Hyer said. "We were fortunate enough to be able to hire several experienced industry veterans who were effective from day one. Members of our team had previously worked on many big roller coaster bodies and projects. Their experience has expanded our capabilities and made our products better."

Hyer said there have been significant changes over the years at Spectrum. One of the largest was when Spectrum began molding rock designs out of real rock.

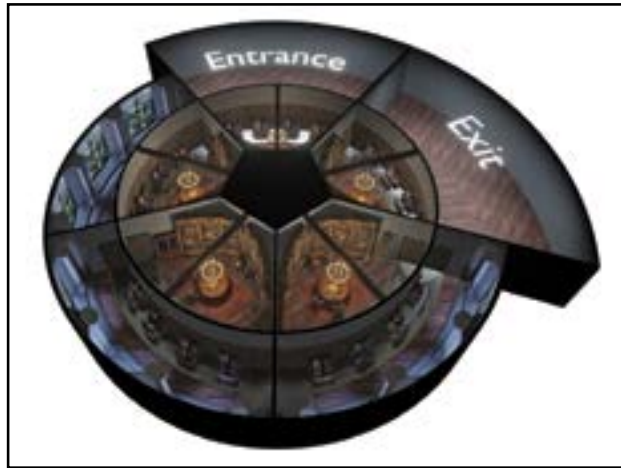
"For many years, the goal was to create the most realistic climbing experience," Hyer said.

"Eventually our designs were molded directly from real rock. Our four-foot-by-four-foot climbing panels still are designed and built this way."

Mack, Lagotronics partner with IMPS for Smurfs interactive ride

THE NETHERLANDS — IMPS, the owner of the Smurfs IP, has teamed up with Mack Rides and Lagotronics Projects to create the Smurfs Gameplay Theater, an interactive dark ride that combines an endless ride system, immersive media scenes, decorative scenes and innovative interactive technology.

The Smurfs Gameplay Theater is a dark ride that transports visitors through a series of scenes featuring the Smurfs and their adventures. With each turn on its axis, the vehicle reveals a new world to explore, providing a story-driven experience that is both immersive and exciting. The Gameplay Theater offers a combination between large interactive media screens and story-driven scenes



The Smurfs Gameplay Theater is a dark ride that transports visitors through a series of scenes featuring the beloved Smurfs characters and their adventures. With each turn on its axis, the vehicle reveals a new world to explore, providing a story-driven experience that is both immersive and exciting. COURTESY LAGOTRONICS

filled with scenery, 3D props and surprising sound effects. Equipped with Smurf-themed interactive devices, visitors can reveal the different worlds themselves and in the meantime collect points by hitting targets in each scene, competing with their friends

and family.

IMPS, together with LAFIG Belgium, are the official licensors of the beloved little blue characters, The Smurfs. Over the years, IMPS has worked in close collaboration with its agents worldwide to develop successful licensed merchandising, retail and co-branded promotions, publishing activities, digital and video games, broadcasting deals, theme parks and live shows, as well as family entertainment experiences. These partnerships have helped secure the everlasting success of the Smurfs. IMPS is run by Véronique Culliford — daughter of Pierre Culliford, creator of the Smurfs and better known under his pseudonym Peyo. Véronique has run IMPS since 1984.

“With a brand awareness of 95% worldwide and its key values like family, high quality, fun and creativity, it is the perfect IP to cooperate with and create family-friendly themed attractions like the Gameplay Theater,” stated Tom Bouwens of Lagotronics Projects.

The ride concept has been designed by Mack Rides in cooperation with Lagotronics Projects to add interactivity. The ride design is created with the philosophy to pack an exceptional amount of fun and excitement into every ride, offering a high capacity, small footprint and low maintenance dark ride solution for theme parks and family entertainment centers. The ride comes in three versions — S, M, and L — which range from 498



to 1224 passengers per hour.

The Smurfs Gameplay Theater utilizes the latest technologies to create a memorable experience, including high-res gaming content, show lighting, audiovisual effects, special effects and a high-quality sound system.

The ride system and ride control are provided by Mack Rides. The interactive system, show equipment package, media creation and show control are provided by Lagotronics Projects.

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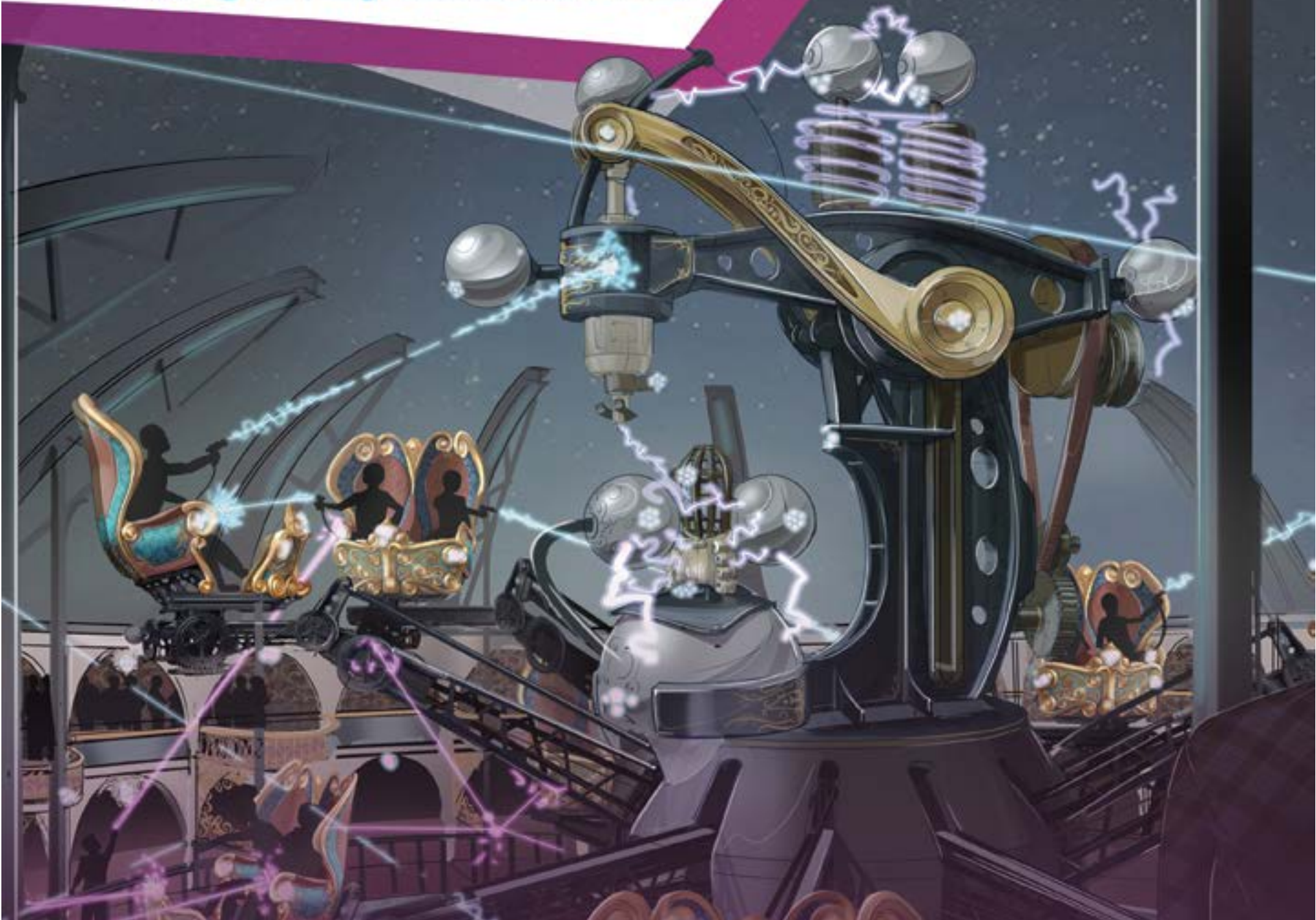
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Great Coasters builds wooden coaster for China's Fantasy Valley

AT: Tim Baldwin
tbaldwin@amusementtoday.com

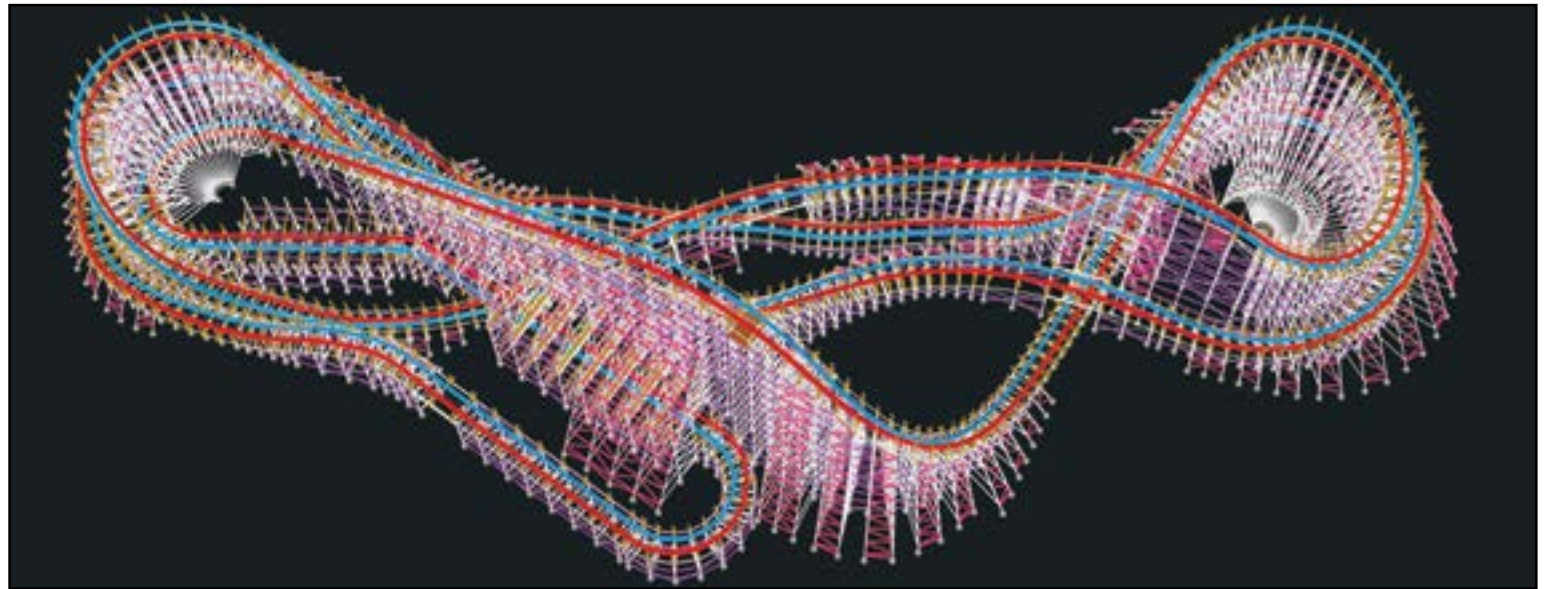
X I A N G Z H O U , Xiangyang, China — In April of 2022, a new park opened in China. Called **Fantasy Valley**, it is one of 20 parks under the umbrella of the **OCT Group**, 17 of which opened since the turn of the millennium. That operator had built many parks called Happy Valley (nine), but this was the first Fantasy Valley.

Three coasters were on site when the park opened. Two smaller ones were supplied by **Jinma Rides**. The iconic coaster for the park was a **Bolliger & Mabillard** wing coaster called DaVinci Ride. But a new roller coaster is on tap for 2024.

Since the park opened, construction has continued on another signature ride. Being built by **Great Coasters International, Inc. (GCII)**, the coaster is called Mad Racers.

"It's not our biggest coaster, nor does it have crazy elements, but it is our first wood-and-steel hybrid in China, which makes it very special," said **Clair Hain**, president, GCII.

Olivia Hain, public relations, GCII, added, "It is our first hybrid in Asia. The wood-and-steel structure makes a superior layout of the ride that has never been



The layout features numerous banked curves, a trademark of GCII designs. Steel structure with wood track is a first for a coaster in China (below). COURTESY GCII

experienced before and guarantees strong visual appeal, high thrills and nonstop fun."

GCII continued its partnership with **Skyline Attractions** for engineering and layout design.

"Mad Racers marks a thrilling milestone in our long-term partnership with Great Coasters International, Inc.," **Tyler Mullins**, Skyline Attractions, told *Amusement Today*. "As the first wooden coaster in China with a steel support structure, the ride introduced a series of challenges and required us to expand our design and engineering toolset. Our team's passion for the project was instrumental in



tackling these challenges, and the new tools developed for this ride help set the stage for other exciting projects with Great Coasters in the future."

The first project in which GCII used steel structure

was at **Fun Spot America** in Orlando in 2013.

Despite the term *racers* in the ride's name, it is not a dual track-style ride, as could incorrectly be assumed. The attraction will feature two 24-passenger trains, however.

At a height of 86 feet, the coaster hits a sweet spot of being a moderate height to deliver great thrills without towering over the skyline to be too intimidating.

Track length is 2,590 feet, and the top speed will be just shy of 50 mph.

The ride is located in the Kunlun Fantasy Land of the park. The KunLun Mountains constitute one of the longest mountain chains in Asia. In Chinese mythology, the sacred KunLun Mountain is the center of heaven and earth. Above the snow line is a glacier that does not melt all year round. The glacier area reaches more than 3,000 square kilo-

meters. It is one of the largest glacier areas in China.

The layout of the ride sports many of GCII's trademark maneuvers, including banked curves and swooping drops. It will provide an exhilarating ride that should reach a broad demographic.

An exact opening date is not determined at this point.

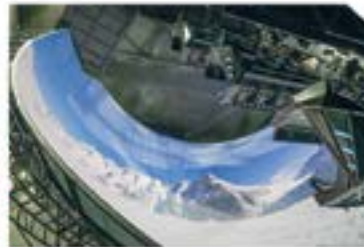
Mad Racers is one of four GCII projects currently under construction or awaiting opening in Asia. The company built its first coaster for that continent in 2011 at **Knight Valley** in China. It was the longest of all its projects at the time. Python in Bamboo Forrest, also in China, is the longest GCII design ever created. It opened in 2016. Counting the current four under construction, there are eight GCII coasters in Asia. Those locations include Vietnam, China, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia.



Mad Racers is one of eight GCII projects to be built in Asia over the years. When opened in 2024, the coaster will add another signature attraction to the new Fantasy Valley park. COURTESY GCII

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Rides returning to Mexico City's park with Aztlán Parque Urbano

AT: Tim Baldwin
tbaldwin@amusementtoday.com

MEXICO CITY — For more than four years, Mexico City's famous Bosque de Chapultepec, the city park within the historic area of the city dating back to the Aztecs, has been without rides. More than 15 million people a year visit Chapultepec, with its museums, attractions, park grounds and castle. **La Feria de Chapultepec** was an amusement park on the grounds for several decades. An incident in September 2019 prompted the government to revoke the license of the ride operator, and the park became silent.

The park is a municipality concession. Wanting the public to feel safe, officials brought in new management, and the original park was leveled, with all-new rides being erected. A complete transformation is underway.

In the past months, new architecture and fresh attractions have been finding their home on the site of the former park.



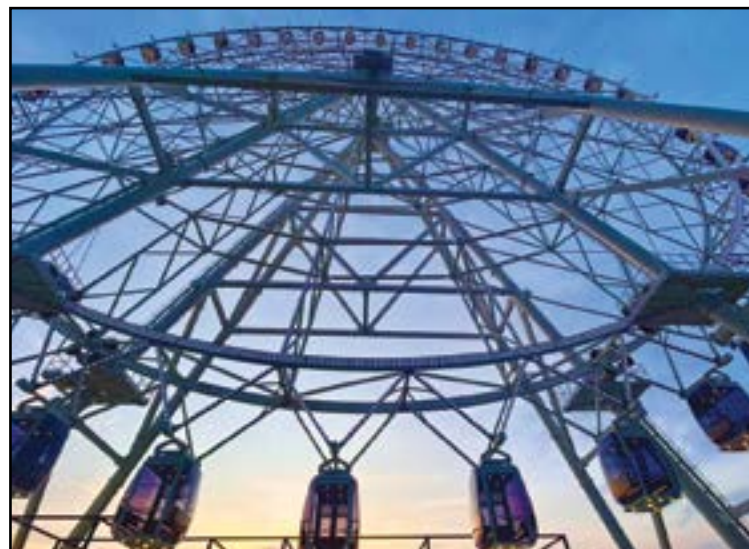
This construction overview (above) shows the curved sculpture of the former wooden coaster, now a monument in steel. The new 85-meter — 279-foot — wheel from Fabbri is a new icon for Mexico City (right). COURTESY AZTLÁN PARQUE URBANO

Aztlán Parque Urbano is the name of the new park. An industry veteran, **Sergio Haa**, has been brought in to oversee the project and serve as director general.

"It is more than an amusement park, it is an urban park, where very important environmental factors have been considered, such as the planting of more than 600 trees, a lot of natural shade and ecological concrete floors that allow the permeability of water to the ground," Haa told *Amusement*

Today. "Additionally, among the attractions, we have the **Dolores Olmedo Museum**, which has the most important collection of original paintings by **Frida Kalho** and **Diego Rivera**, as well as a forum for shows and concerts of the highest quality for 5,800 attendees."

Aztlán Parque Urbano will open 23 rides and attractions by summer. With a soft opening projected for March, 13 of the rides will open very soon. The remainder are



expected to open by July.

"Among the most attractive places is the gastronomic corridor, which will have the best fast food and restaurant brands, along with the monumental 85-meter-high wheel that will undoubtedly become the icon of Mexico City," said Haa.

Supplied by **Fabbri**, the stunning wheel has a beautiful light package.

"I think it is the best ride," said **Giancarlo Manca**, business development man-

ager, Fabbri. "For 20 years, people have tried to make a wheel in Mexico. A wheel now is at the top of the city."

"It will be impressive; in fact, at night it already remains on, being a visual attraction for a large part of the city," Haa said. "Its aerial view is seen by all the planes before landing at the Mexico City airport. It has 40 cabins, with air conditioning, heating, Bluetooth and a security camera. Within the 40

► See AZTLÁN, page 19

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▶AZTLÁN

Continued from page 18

cabins, four of them are VIP that have a refrigerator, screen and can serve a previously selected menu."

Haua also referenced a 400-square-meter space for an immersive project. Brogent's M-ride is the main attraction. The first show will have the foundation of Aztlán, now called Mexico City. Films are *Fly Around the World*, *Fly Around Africa* and — in production — *Fly Through Mexico*.

The largest complement of rides is being supplied by Zamperla.

"We are proud to partner with Parque Urbano Aztlán for this installation. The eight Zamperla attractions are a group of proven winners that will bring plenty of smiles to riders of all ages in this iconic urban park," said **Ulises Dixon**, Latin America Sales, Zamperla.

"As we worked on the project, we had two objectives," Dixon continued. "First, we created a collection of attractions that have broad appeal. Second, it was

imperative to create an experience that exalts the culture and tradition of Mexico City. It is here that the collaboration between Aztlán's design team and Zamperla's art department began. The result of this working partnership between our teams created a wonder-filled experience for guests while celebrating the history and culture of Mexico City."

The park's largest roller coaster is being supplied by Vekoma.

"The layout had already been engineered, but it is going to be the first of its kind in the world," said **Ricardo Tonding Etges**, VP marketing and sales — Americas, Vekoma. "It is Vekoma's longest Suspended Family Coaster ever with 520 meters of track, a significantly long dark ride section before the lift and a number of family-thrill ride elements, including a steep drop followed by a horseshoe element, quick track twists, as well as high-G turns."

The roller coaster is called *Serpentikha*.

"The Suspended Family Coaster is a big hit for a variety of age groups, con-



This Air Race (above right) by Zamperla shows how the rides are themed to Mexico's heritage. The largest of the coaster installations is this Family Suspended Coaster from Vekoma (above right). COURTESY AZTLÁN PARQUE URBANO

sidering the low 42-inch rider height restriction and how attractive the family-thrill ride elements are, all without being intimidating," noted Etges. "The suspended nature of the vehicle offers a fun sense of flying, which is highlighted by the track elements that we can create with this ride system. Family members of different ages and appetites for thrill can ride this coaster together, and I am sure they will all have a lot of fun."

As an homage to the park's past, a large curve of

the defunct wooden coaster has been rebuilt, but this time it is erected in steel. It serves as a symbolic and thematic sculpture.

"We decided to rebuild the northern curve of the old wooden roller coaster as a tribute to the city and its inhabitants," Haua said. "The wood from the old [coaster] will be used for different furniture and decorations in the park. At the high point of the curve, we restored three old carts with their original colors from 1964."

Two family coasters from

SBF/Visa and a spinning coaster and tower ride from Fabbri are also in the mix.

"It is a fairly balanced park in its offer, in terms of children's, family and daring [rides]," Haua said. "We also have 10 games from **Bob's Space Racers**."

Other attractions are being manufactured by **Gosetto** (adult and mini bumper cars), **Bertazzon** (carousel) and **Demiurgo** (theater and virtual reality). SBF/Visa is also providing a swing ride and a major flat ride.

"It is important to [emphasize] that all the rides and attractions are new, specially designed for Aztlán," said Haua.

Intercard provided the pay-per-ride operating system. Admission is free.

"The Aztlán team has done a great job imagining thematic concepts during the creative process, and our team excelled at integrating these ideas into our rides," Dixon told *AT*. "The local visitors will love the theming, which has one foot in Mexico's past with another firmly planted in the future."

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Multi-sensory Flyover attraction debuting at Chicago's Navy Pier

CHICAGO — **Flyover**, an immersive attraction that transports guests to the planet's most epic places through exhilarating flying journeys is set to debut at Chicago, Illinois' iconic **Navy Pier** on March 1, 2024.

The experience features aerial shots and first-person narratives, along with leading drone technologies, to showcase Chicago from perspectives never seen before. The 48,000-square-foot immersive flying journey is located directly across from the **Chicago Children's Museum** at the west entrance of Navy Pier. The new Chicago experience will mark the fourth Flyover experience for **Pursuit**, which also includes Flyover attractions in Las Vegas; Reykjavik, Iceland, and Vancouver, Canada.

"The Flyover journey in Chicago embraces the concept of the strength of the individual and the power of community that is present throughout the history of

Flyover

Chicago," said **Lisa Adams**, COO and executive producer of **Flyover Attractions** by Pursuit. "The opportunity to try and capture the energy of a city and humanity within a city, and to do this in Chicago, was incredibly exciting."

Flyover's signature Chicago journey will be shown on an impressive 65-foot spherical screen with flight motion seats engineered to swoop, dip and turn, giving guests the feeling of flight. The attraction will transport 60 guests at a time, with complete sensory immersion using wind, mist and scents, as fliers hang suspended.

"When we began this journey and throughout the process, we had the privilege of speaking with hundreds of Chicagoans about Chicago and what makes them proud of the city. As we spoke to all



Flyover at Chicago's Navy Pier will showcase the city from perspectives never seen before. COURTESY PURSUIT

these incredible people, we were excited to find common threads and fuse them into a story that ultimately inspires and brings people together," said Writer and Director **David Mossop**.

Pursuit partnered with some of the entertainment industry's most creative minds to bring Chicago's flying journey to life.

Flyover's journey begins when visitors step through

the door, with Act 1 unveiling a gallery-style experience that introduces guests to Chicago characters, suburban settings and thematic musical touchpoints.

Act 2 is where the story of Chicago deepens. Stories of the people that make up the fabric of the city are introduced, set to an energetic and powerful musical score.

Flyover's climax, Act 3, is an exhilarating nine-minute

flying journey unlike anything ever experienced. The audience weaves an impossible and continuous flight-line through Chicago. From 13,000 feet above to diving straight down buildings and skimming sidewalks; from wall-riding skyscrapers, floating through fireworks, and even into buildings like the **Chicago Theatre**; all while choreographed action of Chicagoan lifestyle unfolds: L-trains sparking, boats ripping, car chases, sports being played and up in the airshow.

"From new drone technology developed specifically for Flyover, to a musical score that introduces collaborative new music, to stories of Chicago told by its people, this journey will ultimately engage and entertain viewers with an immersive urban experience that pushes the boundaries of Flyover attractions in both technology and style," said Adams.

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Galaxy Multi Rides bucks traditional approach to inflatable parks

AT: Susan Storey
Special to Amusement Today

With more than 6,000 rides in 45 countries, **Galaxy Multi Rides** became the leading inflatable park company it is today by way of innovation, demand and a mechanical bull.

In 1989, Galaxy Multi Rides' founder, **Robin Whincup** started his company as one that rented bouncy castles for children and adults. He also purchased a Gillies Bull mechanical bull to expand the company's variety of rental experiences. Originally from England, mechanical bulls were rare, and the addition of the ride quickly became a popular novelty. However, while the demand to rent the bull was high, it was not an easy experience for Robin and his team to fulfill.

"It was a clunky thing," Chief Ride Designer and Marketing Director **Mike Whincup** said in a discussion with *Amusement Today*.



Jumpin Fun in Sarasota, Fla., currently the largest inflatable park in the United States, features many of Galaxy Multi Rides' patented designs and innovations. COURTESY GALAXY MULTI RIDES

"It took a team of six men a couple of hours to set up, and then a couple more to remove it. The bull was not designed for easy mobility. Very quickly, Robin found himself saying, "There has to be a better way."

Having already designed and built "The Surf Machine," a lightweight, portable surf ride, Robin added a spin motor, so that it could be transformed into a portable

mechanical bull. And with that design addition, the single ride could now offer a second experience and the Multi Ride System was born.

When Whincup took his transportable mechanical bull to the Entertainment Expo in London and received an inquiry from someone who wanted to order several, an entirely new chapter for his business began. Today Galaxy

Multi Rides designs and manufactures innovative commercial-grade action rides, branded amusement rides, soft play equipment, inflatable theme parks and more.

From the beginning, Whincup knew his designs needed to be safe, easy to install and operate, and customizable and scalable to meet customers' goals and needs. The sky would be the limit for

a multitude of ride options.

"Today we have more than 55 different ride attachments and more than 30 utility and design patents," Whincup stated. "We have never slowed down. We continue to develop and innovate, creating everything from custom rides for stadiums, special events and brand activations as well as interactive, competitive games for guests of all ages."



Whincup

While manufacturing is at the heart of Galaxy Multi Rides, design drives the company forward and is, as Whincup explained, its mark of distinction.

"Our approach to building inflatable parks is employing efficient design and maximizing space in the best way possible. Since 2018, we have

► See GALAXY, page 23

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► **GALAXY**

Continued from page 23

installed 80 parks. With each experience, we develop efficient spaces and experiences that the park's staff and the customers welcome."

"Innovation, safety and the guest experience remain top of mind with each project," he continued. "Safety above all else. With that, our quality, attention to detail and theming set us apart. It's exciting to be a part of."

"The growth in this industry and its diversity is really incredible," Whincup explained. "Building new parks from the ground up is the first to come to mind, but there is also great opportunity in mixed-use spaces, such as adding inflatable experiences to a bowling alley, or

Galaxy Rides has supplied mechanical bull-style rides in 45 countries and crafted one-of-a-kind designs for multiple attractions. COURTESY GALAXY MULTI RIDES



an existing family entertainment center."

Three months into 2024, and Galaxy's universe keeps expanding. The company just finished a major installation with **Flight Trampoline Parks** as part of a rebranding project for six locations in North America. In addition, Galaxy recently launched a partner-

ship with **Roller** to further relationships and support both new and existing customers.

"This was an easy decision for us," Whincup explained. "We're two leaders in the family entertainment space. As the leading Inflatable Park manufacturer, it's in our best interests that our customers thrive

and grow along with us. Partnering with Roller, the leading venue POS company, helps us deliver success."

Currently installing what will be the largest inflatable park in North America, Whincup says indoor play experiences will continue to appeal to guests for years to come. "The market is not slowing down," he said. "There is a desire and a need

for varied attractions, and inflatable parks can deliver in ways other venues cannot. As we continue to grow with the industry, you could say we are also refocusing on our roots. We are constantly creating new products and designs and have several in the pipeline. The original innovation that Robin had to take one mechanical bull and expand both its use and audience continues to inspire and push us."

Whincup concluded, "It's surreal that we are the number one provider of mechanical bulls in the world. We have supplied rides all over the world and created many unique, sometimes even outrageous designs for our customers and their guests. It has really been quite the ride."

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IAAPA FEC Summit 2024 offers abundance of valuable content

AT: Tim Baldwin
tbaldwin@amusementtoday.com

SAN ANTONIO, Texas — The **International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions** has many types of memberships and facilities within the organization. The biggest segment is family entertainment centers. On January 21 – 23, the IAAPA FEC Summit welcomed 145 attendees from 29 states across the country and three Canadian provinces.

A Western flair accented the opening night reception. Unusual cold and rainy weather caused host hotel **Marriott Riverwalk** to close its doors on its river terrace room, but solid networking still took place indoors.

Monday and Tuesday offered a wide range of activities and sessions to help meet the needs of all attendees.

“We offer so much programming for the FEC community, but this is special because it is more of our elevated content,” said **Michael Shelton**, executive director and vice president, IAAPA North America. This is something that appeals to the higher-level management in FECs, CEOs and general managers.”

Following the opening



Attendees gathered for a group photo on the skating rink at AR's Entertainment Hub (above). The beautiful Santikos Entertainment facility was the first onsite tour stop (below left). Salem Thyne was the first keynote speaker, whose address really kicked off the Summit's content offerings (below right). COURTESY IAAPA NEWS; AT/TIM BALDWIN



welcome, keynote speaker **Salem Thyne** from **EVA/Middle Initial LLC** and author of the book *Nobody Cares (Until You Do)* used his own expe-

riences to speak on personal accountability and overcoming one's perceived limitations.

Panelists from the FEC of the Year recipients — **Craig Buster, Todd Maunsell** and **Barry Zelickson** — shared their experiences and took questions from the floor.

Attendee **Bryan Graff** of **Arena Sports** in Seattle said, “My favorite thing is the continuous connection with other operators and [networking] best operating procedures. I enjoyed hearing from the individuals that won the FEC Award and to hear their positives and negatives on what they're doing.”

An afternoon of onsite

tours shuttled attendees to three distinct facilities: **Santikos Entertainment, AR's Entertainment Hub** and **Andretti Indoor Karting**. The latter served as host for the evening reception. Each facility offered a variety of attractions, so attendees saw a diverse range of facilities.

“This year's FEC Summit was incredible: high-impact sessions and so many opportunities to network and learn from other operators!” said **Sherry Howell**, IAAPA FEC Committee Chair and brand engagement director for **CenterEdge Software**. “I was particularly impressed by the site visits. We visited many

unique family and location-based entertainment venues that all provided valuable insights and ideas! Every attendee was able to walk away with something to take back to their own operation. And the warm welcomes we received each and every time we arrived were exactly the kind of memorable experiences our industry is all about.”

“When we set out to do these site tours, we try to get a great mixture,” added Shelton. “We make sure each site has a different mix of attractions — different sizes, different locations, different footprints — and I think we accomplished that.”

The final day saw keynote speaker **Vince Poscente**, an Olympian who shared inspirational advice to help management achieve their best when striving for their goals. His advice? “Do what the competition is not willing to do.” Defining moments lead to decision-making habits.

Panelists from the pre-



A Q&A with FEC of the Year recipients helped elaborate on best practices. AT/TIM BALDWIN

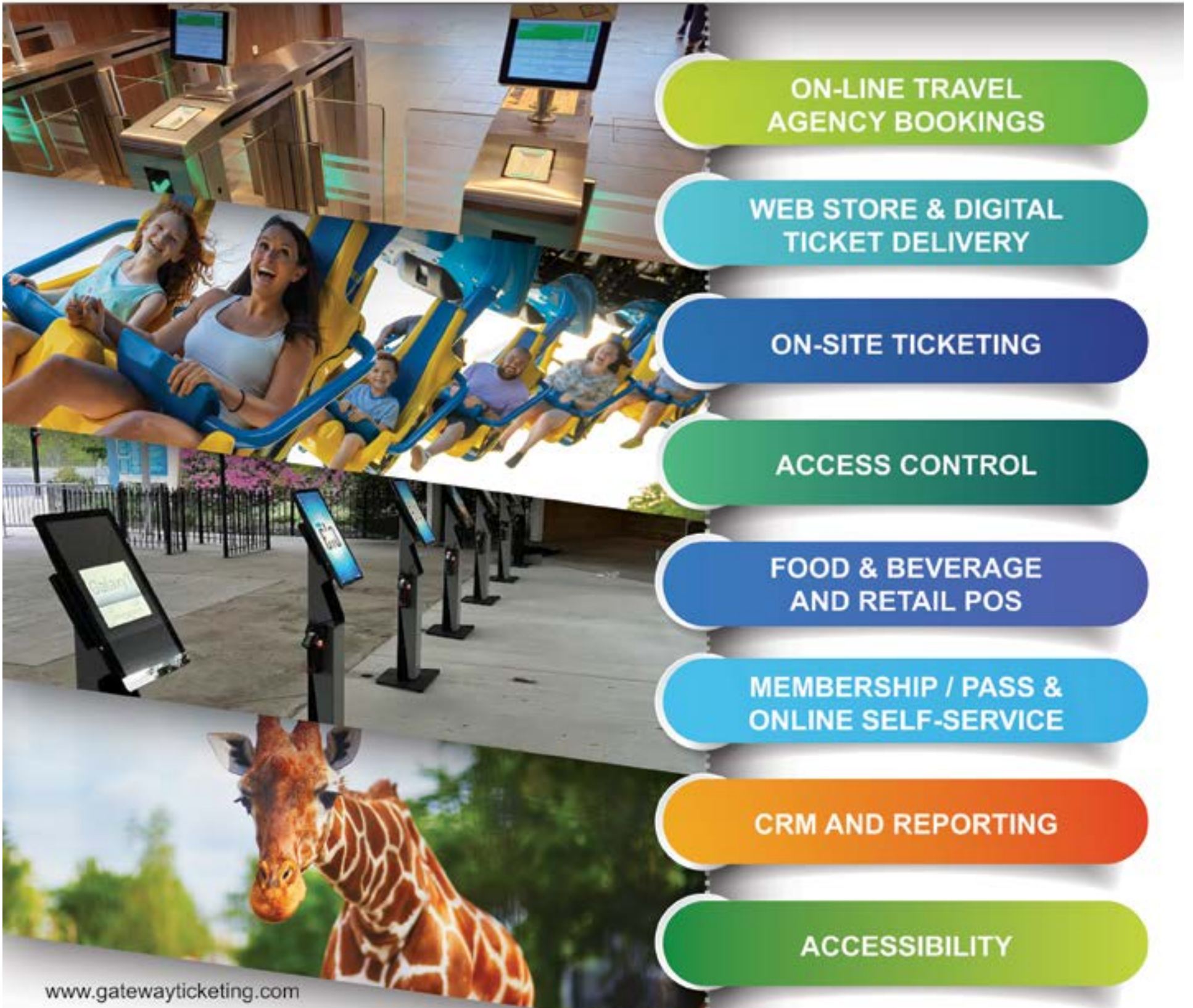
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Ripley's was the final walking tour stop and host of the closing reception (above left). Attendees strolled through The Amazing Mirror Maze in downtown San Antonio (above middle). Those that chose to accept Skyline Attraction's invitation enjoyed a coaster ride on the company's installation at Six Flags Fiesta Texas (above right). AT/TIM BALDWIN

►SUMMIT

Continued from page 24

vious day's facilities took questions from the audience to help increase knowledge of operating procedures. The session was titled Building a Leadership Culture.

"I wanted to connect to other operators and see what's next for them," said **Luke Robinson**, Visalia Adventure Park (Fresno). The value of the community is the optimism it has. It's not always an easy industry to be in, but there is a lot of fulfill-

ment you get out of it. There is opportunity here, and talking to others about what we're going to do and how we fix these problems — the opportunities are endless."

A walking tour of nearby properties provided even more exposure to entertainment options. **Be Kind & Rewind**, **The Amazing Mirror Maze** and **Ripley's Believe it or Not** opened their doors to attendees, with a final reception at Ripley's closing out the event.

Many attendees accepted an invitation from **Skyline**

Attractions to travel to **Six Flags Fiesta Texas** to experience the new P'Sghetti Bowl coaster with its dynamic lighting package, which looked stunningly brilliant at night.

"Though we have been to the big, exciting IAAPA Trade Show and Convention like 20 times, this is the first IAAPA FEC Summit we have been to," said **Sarah Donhauser**, co-owner, **ZDT's Amusement Park**. "Being a small, family-owned amusement park, we are kind of an outlier, not as big as typical theme parks and not as

small as typical FECs. We are unique. But, as this experience reinforces, we all share many of the same passions and struggles. The camaraderie of sharing ideas and stories and hearing others is invaluable. In addition to getting to visit with others in the industry, we were also treated with two inspiring motivational speakers, as well as some truly enlightening site visits! I might add Santikos will most definitely be our theater of choice after hearing of their charitable mission. Plus, their team was

incredible!"

IAAPA Director of Global Editorial **Scott Fais** served as emcee of the event for the fifth year in a row. "I love starting my year at IAAPA FEC Summit where you find this remarkable community of operators, suppliers and entrepreneurs," Fais told *Amusement Today*. "I've seen how professionals connect here, make new business contacts through networking, and then quickly form lasting friendships. That's the magic of IAAPA Connections events."

An advertisement for Wiegand roller coasters. The main image shows a woman with long blonde hair, wearing a yellow top and black pants, sitting in a roller coaster car. She is smiling and looking towards the camera. The car is on a track, and the background is a lush green forest. The Wiegand logo is in the top right corner, featuring a green mountain peak and the word "Wiegand" in a stylized font. Below the logo, the text reads "The Best just got Better!" in a handwritten style. Further down, it says "NEW FROM WIEGAND, 'THE ALPINE COASTER 2.0'" and "LET US DESIGN YOUR NEXT ADVENTURE!". At the bottom, it provides contact information: "Contact the Mountain Coaster Experts @ info@wiegandsportsusa.com 406-777-9900 WIEGANDSPORTSUSA.COM".

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FAMILY ENTERTAINMENT CENTRAL

AT: John W.C. Robinson

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K1 Speed announced the forthcoming opening of a new center in Knoxville, marking its second expansion in Tennessee this year.

Following the opening of K1 Speed's Memphis location earlier in 2024, and its Nashville location's 2023 debut, Knoxville will soon welcome a sprawling 105,000-square-foot center. Set to open in the summer, this location will house two expertly designed tracks, cutting-edge electric go-karts, an expansive arcade, a Paddock Lounge café and event spaces.

"After our amazing reception in Nashville last year, we knew Tennessee needed more K1 Speed locations," said Co-Founder and Director of Marketing **Susan Danglerd**. "That's why I'm delighted come summer, we'll have three locations in the state to choose from, with Knoxville being the biggest of them all."

The Knoxville location will also boast one of the company's largest arcades, featuring classic and modern video games, prize machines, pool tables, air hockey and games of skill, such as basketball hoops and punching bags.

Semnox announced a groundbreaking collaboration with **Texas Entertainment Xperience (TEX)**, a family entertainment destination sprawling over 100,000 square feet. The partnership, initiated with the grand reopening of the revamped facility, marks a major leap forward in enhancing the overall visitor experience at TEX.

Now known as **TEX Fun & Social**, the newly renovated venue features a diverse range of attractions utilizing Semnox's Parafait suite of solutions. From eight lanes of full bowling with a solid LED wall, new state-of-the-art arcade games, laser tag, six lanes of axe throwing, four golf simulator suites and indoor pickleball courts to a full restaurant and bar, large arcade and redemption area, TEX Fun & Social has a unique mix of activities to attract guests of all ages.

"We invested a lot of time in trying to make the right decision on what point of sale (POS) and game card system to bring into our newly rebranded facility. We could not be more pleased with our decision to have Semnox run our FEC," explained **Shelby Hernandez**, general manager at TEX Fun & Social. "We have six major attractions and over 85 arcade games on the floor now. Everything worked as we had hoped. The entire Semnox team has been incredible to work with; they all truly earned our business."

Chuck E. Cheese is extending the Chuck E. Cheese experience beyond the fun centers with the launch of the *Chuck E. Cheese and Friends Party Cookbook* with

Weldon Owen Publishing.

This publishing deal is the latest development in the growing collection of Chuck E. Cheese licensed merchandise available at retail locations and online, which also includes apparel, accessories, toys and collectibles for fans of all ages.

In the *Chuck E. Cheese and Friends Party Cookbook*, the gang has fun and tasty parties to share with everyone, including Chuck E.'s Game Night party to Jasper T. Jowls' Howlin' Hootenanny and Helen Henny's All-day Breakfast Sleepover.

Each party is full of delicious, themed recipes — from tasty Vamples for your next Halloween party and French toast dippers for the next kid's slumber party, to Bella's favorite quesadilla pizza from her Festive Fiesta and more! Accompanying the recipes are exclusive fun games, jokes, links to video dance parties and other activities to make each party even more memorable. Share some of Pasqually's hilarious jokes, listen to DJ Munch's remix of "Chuck E.'s Happy Dance" or cut loose with the spring sensation that's sweeping the nation, the "Spring Break Breakdance."

Green Acres Mall of Valley Stream, New York, is boosting its entertainment offerings as it plans a \$100 million revamp to draw more high-end stores.

Launch Family Entertainment, which has bowling, trampolines, an arcade, a ninja warrior course and food, will open a 34,181-square-foot venue in the Valley Stream mall in late 2024 or early 2025, franchisee **Wisam Assaedi** said.

Also, family-friendly **Chuck E. Cheese** will be opening in a 12,889-square-foot space at **Green Acres Commons**, the shopping center adjacent to the mall, in February 2024.

Just south of Austin, Texas, Buda City Council members approved up to \$400,000 in incentives to open the golf entertainment center **Tap In** on January 3, 2024, at **The Corner on Main Street** retail center. The 7,000-square-foot venue will cost roughly \$1.5 million with an expected opening date to be announced in 2025.

Tap In is a family entertainment center that has mini golf, a virtual golf simulator bay and a bar, according to the report.

"We know that we needed more indoor entertainment (in the area) that is great for adults and families," stated Tap In co-owner **Jennifer Wible**. "Our main goal is to create a space where people can really find a community to engage with each other."

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Fort Worth Stock Show attendance falls victim to cold weather

AT: B. Derek Shaw

bdshaw@amusementtoday.com

FORT WORTH, Texas — Mother Nature was not kind to the 23-day **Fort Worth Stock Show & Rodeo** (FWSSR) this year as attendance dropped to 1,144,305. With the theme “Where the West is Fun,” the event ran from January 12 to February 3.

“We experienced abnormally cold temperatures for the first 13 days of the 2024 event. Obviously, attendance lagged during this time, and while the weather improved for the remaining 10 days, it was impossible to make up the deficit resulting from colder-than-normal temperatures during our first two weekends, which typically provide some of our strongest attendance numbers,” said Communications Director **Matt Brockman**.

Again, hometown carnival provider **Talley Amusements** (and its family of rides) brought in 46 with 14 food stands and 30 games. The new ride this year was a **Fabbri Booster**, which the carnival has named **The Defender**. The three most popular rides were a **Lamberink** 33-meter Ferris wheel, **Interpark** Iron Dragon Coaster and a **Chance Rides** Big Kahuna.

Mary Talley, co-owner, talked about the weather that wreaked havoc on the stock show this year: “In the city of Fort Worth, it is commonplace to hear the following: ‘We always know when it’s Stock Show time because it turns frigid cold!’ We experienced some of the coldest temperatures and rain



Hometown carnival provider **Talley Amusements** brought in 46 rides with 14 food stands and 30 games. Nearly half the rides were ones for kiddies. When the weather cooperated, the midway had a nice crowd. In the background (below) is Talley Amusements **Lamberink** 33-meter Ferris wheel, one of the most popular rides.

COURTESY FORT WORTH STOCK SHOW & RODEO; AT/SAMMY PICCOLA

this year consecutively for 15 days starting on Jan 13. We are grateful that we were able to work the last eight days.” Talley Rides’ revenue was down 35% compared to 2023.

The carnival hasn’t experienced any employment challenges so far this season. “We were able to get our entire labor force for 2024 and did very well in the H2b lottery for April 1,” said Talley.

She added: “We have been providing carnival services since 2003 at the Fort Worth Stock Show. It is a pleasure and an honor to work with these fine folks at our hometown rodeo!”

Brockman explained what sets their event apart from others. “We began as a livestock exhibition in 1896 and livestock and horse shows remain a bedrock of our identity today. Our carnival/midway compliments our



entertainment offerings perfectly with something for everyone from toddlers taking their first ever ride on the Choo Choo Express or the Tea Cups, all the way to teenagers and adults getting their adrenaline-charged on exciting thrill rides like the Cliff Hanger, Tilt-A-Whirl or Kamikaze. We have a great working relationship with Talley Amusements.”

FWSSR organized the world’s first indoor rodeo in 1918. One hundred six years later, the FWSSR ProRodeo Tournament is among the top five professional rodeos in the United States.

The event has strong support from the section of the city where they are situated. “Located in the heart of our vibrant city’s Cultural District, we are very fortunate to be strongly embraced by local residents and the greater North Texas community,” said Brockman.

“Showcasing our traditions and the western lifestyle is important to us while also being innovative in our efforts to appeal to an increasingly diverse local demographic.”

The stock show advertises its product across numerous media: digital (paid social, display and search), along with television, radio and print.

Concessionaire **Steve Coburn**, with **Coburn’s Catering**, said, “Of course, BBQ and beer are always great at the rodeo.”

The newest offering this year was a **Whole Hog Sandwich**. It was an eight-ounce pork sirloin steak, marinated and grilled with bacon and cheese. The most unusual item was fried alligator tail offered by a Cajun vendor. **McKinney Food Services’** Texas-sized corn dogs and **Mama’s Pizza** are always popular at the show. The Coburn family started there in 1946. Steve

has been there since he was 11 years old. “It’s the only job I’ve ever had.” Despite the cold weather, Coburn felt the stock show attendance was really good.

The auditorium entertainment series was well received and featured **Sammy Kershaw**, **Old Crow Medicine Show**, **Smokey Robinson**, **Odd Eye Circle**, **Tanya Tucker**, **Pam Tillis** with **Little Texas**, and **Jamey Johnson** with **Annie Bosko**.

Looking back on the 2024 event, Brockman said, “Interest and participation in our youth competitions continues to grow. We’ve expanded our competitions and contests beyond traditional livestock events in recent years to include art, shooting sports, escaramuza and charrocala competition, horticulture, fiddle contest, robotics, ag mechanics, high school mariachi competition and wildlife. We’re broadening our outreach and engaging more youth from both urban and rural areas of Texas. In 2024, youth competitors from 243 of Texas’ 254 counties competed at the FWSSR for premium awards, auction receipts and scholarships. We’re proud of the positive impact we’re having on the youth of Texas.”

The 2025 dates are set for January 17 through February 8.

•fwssr.com



The new ride at this year’s Fort Worth Stock Show & Rodeo was a **Fabbri Booster**, which the carnival calls, **The Defender**. AT/SAMMY PICCOLA



Talley Amusements has been providing carnival services since 2003 at the Fort Worth Stock Show. AT/SAMMY PICCOLA

Gibtown Show successful even with a two-week event spread

AT: B. Derek Shaw

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RIVERVIEW, Fla. — The 56th annual **International Independent Showmen's Foundation (IISF) Super Trade Show & Extravaganza**, usually held with three other industry organizations, did fairly well, even though it took place by itself after the other ones operated a week earlier. The **Outdoor Amusement Business Association (OABA)**, **Showman's League of America** and **National Independent Concessionaires Association (NICA) Business Expo/Fare Foods** all held their events the first full week in February, leading up to the **National Football League's Super Bowl Sunday**.

Surprisingly, there were a decent number of rides and other equipment surrounding the **International Independent Showmen's Association (IISA)** clubhouse along one side and the rear of the exhibitor building. Multiple Ferris wheels and a solid mix of flat rides made up the outdoor exhibit area. Inside, the vendor floor saw 17 new exhibitors as part of the 300-plus supplier mix. Show hours were 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. all four days, Tuesday through Friday. There were more than 20 participating ride companies, representing more than 30 manufacturers. The two with the largest amount of rides were **Equipment Solutions International** and **Amusement Devices & Manufacturing (ADM)**. In addition, other participants were numerous food trailer and concession manufacturers, game manufacturers and suppliers, living quarter manufacturers, plush, novelty and food suppliers, lighting, electrical and part suppliers, industry organizations, vinyl and sign companies and tourist attractions.

Seminars and workshops included ServSafe food manager training and certification, filing strategies with the release of supplemental visas and P4, a new category for the mobile entertainment industry. The P4 nonimmigrant visa allows spouses and dependent children of P



Above is part of the far end of the outside supplier area as seen from atop of one of the Fredericksen Fun Slides. In the foreground is a family swinger, manufactured by CDSUD Park, Wadkins Expo Wheel, an ADM balloon ride and fun slide. Altitude Rides and Attractions had a hit with its 30-foot portable Hammered Ride. The small footprint only occupies 17 feet of space (right).

COURTESY STEFAN HINZ; AT/B. DEREK SHAW

visa holders to temporarily enter the United States to live with the principal visa holder. In addition, the last day of the show offered a class in industrial truck/forklift training on the grounds.

Many years ago, rides were brought to Gibtown (the nickname for Gibsonton) on "spec." These days, most rides that were on display were already sold, whereby the owner now drives the equipment off the lot to their headquarters, winter quarters or, in some cases, to a spot they are/will be playing.

"It's very interesting. Nice rides — nice new rides to see. Things are a bit different than what we see at home," said **Linda Taylor, Taylors Funfairs**, Levens, England. "We like the club."

"It's been a nice crowd here," said **Steve Lisko, Jr., Equipment Solutions International**.

Showmen Supplies President **Scott Siefker** was satisfied with the show. "It's been pretty steady, on par with other years. There was some concern with the separation of this show from the OABA, whether or not it would have a substantial impact on traffic. It might have had some impact, but not too terrible."

Asked about crowd response to ADM Rides, Owner **Brian Woodke** said, "The crowd reception is always good. I like being in the back end here. I think the

whole show is up, and the reception is good. I'm glad to see more people vending at the show. It's bringing the crowd out, and I think it's bringing the next generation in, to see what's out here."

"We are happy with the attendance, but there are a lot of showmen that are coming down. However, we do want to see if we still can get the two groups to merge and form one big, wonderful show," said **Len Soled, Rides 4 U**. "I can see by the exhibitors here, [there is] not as much equipment as in the past years. I was surprised even inside the building, there were a lot of empty spots. The people are still coming this year. I promoted it for both associations to get people down here."

"All our vendors seem happy," said **Kyle Schmidt**, IISA president. "A lot of people are back to buying, and they are getting a lot of business. This is trending to be one of our biggest trade shows in a very, very long time."

Here's a look at some of the activities held by other organizations the week prior.

The Showman's League of America held meetings throughout the week, including the Scholarship Committee and the Board of Governors annual meeting at the **Sheraton Tampa Brandon Hotel**. Presiding over the festivities was **Marc Janas (B. Original Foods)**, president.



Awarded were \$121,000 in scholarships for more than 55 students, including two international ones. The application process for 2025 goes on all year long, which can be found on the website. Students from trade and technical schools are encouraged to apply as well.

The 2024 NICA Business Expo and Fare Foods Food Show, with the theme of "Tomorrow Starts Today!" kicked off with the annual general membership meeting. The Legacy Dinner and Celebration closed out the first evening with a cocktail reception, dinner, industry speakers, NICA Foundation Spotlight, Hall of Fame and Winner's Hour Activities.

Throughout the three days were educational workshops covering a variety of topics: Blue Ribbon Guest Service, DOT (Department of Transportation), Fiserv/Clover (payment system), labor, the next generation, reducing chargebacks and safety and security.

There was the **American Heart Association** Heartsaver CPR training and ServSafe food manager classes. Roundtable discussions featured topics such as hours/days of operation, internet infrastructure, multi-year agreements, and weather protocols. In addition, the Fare Foods Food Show showcased over 50 exhibitors who specialized in food, insurance, manufacturing, sup-

plies, technology and more.

The NICA Hall of Fame recipient was **Dominic Palmieri III**, owner, **The Midway Gourmet**.

"The OABA had an extremely productive and celebrated Florida Week in Tampa," said **Greg Chiecko**, OABA CEO. "New this year, the OABA held educational sessions on Wednesday. The Smart Transactions: Reducing Chargebacks in Your Business session had a full house of NICA and OABA members. Many ideas for reducing chargebacks were presented and more ideas are coming down the road. **HB Strategies**, the OABA lobbying firm from DC, explained the CARE Act (HR 1787) and how we, as the industry, can contact our U.S. Representatives to co-sign the bill. It was a great exchange, and we expect action toward moving the bill forward."

Thursday was full of activities as the board of directors met with "Partners Program" participants and held their board meeting. New this year, at the request of manufacturers and suppliers, a Tabletop Trade Show was held from 1 to 4:30 with about 30 participants.

"Our manufacturing and suppliers indicated it was a very productive few hours, and they were satisfied with attending," said Chiecko. "In the evening, we held a very successful 8th Annual **TopGolf** Foreign Guest Worker Advocacy Fundraiser at the Tampa Top Golf Facility."

The 59th annual member meeting and chair reception took place Friday evening where **Ben Pickett**, from **Ray Cammack Shows**, took the reign of chair of the OABA board of directors from **Rick Reithoffer**. Also, **Johnny Doolan** and **Bill Johnson** were inducted into the Hall of Fame and **Eugene Siefker** posthumously received the Pioneer Award.

Saturday afternoon closed out the week when **Wayne McCary**, OABA trustee and hall of famer, was inducted into the Circus Ring of Fame at the **Sarasota Circus Tent**.

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MIDWAYSCENE

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Tom Keaney is the new CEO of **The Solano County Fair Association**, Vallejo, California, and he doesn't have far to come — a little over 20 miles, even though a nationwide search was conducted. Keaney has been serving as the executive officer for the **Cloverdale Citrus Fair**, Novato. He started his position in Solano County on February 1.

"I think he is going to be an excellent fit for our fair; I look forward to working with him," **Valerie Williams**, told the *Daily Republic*. She is the former Solano County Fair Board president who took over as the interim executive in September.

"We envision a new day for the Solano County Fair and fairgrounds — one that allows our county residents a safe, wholesome place for the community to gather and celebrate our diverse interests and cultural expressions. And we believe that Tom Keaney is the leader to help us achieve this goal," said **George Kennedy**, president of the board of directors, in a statement.

In addition to his experience managing a local fair and fairgrounds, he has experience as a business and data analyst in the financial field, paralegal work in real estate, labor law and intellectual property law. Keaney also has been involved with the Novato Chamber of Commerce, Boy Scouts and 4-H youth organizations, and as a volunteer with emergency response and at evacuation shelters for the Kincade, Glass and Walbridge fires.

"I have always been energized by my desire to make a difference in the communities where I work and live. Serving as the leader of the Solano County Fair Association is a tremendous honor and opportunity to support resiliency and quality of life in our community," Keaney said in the statement.

Keaney spent 18 months at the Citrus Fair and arrives as the Fair Board is planning for the 75th Diamond Jubilee celebration on June 13-16.

The Ohio Expositions Commission recently named **Adam Heffron** as the new executive director of the **Ohio Expo Center & State Fair**, as **Virgil Strickler**, recently retired. Heffron began this month.

"We want to take a moment to once again thank Virgil Strickler for the incredible legacy he has created," said **Angela Krile**, Ohio Expositions Commission Chair. "We are excited that Adam is bringing this leadership, tenacity and extensive event and fair industry experience to build on our strong foundation and take the Ohio Expo Center & State Fair into the next phase of success with the Expo 2050 Master Plan."

"It is a life-long aspiration of mine to work

alongside such a talented team to produce one of the nation's premier agricultural fairs and be a host venue to so many successful events," Heffron told Ohio's Country Journal. "I am honored to lead the Expo 2050 Master Plan that will further advance the reputation and quality of the institution, as well as continue Virgil Strickler's leadership legacy."

Heffron recently served as the executive director of **Alliant Energy Center**, a multi-building entertainment venue located in Madison, Wisconsin. Prior to that, he spent most of his career in the event and fair industry, serving at the **Milwaukee World Festival**, the **Washington State Fair**, the **Wisconsin State Fair, Meet Minneapolis — Convention and Visitors Association** and the **Minnesota State Fair**.

Reithoffer Shows and the **Wilson County Fair-Tennessee State Fair** recently announced a sky ride will be built on the Lebanon, Tennessee, fairgrounds.

Plans include an 1100-foot-long ride with a capacity of approximately 100 chairs (200 patrons) running from the fair's main pedestrian green gate to the agriculture building on the northeast side of the fairgrounds.

Randall Clemons, president, **Wilson County Promotions**, and operator of the fair, said this announcement is another addition to programming and capital work which will continue to take the fair to the highest levels. "We are delighted that Reithoffer Shows has selected our fair for the construction of the sky ride. It is going to be a hit!"

Reithoffer Shows said it is planning for a 2024 opening of the ride, provided all the steel and construction labor can be met. This will be the fifth sky ride installed at Reithoffer-partnered fairs. Others include **Bloomsburg (Pennsylvania) Fair**, **Coastal Carolina Fair** (Charleston), **Georgia National Fair** and **New Mexico State Fair**.

After only three months on the job, new Chief Executive Officer **Sarah Pelle** has announced an ambitious five-year plan that involves a mixture of new and old for the **Yolo County Fair**, Woodland, California.

Pelle brings a "rich background in policy development, organizational management, budgeting, and effective communication strategies," according to fair board officials who spoke with *The Daily Democrat*. Pelle took over in mid-November after former executive officer **Bart Vannucci's** contract ended in June 2023 after five years.

Pelle's prior role was at the California Department of Food and Agriculture.

Pelle said the fair is a "public asset," and that one of her main goals is connecting with the community, including meeting with nonprofit groups.

WATER PARKS & RECREATION

▶ Oceana Water World destroyed by fire — page 34 / News Splash — page 34

Aquatica Orlando reimagining WhiteWater West Bowl Slides

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ORLANDO — When **Aquatica** opened in 2008, among the notable attractions was a pair of **WhiteWater West** Super Bowl slides known as **Tassie's Twisters**. The Super Bowl, introduced in 2002, is one of WhiteWater's best-selling attractions. Riders on tubes holding one or two passengers traverse an enclosed tube where they gain speed before being shot into a circular bowl. Centrifugal forces keep the riders high on the side wall of the bowl for a few rotations until they start to slow down, eventually lose momentum and are then directed with water jets into an exit in the center of the bowl which leads to another chute and then the final runoff.

Tassie's Twisters is unique in that the pair of bowls is located on an island in the middle of **Loggerhead Lane**, the park's lazy river. Upon exiting the bowl chute, riders find themselves floating in the lazy river. In its original configuration, guests had to first enter the lazy river to queue for the bowl slides. Eventually, a bridge was built over the river to allow for easier access.

For the 2024 season, **Tassie's Twisters** will become **Tassie's Underwater Twist**, transporting guests into a vibrant underwater world. The two bowls will be enclosed and will feature video projections accompanied by a captivating orchestral score. As passengers enter the bowl, they will be engulfed in a simulated marine-like environment. Guests will



Tassie's Underwater Twist features a new twist on a pair of old slides. Covers over the bowls along with projection mapping and an orchestral soundtrack will offer riders an immersive experience. COURTESY AQUATICA ORLANDO

find themselves surrounded by lush seagrass meadows, schools of colorful fish and even the occasional shark. The scenery was inspired by Australia's **Shark Bay** — a UNESCO World Heritage Site with the largest known area of seagrass meadows in the world. As the video projections bring the underwater world to life, the music will help evoke a sense of wonder and excitement. As is typical with recent installations from **United Parks & Resorts** (formerly **SeaWorld Parks & Entertainment**), the attraction endeavors to educate as well as entertain. Visual components along the path of the ride will enlighten visitors about the importance of seagrass meadows and the marine life that depends on them.

"**Tassie's Underwater Twist** is set to redefine the thrill of aquatic adventures at Aquatica Orlando," said **Brad Gilmour**, president of Aquatica Orlando. "As we eagerly anticipate the grand opening in the spring, this immersive attraction promises a whirlwind of wonder and adrenaline-pumping twists. We've crafted an experience that will not only delight slide enthusiasts but also create lasting memories for families and friends. With **Tassie's Underwater Twist**, we invite guests to dive into an underwater world of wonder, where fun and excitement meet curiosity and education."

Tassie's Underwater Twist is part of United Park's strategy to open a new or refurbished attraction at its parks every year. Aquatica opened **Turi's Kid**

Cove last year — a major enhancement of the previous water sprayground, **Kata's Kookaburra Cove**, that opened with the park in 2008. In 2022, Aquatica opened its revamped water slide **Reef Plunge** (see AT Vol 25, Issue 9, Dec. 2021).

Aquatica Orlando is located adjacent to **SeaWorld Orlando** and **Discovery Cove**. It opened in 2008 and is themed to the southern Pacific, particularly Australia and New Zealand. Although separately gated, all three parks are promoted together. Promotions often include nearby **Busch Gardens Tampa Bay** and **Adventure Island** water park, all of which are owned and operated by United Parks & Resorts.

In its opening year, Aquatica hosted approximately 950,000 guests, plac-

ing in the top five most-attended water parks in North America. Following the success of the first Aquatica, a second was opened at **SeaWorld San Antonio** in 2012. A third Aquatica opened in 2013 in Chula Vista near **SeaWorld San Diego** at a water park that originally opened as **Whitewater Canyon** in 1997. Located more than 20 miles from SeaWorld, it was not as successful as the other two parks. In 2019 SeaWorld announced the park was to be rethemed and transformed into **Sesame Place San Diego** with a focus more toward children. Following closures and delays owing to the global pandemic, the park did not open until 2022 as **Sesame Place**; it did, however, retain almost all of the water attractions from Aquatica.

Liseberg's Oceana Water World destroyed by fire

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GOTHENBURG, Sweden — On February 12, 2024, a fire erupted at the construction site at **Oceana Water World**. Although officials are still investigating the cause, video shows a massive explosion from what appears to be flammable gas. The fire spread quickly, igniting large sections of the park's outdoor fiberglass slides, including a massive funnel slide. The fire then spread to parts of the pool hall.

Per Nyqvist, the rescue chief at the Gothenburg Fire Department, reported on the sequence of events, which began with an alarm at 10:06 a.m. on February 12 regarding a fire at **Liseberg's** water world, Oceana. It had a dramatic start, as there was an early occurrence of a fire gas explosion, followed by extensive smoke development from the fire. A major rescue operation was initiated, involving many units working intensively and in collaboration.

Unfortunately, aerial footage by the end of the day showed what appears to be a total loss of the waterslides and significant damage to the buildings. It is unclear if anything can be salvaged.

Sixteen individuals sought medical attention after the fire, and all were discharged from the hospital. Tragically, one person, working on behalf of Liseberg, lost his life in the fire.

Prior to the fire, Oceana was nearing completion and expected to open in the summer. Some of the pools had already been filled with water. The park was a just a week away from having the slides commissioned with final safety checks and then handed over by the manufacturer.

Oceana broke ground in 2020 and was part of a large-scale expansion project marking Liseberg's centennial. **The Grand Curiosa Hotel** opened in 2023, and Oceana Water World was on target to open in a few months. The expansion had been years in the making, with the original plan to have both open in 2023, however plans were put on hold during the global pandemic.

Oceana covered a total area of around 13,600 square meters (146,000 square feet), including 4,000 square meters of outdoor space and 6,000 square meters of indoor pools. Included in the 14 rides and attractions were several high-profile slides provided by **WhiteWater West** of British Columbia, Canada. Among the slides was Scandinavia's first Master Blaster, Europe's first six-person raft Abyss funnel slide, Europe's first double Constrictor/Rattler slide and Europe's first six-person Constrictor/Boomerango.

WhiteWater released a statement stating that the company had been working for several years with the Liseberg team to create Europe's finest new water park, which contained family and kids slides, aquatic play and waves designed and manufactured for this beautiful indoor park. The statement also noted that it is heartbreaking to witness a fire consume all the progress which had been made as the park reached completion.

"At this point in time, WhiteWater's focus is on working with our client and all of the team on site to help them through this emergency. To witness such destruction is traumatizing, and we recognize the impact this will have on many, which is where our immediate thoughts and actions reside to help them," said **Geoff Chutter**, CEO of WhiteWater.

The day after the fire, **Andreas Andersen**, CEO of Liseberg said, "We are shocked and deeply saddened, affected, and shaken by what has happened. Right now, our focus is not on finances or material damages but on the people affected by the fire. Currently, we do not have an overview of the project-related consequences. At the same time, I can promise that we will look forward with determination and hope. We will get through this."

By the end of the week, Liseberg's board decided to move forward and rebuild Oceana as intended.



NEWS SPLASH

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The citizens of Los Lunas, New Mexico, have been asked to provide input on what they would like to see in a new aquatic center.

The meeting was led by **Evan Eleff**, a partner with **Sports Facilities Advisory**, and **Kevin Port**, a representative of **Councilman Hunsaker**, an aquatic planning and design firm. The village commissioned these companies to explore the possibilities of an aquatic center.

Eleff and Port presented their process for developing aquatic centers and what kind of amenities the space could offer, ranging from lap lanes, water slides, hot tubs and more. They also presented some examples of other aquatic centers the company has worked on to give a sense of what is possible and how it could look.

To further engage the community, the consultants created an online survey to learn more about the public's preferences and what they rank as most important to have in the facility. The survey was open until mid-January and data from it will be integral to the design of the facility.

Port said they estimate the cost to construct the aquatic center to be around \$20 million, so the more community engagement the survey receives the more momentum there will be to move the project forward.

Myrtle Waves Water Park in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, will open a new mat racer this spring. The slide, a four-lane mat racer, was moved from the former **Wild Water and Wheels Park** in Surfside Beach. Although the park has a variety of body and tube slides, this will be the first mat slide for the park.

Wild Water and Wheels operated at nearby Surfside Beach, South Carolina, for 30 years. At the end of the 2022 season, the Lazarus family operating as **Lazarus Entertainment Group** closed the park.

Mark Lazarus, president, said that like many others, the cost of business has gone up tremendously and it's harder to attract and retain employees. Additionally, he said nearby campgrounds are now offering similar amenities.

He said with schools back earlier his former 100-day season was cut to 65 operating days.

Campgrounds that were major feeders now have their own little water parks that keep the people at their venue. He really wanted to keep the water park open, but it was no longer viable.

Lazarus indicated he's not selling the land to developers to get rich and retire, he's selling it to pay off his debts.

He first tried to sell the complete operation, but there were no takers.

Lazarus Entertainment Group currently operates Myrtle Waves Water Park and **Broadway Grand Prix Family Race Park**, both in the Myrtle Beach area.

In January, the **Palm Springs Surf Club** (PSSC) opened a new surf park at the former **Wet-n-Wild Waterpark**. Utilizing technology provided by **SurfLoch**, the state-of-the-art wave pool mimics ocean waves, allowing all skill sets a chance to catch and ride the waves.

"We can curate the perfect wave every time about every seven seconds," said **Tim O'Byrne** president and CEO, PSSC.

"We are about to completely curate everything about the wave, the height ... from about two feet to where you can catch a wave to seven and a half feet, which are big gain professional kind level surfer waves," said O'Byrne.

Aside from the wave pool, the resort-style water park offers refreshments at its three bars, fine dining and casual fare at two onsite restaurants.

For those who do not surf, the park also features a lazy river, splash pad, pools and cabanas, which will provide the best view of the upcoming surf competitions when those seven-foot waves will be on display.

SurfLoch was founded by **Tom Lochtefeld**, who along with **Jeff Henry** of **Schlitterbahn** developed the first **WaveLoch FlowRider** in 1991.

The region of Clare Valley in Australia, is now home to a AU\$2.6 (\$1.7) million water park. **Splash Zone** is located at **Discovery Parks**, a popular holiday and caravan park (campground), located in the heart of South Australia's world-famous wine region.

Designed as a resort-style swimming pool and splash park, attributes include nature-inspired theming, complete with rocks, streams, and nature play elements.

The attraction features an interactive play structure with a giant tipping bucket, spray-zones, multiple water-based challenges and a handful of waterslides.

The new waterpark was designed to not only attract new visitors from around Australia, it will also provide recreational experiences for locals.

Clare Valley offers a number of unique things to do in keeping with its wine heritage, including the popular 34km Riesling Trail suitable for walkers, cyclists and even wheelchairs.

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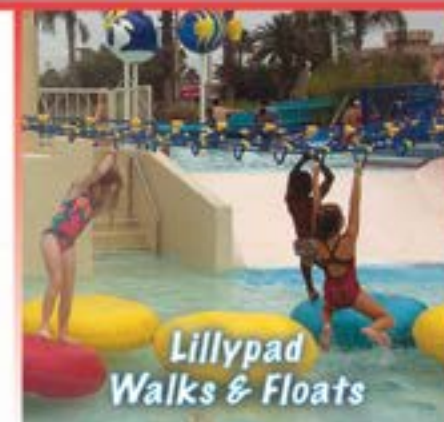
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BUSINESS & NEWSMAKERS

▶ **Woman of Influence: Embed's Sara Paz — page 39 / McGowan Companies acquire Parks Plus — page 45**

Nearly 1,500 attend annual Pennsylvania Showmen/Fair convention

AT: B. Derek Shaw
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HERSHEY, Pa. — The Pennsylvania State Association of County Fairs (PSACF) and the Pennsylvania State Showmen's Association (PSSA) 111th annual convention took place January 17–20, 2024, with the theme “Flourishing with Opportunity, Rooted in Agriculture.” Of the 107 fairs in the state, 89 sent representatives. There were 1,484 attendees.

Again, the 32,000-square-foot Great American Hall at Hershey Lodge and Convention Center, Hershey, Pennsylvania, was the venue for the two-and-a-half-day trade show, with 132 vendors. Five carnival operators had booths: C&L Shows, Houghton Enterprises, Main Event Amusements, Penn Valley Shows and TDK Entertainment. Numerous fair and carnival operations, as well as Variety Attractions, provided hospitality rooms along with both presenting organizations.

Marla Calico, president and CEO of the International Association of Fairs and Expositions (IAFE), was the keynote speaker during the opening celebration. The convention featured educational seminars, daily workshops and table topics comprising the educational component. Some topics included: 60 Tips in 60 Minutes; Capital Improvement Grants; Fair Queens, What Do We Do with Them at The Fair?; Human Trafficking; Are We Adjusting Our Fairs to Society



Having a quick meeting at the showmen's booth are (l to r) Donna Kramer, Treasurer; Mary Ott, Executive Secretary and Lloyd Searfoss, 2024 President (above left). Before the showmen's banquet, PSSA President Jimmie Houghton and wife, Christine, went for a “ride” in the car that was a photo prop for the evening's festivities (above right). Below, Tim and Diane Krise own TDK Entertainment, a ride rental company based out of Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania. AT/B. DEREK SHAW



Today? (and How?); and Roles and Responsibilities of a Board. Nightly banquets, with a different focus each evening, completed the schedule of activities.

“An ongoing initiative for the past few years has been to ask a (PSSA) member to sign a new member,” said Mary Ott, Executive Secretary of the PSSA. “We suffered a lot of losses because of that COVID year. Technically, it was a two-year period we lost members to illness and age. A lot of people lost their businesses because of the shutdown. They just couldn't survive and hold on.”

Wednesday evening featured a talent showcase,

comprised of 19 acts providing all types of music and other entertainment. Many of these same acts had a presence on the trade show floor with a booth or strolling the aisles. Over half were self-booking.

Thursday evening's banquet, held by the PSACF, began with introductions of all 58 Fair Queens who were vying for the 2024 Pennsylvania Fair Queen title. Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture Secretary Russell Redding made a few remarks. “I had the opportunity to visit many fairs last summer — and 2023 was a year of major milestones, including a 50th fair anniversary, a 75th anniversary, a 150th anniversary and an



astonishing 225th anniversary. Pennsylvania fairs bring \$126 million yearly to our economy and generate an additional \$50 million in revenue, drawing both locals and tourists who spend money on overnight stays, shopping, dining and sightseeing. County fairs promote agriculture and enhance our community values through social connection, tradition, entertainment, professional opportunities and introducing new ideas.”

Martha Ebersole with

the Perry County Fair is the 2024 president. She also served as the banquet emcee. The vice president is Craig Lash, Sewickley Township Community Fair. Sherry Moyer of the Oley Fair was the Fair Person of the Year honoree. Jordan Anderson with the Albion Area Fair was named the Junior Fair Person of the Year. Four zone awards were presented: Zone 1, Venango County Fair; Zone 2,

▶ See SHOWMEN, page 38



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Three showmen became "showwomen" for the evening as they carried out the '50s theme, much to the delight of the attendees with their shenanigans. (l to r): Jason Houghton, Jr., Ryan Hartman and Steven Good, Good Time Amusements. COURTESY TIM MCGOWAN STUDIO

►SHOWMEN Continued from page 37

Clinton County Fair, Zone 3, Mountain Area Fair and Zone 4, Mason Dixon Fair. Country music singer and songwriter **Darryl Worley** provided the entertainment, brought in by Variety Attractions.

The PSSA banquet took place Friday evening. "In the past few years, our presidents have selected a theme and that always provides a lot of entertainment at our banquet. This year's theme was a '50s sock hop and doo-wop. [It was] a lot of fun," said Ott. Decorations were coordinated by President **Jimmy** and **Christine Houghton** from **Houghton Enterprises**.

"I've always liked the fifties and that's why we decided to go with this. This is my dream," said Houghton.

Al Rosenberg, third generation owner of **Triangle Poster & Printing Company**, Pittsburgh, was named Showman of the Year. His grandfather, **David**, was a charter member of the PSSA. A check was presented to the **Pennsylvania Farm Show Foundation** for \$27,819 — half the proceeds from the Showman's **Herschel** carousel and **Hampton** mini tractor ride that operated during the eight-day **Pennsylvania Farm Show** earlier in January. Nine deserving students were presented scholarships. The banquet also included the installation of the 2024 PSSA President, **Lloyd Searfoss** with **Penn Premiere Shows**. Entertainment was provided

by **Desire**, a professional doo-wop group based in the Lehigh Valley.

The incoming president spoke on his role. "I plan to focus with the county fairs association, to be a good liaison — work with those guys, work with the parks association, work with the **Department of Agriculture** and political entities that we have to brush elbows with and keep the ship sailing straight," said Searfoss.

Regarding the upcoming season, he said, "Anyone in this business has to be an optimist. We're going to be optimistic that finance holds up and people have money to spend. We see attendance holding its own, and I believe that spending is going to be on par with 2023."

The 38th annual Pennsylvania State Fair Queen Coronation took place Saturday evening. **Erica Teagarden** representing the **Washington County Agricultural Fair** was named the 2024 queen. She is a 2022 graduate of **McGuffey High School**, Claysville, where she was involved in **FFA**. **Elise Honeycutt**, who represented the Albion Area Fair, was selected as the alternate. She currently is a junior at **Northwestern High School** and also involved in **FFA**. Both the queen and alternate will travel the commonwealth this year representing Pennsylvania's rich agricultural heritage and serving as an ambassador for the fair association.

"Our fairs wouldn't be what they are without the youth

that take on the role of being ambassadors for their fairs," said Agriculture Secretary **Russell Redding**. "While each contestant represented a different fair, they all came together to represent our shared agriculture industry. It is such an honor to see how our youth are able to grow as leaders through opportunities such as the State Fair Queen competition."

During the PSACF annual meeting, a Showmen and Fairmen memorial service was held for the 130 individuals lost the past year. Many of them were also part of a display in the trade show area.

Reflecting on the convention and trade show, **Harry Reffner**, PSACF Executive Secretary/Treasurer said, "It went very well. Attendance is up in all areas — our trade show is up, we were at 1,300 last year, we're about 1,500 attending, and both banquets were full. I could not seat anyone else. [It] seems like our table topics and seminars were well received. We were pleased to have **Marla Calico**, from IAFE as our keynote speaker and two seminars."

Ott agreed. "I think on the overall, it went well. The snow affected our banquet attendance a little bit. It caused some travel issues for some of our guests coming in. [I'm] looking forward to getting on the road and see what 2024 brings."

The 2025 edition is scheduled for January 22-25 at Hershey Lodge.

• pashowmen.com
• pafairs.org

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Women INFLUENCE

A view from the top...

From San Diego to Asia, from Europe to Dallas, **Sara Paz** is living a professional global adventure making tech accessible, profitable and fun. For the past five years, she has served as chief marketing officer of **Embed**, helping to guide the industry forward in new ways, while lighting the way to ensure the world of tech embraces diverse, passionate team members at all levels.

Career part of Paz's adventure

DALLAS, Texas — It was not lost on Sara Paz, that her interview with *Amusement Today* would run in March, International Women's Month. In fact, she couldn't think of a better time. "This is an incredible time for us," she shared. "For the first time in our company's history, we have 50% gender parity. At Embed, we believe in the value of diversity. We have a shared commitment to gender parity at all levels of our organization because we believe in the boundless strength that results from harnessing and realizing the talent capital of gender and cultural equality. We are a technology company, and we say 'Expect Her in Tech.' We take great pride in being gender equal and working to put an end to gender inequality in the tech sector."

A self-described professional gypsy and nomad, Paz has been all over the world for both work and fun.

Through career postings in the USA, Mexico, England, Finland, Singapore and Japan, she has gained a complete global marketing perspective that is enriched by a passion and celebration for cultural diversity. Paz began in her career with Sony Corporation in Tokyo, Japan, and continued to hone her style and craft, moving on to pivotal regional and global marketing roles at Intel, Nokia, HTC and LVMH's private equity firm. It was when she joined Embed in 2019, she discovered she could turn her knowledge, focus, drive and skill to the business of fun. "Yes!" she said. "We are in the business of fun — and we are earnest about it. We know when the consumer thrives, our operators thrive. Consumers thrive when they are having fun. It is no secret that we call ourselves, internally and externally, fun crusaders."

"This is such an incredible time to be alive," she continued.

"Technology continues to evolve in ways we still cannot imagine. I have always loved tech; it empowers our lives as individuals, strengthens businesses and breaks down barriers. I am part of a team that celebrates the complexities of technology while making it accessible and fun."

"Rene Welsh (Embed's CEO) is a serial entrepreneur, and she has put together an incredible team of brilliant minds, who are highly competitive and who embrace what they do and why they do it," Paz described. "Her generous soul naturally comes through in all she does, and it is a tremendous ride to be with her on this tech journey."

And while the end goal at Embed is to ensure operators provide seamless, user-friendly products for their customers, Paz stresses the path that leads to success is not meant to be smooth and easy: "As we envision and develop goals, it is important to always celebrate the process along the way. We remind our employees, particularly junior ones who are starting their careers with us, that if we do not experience bumps in the road, if we are not failing enough, we aren't doing it right."

"I love the process," she continued. "The will our team has to show up and forge new paths is exciting. We are not following a linear step-by-step process but instead are striving for excellence and celebrating each step as we head there."

Paz sees her career as a professional adventure. "I am a life learner," she explained. "I want to do incredible work, with incredible people. Our entire Embed team is focused on innovating and not fearing fear. We aim for high performance, doing good and always being fun crusaders."

Paz solemnly remembered what it was like for her team when



the COVID pandemic took hold. "Our industry was the first to close and the last to open," she said. "We knew early on that families would always celebrate a birthday. Friends would always want places to gather. Our important role was to look for and create ways to support our operators so that they could emerge successfully through the pandemic. We set out to help everyone get back to creating memories together again."

"Those were critical months when the Embed team realized what we were truly made of. We knew we were strong. We knew we were innovative, so we had to pivot, refocus our efforts and focus on providing products, services, even education and marketing tools — for free! — to help our operators open again. Our entire approach was, 'We are in this together.'"

Paz explained, "When your goal — your one thing — is to achieve excellence, it is impossible to do anything else. Yes, it takes time to do that work, but seeking excellence, especially when it is a shared goal, is both an incredible way to work and to live life.

"I count my blessings with my work every day," Paz shared. "Approximately 50% of my team have worked for me at previous tech companies. When I called to invite them to join us at Embed, they could have easily said, 'No, I'm not taking another crazy crusade with you!' But instead, they joined me on this professional adventure. We are not doing what everyone else is doing. We have a long-term focus on achieving excellent long-term results. The work and the process are as tough as it is rewarding. Together we are transforming the business of fun."

"There's the saying, 'Your vibe attracts your tribe.' I'm proud that so many of my current team came from during other chapters in my life and that I'm serving on a Chief Executive Leadership team made up of 50% women, led by a female CEO. I'm surrounded by a tribe that is the very change we want to see reflected in the world of tech," Paz concluded. "The United Nations 2024 International Women's Day platform theme is 'Invest in Women: Accelerate Progress.' At Embed, we're already there."

—Susan Storey

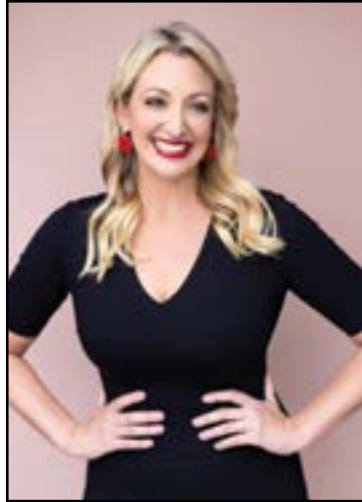
Sara Paz

Embed
Dallas, Texas

The TEA 30th Anniversary THEA Awards Gala is ready to shine

AT: Susan Storey
Special to Amusement Today

BURBANK, Calif. — Traditional wisdom has said the perfect gift for a 30th anniversary is pearl. As the **Themed Entertainment Association (TEA)** readies for the 30th Annual Thea Awards Gala, it is almost poetic to note that a pearl is the result of an oyster dealing with a challenge. The awards recipients who will be celebrated at this month's event have addressed challenges and created innovative places and spaces that achieve excellence.



TEA Board President Melissa Oveido (above left) spoke with *Amusement Today* about the upcoming 30th Annual Thea Awards Gala which will be held March 15 in Hollywood, Calif. The elegant affair is one of the themed entertainment industry's most celebrated global events and is the final event of TEA Inspire Week. COURTESY TEA

"We are so excited about this year's Thea Awards," **Melissa Oveido (Ruminot)**, president of the TEA International Board and chief business officer for **B. Morrow Productions**, shared. "Never before have we seen such diversity in the categories and among the recipients. The ingenuity and approach this year's recipients applied to their projects is unlike any-

thing we've seen before. They developed immersive shows, environments, attractions and so much more."

She added, "The Thea Awards Gala is much more than a celebration. To borrow a line from 'Hamilton' — it truly is about being in the room where everything happens. This event honors the individuals and the teams who took the grain of an idea and made

tangible, beautiful environments and experiences. Yes, we highlight the work, but most importantly, we celebrate the people."

In 1994, TEA introduced the Thea Awards to recognize achievement, talent and personal excellence within the themed entertainment industry. In choosing the name Thea for the new program, TEA created a new word, from

three: Theia, the Greek goddess of brightness and light; Theater, a word derived from the goddess herself; and TEA, the very name of the association. Since then, the Thea Awards have become prestigious in the global industry and a symbol of international excellence.

"The Thea Awards are different in many special ways," Oveido said. "So

often the teams and individuals that work on the incredible projects in our industry are bound by confidentiality and non-disclosure agreements. From the very beginning we decided that in order to be eligible for a Thea Award, the entry must include the full team. No other reward program required this, and

▶ See THEA, page 41

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► **THEA**

Continued from page 40

to this day, it's a breakthrough that sets us apart. We understand the final product is the sum of the work from talented, multi-faceted teams across many disciplines. Nominees must submit the full story of the project and include the full credit list. We want to know who was involved every step of the way. In this way we also acknowledge how the creative community partners with owners and operators to deliver excellence for their guests and customers."

"We are especially excited by the truly global array of recipients this year," Oviedo continued. "When you look at the full body of works, you can see how far and wide the themed entertainment industry has



At last year's Thea Awards Gala, Emily Png (above left), co-founder of Andsoforth, accepted the 2023 Thea Award for Immersive Dining Experience Limited Budget: Absurdities Vol. 1. This month's black-tie gala will honor the new class of recipients who were announced during IAAPA 2023. COURTESY TEA

expanded. The categories for outstanding experiences are as creative as the recipients. Immersive mall experience, dining attraction, retail experience — such innovations are celebrated. We also include projects on a limited budget because excellence isn't merely the result of a large budget."

In addition to the awards for outstanding projects, annual accolades include the Buzz Price Award, the Catalyst Award, the Classic Award and the Peter

Chernack Distinguished Service Award.

Attendees at this year's gala will notice another change from years' past. "We moved this year's event to Hollywood," Oviedo shared. "As soon as you say, 'Hollywood,' you just naturally think of best of the best. Hollywood is the land of dreams. The Thea Awards celebrate themed entertainment dreams that became a reality. The glamour and history of Hollywood, even being in the **Dolby Theatre**



itself, the very home of the Academy Awards, all of it is coming together so that we can host our most exciting evening ever."

Leading up to the Thea Awards Gala, themed entertainment professionals will first gather together for the peer-led TEA Inspire event. Taking place March 14-15 at the **Loews Hollywood Hotel**, TEA Inspire will do "exactly that!" Oviedo said. "This event gives us the opportunity to dive deeper and

learn from case studies and each other. It is unique in that it was designed to equally welcome experienced leaders and executives alongside the next generation of emerging professionals. This program unites attendees with their shared passion and talents. This is the week when we all come together to engage with excellence, learn from excellence, and most importantly, celebrate excellence. I can't think of a place I'd rather be."

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OBITUARY



Elizabeth (Betty) Siefker

Elizabeth Siefker, Showmen Supplies founder, passes

LA PORTE, Ind. — The family of Elizabeth (Betty) Siefker shared the news of her passing on January 28, 2024.

Born to Harold M. and Stella Grace (Dunne) Spears on February 22, 1927, in Rockford, Ill., the family moved to La Porte in 1931. She attended St. Peter's school and graduated from LaPorte High School in 1944. Post high school, Siefker was employed in administrative services at Kingsbury Ordinance Plant and Hargrave & Hargrave Insurance.

On June 30, 1951, she married Eugene G. Siefker of Columbus Grove, Ohio. As their family grew, Betty was most active in the raising and educating of their seven children and the founding and growth of the family business, Showmen Supplies, Inc. She served as Executive Administrator until her retirement in 2013.

Betty made time for civic and community work as well. She was a two-term president of La Porte Hospital Auxiliary and was chairperson of the Northern Area Council of Hospital Auxiliaries, later serving on the Board of LaPorte Hospital Foundation. She was a member of the Women's Literary Society where she served as treasurer, a member of Sigma Phi Gamma International Sorority, and a member of two Red Hat Societies — the Classy Red Hatters of La Porte and the Queens of Hearts in San Diego, California.

ON THE MOVE

ProSlide Technology Inc. announced the opening of its new office in Dubai. This strategic expansion is well-timed to meet the surging demand for innovative water rides in the rapidly growing Middle East, where world-class tourism and leisure projects are flourishing.

"We are proud to officially open our ProSlide office in Dubai, continuing our strong commitment to the Middle East leisure and entertainment industry," expresses **Ray Smegal**, chief commercial officer of ProSlide. "With a spotlight on innovation and guided by our mission to revolutionize the water ride industry, our Dubai team is well positioned to play a pivotal role in shaping the future of the region's transformative water parks."

The ProSlide Dubai team includes **Daniel Jackson**, principal master planner; **Christy Liu**, customer service account manager; **Vijay Veerappan**, project manager; and **Philip Baker**, vice president business development (based in Canada). With a combined 30 years' experience designing, building and servicing water parks globally, they are well poised to drive ProSlide's mission of innovation in water rides.

"Our in-region team of master planning, project management and customer service enhances our ability to collaborate closely with clients and their teams from the initial concept to project completion and beyond," stated Jackson. "Above all, we want our clients to succeed — their success is our success."

Palace Entertainment announced the appointment of three new general managers across key properties within its portfolio. **Megan Hartman** has been promoted to general manager of the **Dutch Wonderland** resort properties, **Chris Kearsing** has been promoted to general manager of **Story Land Theme Park and Living Shores Aquarium**, and **Steven Syas** has been elevated to general manager of **Sea Life Park Hawaii**.

Hartman has a rich background within the amusement industry offering 20 years of experience with Palace Entertainment, **Great Wolf Lodge** and **Cedar Fair**. She most recently served as the assistant general manager and director of operations at **Splish Splash Water Park** on Long Island.

Kearsing joined Palace Entertainment in 2023 as the director of operations at **Adventureland Resort**. Throughout his time, he has helped to elevate the resort's rides, admissions and guest services programs and has continued to be an important asset to Palace Entertainment. He brings more than 20 years of experience across the hospitality industry to the Palace Entertainment team.

"I am looking forward to shaping our leadership team with key industry players ahead of the start of our 2024 season," said Group Manager of Theme Parks **Mark Pauls**. "Together, Megan and Chris bring more than 40 years of theme and water park experience to these roles, they are the perfect fit to lead these properties through

a successful 2024 season and beyond."

Syas rejoined Palace Entertainment in 2022 and previously worked with the organization from 2018 through 2021. He has been instrumental in launching and leading Sea Life Park's all-new "Aloha Kai Luau." Syas offers a unique understanding of the food and beverage industry with more than 45 years of experience.

"Steven's understanding of the educational side of our park and his wealth of food and beverage experience he offers makes him the perfect fit to lead our team at Sea Life Park," offered Group Manager **Mike Lusky**. "We are looking forward to continuing to work with him to grow our business on Oahu."

Ellis and Associates (E&A) expanded with the addition of two new full-time positions. **Debbie Evans**, who has been managing external marketing efforts for the company as a consultant, assumes the new role of marketing executive. In addition to leading all marketing communication strategy, Evans will launch a new crisis communications training and consulting practice for E&A. **Shelly Rucinski**, who is known to many in the aquatics industry from her work with **Noah's Ark Waterpark** joins as client manager.

"We are incredibly proud to be adding these two accomplished women to the E&A leadership team," said E&A Senior Vice President and COO **RAC Carroll**. "Debbie and Shelly are highly respected for their experience and ability to get things done."

Since leaving her role as corporate director of communications for Six Flags, Inc., where she oversaw public relations and crisis communications for 39 parks in the company's portfolio at the time, Evans has worked with dozens of leisure industry resorts, parks, events, attractions and suppliers.

Starting in 1990 after working as an intern at the park, Rucinski became synonymous with the operation of Noah's Ark Waterpark. Recruiting, training, supervising and mentoring nearly 8,000 lifeguards during her tenure was only part of the job.

RWS Global announced the appointment of **Neil Palomba**, former COO of **Carnival Corporation**, as the company's new advisory board member leading the growth of its sea division.

Palomba brings more than 25 years of experience to the position, with leadership roles at **MSC, Costa Cruises** and **Carnival Cruise Line**.

"We are thrilled to welcome Neil Palomba aboard our team," said **Ryan Stana**, chairman and CEO of RWS Global. "His bank of knowledge and experience in the cruise industry will be invaluable as we expand our offerings at sea and dive deeper into the market."

In his new role, Palomba will collaborate with the team to expand their design models and entertainment experiences into their sea division.



Jackson



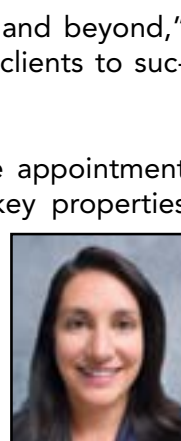
Liu



Veerappan



Baker



Hartman



Kearsing



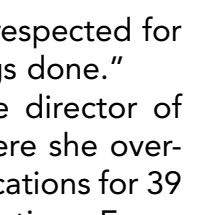
Syas



Evans



Rucinski



Palomba

McGowan Companies acquire Parks Plus Insurance

Purchase adds to the McGowan amusement industry portfolio

CLEVELAND, Ohio — In the ever-changing world of insurance, where coverage and pricing are constantly evolving, **The McGowan Companies** are leading the way in creating stable and cutting-edge risk management solutions for the amusement industry.

During the past few years, **ParksPlus Insurance** of Spring Hill, Florida, has positioned itself as a thought leader in creative and aggressive property insurance solutions for amusement parks, FECs, carnivals and water parks. McGowan is excited to add ParksPlus to the company's portfolio of companies which includes **McGowan Allied Specialty Insurance**.



ParksPlus Insurance was founded in 2018 by **David Chodzko** C.I.P. to fill the needs of property insurance for amusement owners, a niche Chodzko felt had not been properly offered to facility owners in the past.

"The acquisition of ParksPlus adds another industry leading resource to our Amusement Insurance and Risk Management programs. With this addition, our clients and brokers now have direct access to the next evolution in property insurance solutions for the amusement industry. This further demonstrates our long-term commitment to the amusement industry and to leading the indus-



Drew Tewksbury, Director, McGowan Allied Specialty Insurance. AT/GARY SLADE

try in creativity, solutions and future needs of our clients and brokers," said **Drew Tewksbury** director, McGowan Allied Specialty Insurance.

"From a personal perspective, ParksPlus has done very well in the short period it has been serving

the industry. This partnership with McGowan will enable us to take this to the next level and I am excited at the prospect. ParksPlus is dedicated to providing exceptional coverage, to our clients, at a fair price," stated ParksPlus's Chodzko.

• parksplusinsure.com

Port of Galveston trustees approve cruise terminal

GALVESTON, Texas — In early February, the **Port of Galveston** trustees approved to develop a fourth cruise terminal complex at Pier 16 that will be the homeport for **MSC Seascapes** beginning November 2025. **MSC Cruises** is the world's third largest cruise brand. The project, which will begin in the coming months, will include a \$100 million cruise terminal, a \$42 million parking garage, internal roadway work and other improvements at Pier 16. Under the 20-year agreement, which includes four five-year options, MSC will have a set cruise schedule beginning in late 2025 when the new terminal opens. The Port of Galveston is the fourth most popular cruise ship port in the U.S., hosting 1.49 million cruise ship passengers in 2023.

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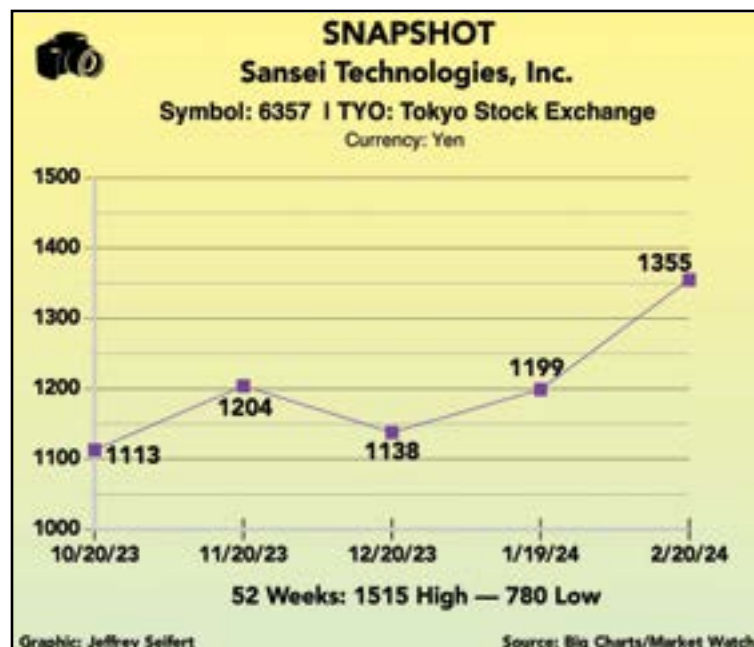
MARKET WATCH

COMPANY	SYMBOL	MARKET	PRICE 2/16/24	HIGH 52-Week	LOW 52-Week
PARKS AND ATTRACTIONS					
The Blackstone Group	BX	NYSE	127.89	133.53	76.19
Bowlero Corp.	BOWL	NYSE	12.92	17.45	8.85
Cedar Fair, L.P.	FUN	NYSE	42.49	47.95	34.04
Comcast Corp./NBCUniversal Media	CMCSA	NASDAQ	41.24	47.45	34.63
Dave & Busters Entertainment, LLC	PLAY	NASDAQ	60.80	61.65	31.65
EPR Properties	EPR	NYSE	42.18	49.10	33.92
Falcon's Beyond	FBYD	NASDAQ	11.50	44.00	7.17
Fuji Kyoko Co., Ltd.	JP:9010	TYO	3815.00	5820.00	3730.00
Haichang Holdings Ltd.	HK:2255	SEHK	0.74	2.09	0.67
Lefoo Development Co.	TW:2705	TSEC	17.15	28.45	16.15
MGM Resorts International	MGM	NYSE	42.54	51.35	34.12
Parks America, Inc.	PRKA	OTC	0.45	0.53	0.23
Royal Caribbean Cruises, Ltd.	RCL	NYSE	116.09	133.77	59.37
Six Flags Entertainment Co.	SIX	NYSE	25.51	31.29	18.29
Tivoli A/S	DK:TIV	CSE	760.00	822.00	684.00
United Parks & Resorts Inc.	PRKS	NYSE	47.09	68.20	40.87
The Walt Disney Company	DIS	NYSE	111.60	112.92	78.73
Warner Bros Discovery Inc.	WBD	NASDAQ	9.83	16.34	9.27
SUPPLIERS/OTHERS					
Brogent Technologies, Inc.	TW:5263	TSEC	114.50	141.00	108
Sansei Technologies, Inc.	TYO:6357	TYO	1300.00	1515.00	795.00
Topgolf Callaway Brands	MODG	NYSE	14.82	24.08	9.84

Details and information available at amusementtoday.com/stocks

Worldwide Markets — CSE/DK: Copenhagen Stock Exchange; HK: The Stock Exchange of Hong Kong; JP: The Tokyo Stock Exchange; NASDAQ: National Association of Securities Dealers Automated Quotations; NYSE: New York Stock Exchange; OCT: Over-the-counter stocks; TAIEX: The Taiwan Capitalization Weighted Stock Index; TYO: The Tokyo Stock Exchange; TW: The Taiwan Stock Exchange.

—SOURCES: Bigcharts.com



DIESEL PRICES

Region (U.S.)	As of 2/12/24	Change from 1 year ago
East Coast	\$4.201	(\$0.452)
Midwest	\$4.042	(\$0.232)
Gulf Coast	\$3.865	(\$0.285)
Mountain	\$3.805	(\$0.855)
West Coast	\$4.264	(\$0.410)
California	\$5.250	(\$0.195)

CURRENCY

On 2/19/24 \$1 USD =	
0.9277	EURO
0.7935	GBP (British Pound)
150.17	JPY (Japanese Yen)
0.8806	CHF (Swiss Franc)
1.5304	AUD (Australian Dollar)
1.3482	CAD (Canadian Dollar)

BUSINESS WATCH

SeaWorld changes corporate name

ORLANDO — **SeaWorld Entertainment, Inc.** announced it has changed its name to **United Parks & Resorts Inc.**, as of Feb. 12, 2024. The new name unites the company's portfolio of seven brands across 13 parks in the United States and Abu Dhabi.

The company's stock ticker symbol on the **New York Stock Exchange** will change from SEAS to PRKS, with trading as PRKS to beginning Feb. 13, 2024.

"Our new company name, United Parks & Resorts Inc., better reflects that we have been, and will continue to be, a diverse collection of park brands and experiences," said **Marc Swanson**, the company's chief executive officer. "Each of our iconic parks, including the four **SeaWorld** parks in Orlando, San Antonio, San Diego and Abu Dhabi, will continue to operate under the same names our guests know and love. What also remains unchanged is our deep commitment to creating experiences that matter for our guests and inspiring them to help protect animals and the wild wonders of the world."

The name change affects only the name of the parent company, SeaWorld Entertainment, Inc. The company's portfolio of parks — **SeaWorld**, **Busch Gardens**, **Discovery Cove**, **Sesame Place**, **Water Country USA**, **Adventure Island** and **Aquatica** — will retain their respective park names.

Comcast reports fourth quarter financials

PHILADELPHIA, Pa. — **Comcast Corporation** reported results for the quarter ended December 31, 2023. Revenue increased 2.3% compared to the prior year period. Adjusted EBITDA was consistent with the prior year period, including \$527 million of severance and other in the quarter and \$638 million of severance in the prior year period. Excluding severance and other, adjusted EBITDA decreased 1.2%.

"We capped off 2023 and the fourth quarter with excellent operational and financial performance," said **Brian L. Roberts**, chairman and chief executive officer of Comcast Corporation. "We also reported the highest Adjusted EBITDA on record at theme parks, were the No. 1 studio in worldwide box office for the first time since 2015, and maintained **Peacock's** position as the fastest growing streamer in the U.S. 2024 is already off to a great start."

Revenue for content and experiences increased compared to the prior year period driven by theme parks, media and studios. Adjusted EBITDA for content and experiences increased 2.3%, including \$101 million of severance in the quarter and \$186 million of severance in the prior year period primarily in headquarters and other. Excluding severance, adjusted EBITDA decreased 5.9%, primarily due to a decrease in media, partially offset by increases in studios and theme parks.

Gateway Ticketing honors its workforce

GILBERTSVILLE, Pa. — **Gateway Ticketing Systems, Inc.** celebrated the outstanding achievements of its dedicated workforce at the annual company award ceremony held in late January 2024.

"We are immensely proud of our talented and dedicated employees who continue to drive Gateway's success," said **Michael Andre**, president and CEO of Gateway Ticketing Systems, Inc. "We strive to foster a culture of recognition and appreciation because recognizing and valuing our employees' contributions enables a spirit of motivation, engagement, and commitment to our shared goals."

Each year, the ceremony is divided into three main categories — Core Value Awards, Polaris Awards, and the President's Award — the recipients are a symbolic microcosm of the Gateway Ticketing Systems team.

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SAFETY, MAINTENANCE & OPERATIONS

▶ StarGuard Elite, Urbnsurf forge partnership — page 49 / 2024 IRT Ride Camp a success — page 52

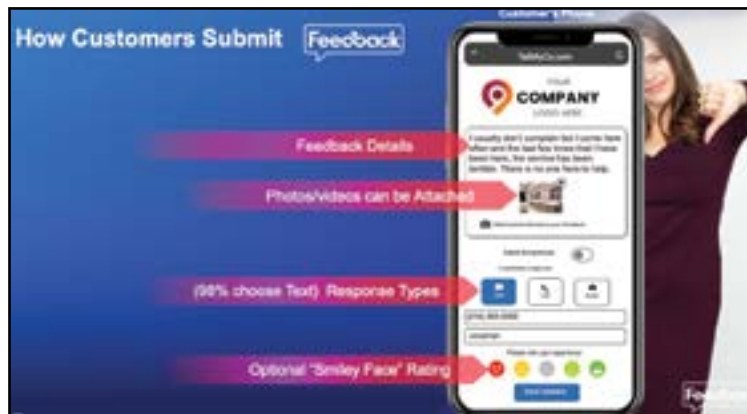
Emerging guest feedback resource builds on real time results

AT: David Fake
Special to Amusement Today

DALLAS, Texas — Obtaining guest feedback as a means of measuring customer satisfaction and identifying areas for improvement is not a new concept in the amusement industry. It is a long-proven fact that amusement parks, attractions and FECs that regularly seek guest feedback and quickly act upon that feedback have a much higher satisfaction and, ultimately, higher success rate.

Imagine having a crystal ball that by gazing into it could tell a company what its guests are thinking, exactly where it needs to focus its efforts for improvement, as well as what it is already doing well. Most parks, attractions and FECs could not throw their money fast enough at a company that offers such a tool.

That end is essentially what **Real Time Feedback**



Real Time Feedback's patented technology bridges the gap, allowing for FEC staff and management to connect with the center's guests. The company's platform is being implemented at all Andretti Indoor Karting & Games locations (right), providing guests with an easy-to-use, timely and effective way to communicate with Andretti Indoor Karting and Games. COURTESY REAL TIME FEEDBACK

has been working to perfect since launching its cloud-based customer satisfaction and feedback tool in 2017. However, Real Time Feedback has taken the concept to the next level by introducing real-time communication into its feedback management platform.

According to Real Time Feedback's LinkedIn profile, it considers the product to be

a "private two-way communication/engagement platform transforming the customer experience on location in real time. By providing a simple, non-confrontational way to give compliments and complaints through specialized QR codes, NFC Tags, Custom URLs and more, Real Time Feedback keeps you plugged in and allows customers to become your eyes and ears. We optimize operations and engrave brand loyalty along the way."

Real Time Feedback's founder, **Adam Alfia**, tailored that description specifically to the amusement industry by stating, "Our solution fills a critical gap in family entertainment centers. We recognize that large spaces that regularly have guests outnumbering staff 50 to one have difficulty understanding the nuances of their customer's journey. Our pat-



ented technology bridges that gap and allows for staff and management to connect with their guests, and we've seen pivotal insights emerge from that relationship that fundamentally change FEC operations for the better."

So, what exactly does Real Time Feedback's solution do to accomplish this feat?

Through the use of strategically placed QR codes throughout a park, attraction or FEC, Real Time Feedback's platform provides guests an easy-to-use, timely and effective way to communicate with the business, while creating a channel for it to quickly respond to the guest's communication in real-time, and in many cases, resolve the issue before the guest even leaves the location.

According to a *Customer*

Experience Magazine (CXM) article, **Esteban Kolsky**, CEO of **ThinkJar** and former **Gartner** analyst, conducted a customer experience survey and shared 50 of his findings, one of which states, "Only one out of 26 unhappy customers complain. The rest churn. A lesson here is that companies should not view the absence of feedback as a sign of satisfaction. The true enemy is indifference."

By not resolving a guest's issue, statistically, a company is leaving an additional 25 customer issues unresolved, since they will also simply take their business elsewhere without a word. This means that it is important that a business allows its customers to have a voice and know that they are being listened to.

▶ See **FEEDBACK**, page 48



Real Time Feedback recognizes that large spaces like FECs which regularly have guests outnumbering staff 50 to one have difficulty understanding the nuances of the customer's journey. COURTESY REAL TIME FEEDBACK

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MAGNETIC BRAKE UPGRADE
PICTURED: TRAILBLAZER, HERSHEY PARK

► **FEEDBACK**

Continued from page 47

So then, what could be better than turning around a guest situation and creating a highly satisfied guest in real-time? Real Time Feedback believes the answer to that question is to, in turn, provide each highly satisfied guest with a means of leaving a review.

By design, Real Time Feedback's platform also encourages and boosts guests' online reviews by linking directly with review platforms such as **Yelp** and **Google** at the conclusion of each communication.

Aaron Thompson, marketing director at Real Time Feedback says, "We essentially have a side platform built in for review generation and review management. So, our platform not only helps you engage with your guests, but we are also boosting your online reputation in the process."

Once a consumer knows that a business can



Real Time Feedback's QR-code and smart phone-based system creates a channel for a venue to quickly respond to guests' communication in real time and, in many cases, resolve the issue before the guest even leaves the location. COURTESY REAL TIME FEEDBACK

reliably provide good service; they are likely to continue coming back and may even pay more than what competitors charge.

By creating a timely solution for guests, the parks, attractions and FECs are more likely to also create a future repeat guest. In fact, 86% of customers are willing to pay up to 25% more for a better experience, according to a study completed by **Oracle**.

Positive online reviews help businesses grow. They are considered the most important factor for local

search engines, according to another study conducted by **Local SEO Guide**. The study also appears to prove the theory that the order of Google search results is directly related to review ranking, given popular and trendy destinations and attractions are more likely to rise dramatically in terms of reviews ahead of other ranking factors.

While studies and statistics from analysts and large data companies may be compelling, amusement industry-specific feedback paints a far more vibrant picture.

Andretti Indoor Karting & Games ran a pilot imple-

mentation of Real Time Feedback's platform at its Orlando location. Following the pilot, the general manager at the time, **Maria Agresti**, had this to say: "This is really the first platform that I've seen where we give the guest the ability to tell us what's wrong. And it also gives us the opportunity to fix it right on the spot... really, truly, I wouldn't trade it for anything. It gives us so much data."

The pilot was so successful that **Andretti Indoor Karting & Games** is rolling out the platform to all locations.

"Real Time Feedback

has revolutionized our guest service experience by providing a direct link between our guests and management team so we can immediately solve any issues and get our guests back to the fun!" said **Samantha LaMagna**, director of marketing at **Andretti Indoor Karting & Games**. "The team at RTF has been incredible to work with and has been constantly working to add additional tools that not only help us connect with our guests but also provide insights into our business and possible challenges that need to be addressed."

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StarGuard Elite, Urbnsurf forge partnership for surf park safety

AT: Jeffrey Seifert
jseifert@amusementtoday.com

ORLANDO — **StarGuard Elite** (SGE) has announced a strategic partnership with **Urbnsurf** to develop the world's first international Surf Park Safety program. By combining SGE's industry-leading aquatic safety training programs and risk prevention services with Urbnsurf's proven surf park expertise and operational best practices, the partnership plans to create a safety program for surf parks globally, providing training standards, certifications and operational best practices.

Decades ago, surfing was limited to those having access to the right kind of ocean waves. The advent of the artificial surfing lagoon has changed all that, and surfing has increased in popularity — to the point that currently more than 24 million people identify themselves as surfers.

Made-to-order waves offer surfers the chance to play or train in a structure that mimics ocean conditions but with identical waves and swell periods. Despite the high installation costs, wave pools and surf parks are being installed everywhere, from Asia to Europe to North America. The face of the sport is changing dramatically as surfers are no longer limited to ocean beaches.

Dynamic wave surf parks present particular challenges for lifeguards with surfers and swimmers in constant motion over a large body of water, along with rapidly changing water depth as the surf wave moves laterally across the pool. Although stationary surf parks offer a much smaller footprint and less of an area to monitor, the rapidly moving water can create its own set of challenges.

Wess Long, president of StarGuard Elite told AT: "The challenges we see are that surf parks aren't water parks and water parks



A typical surf lagoon covers a large area and can have multiple surfers in the water at the same time in various locations moving at different speeds. Large, fast-moving swells can obscure a surfer from view. These are just some of the unique challenges that surf park lifeguards must be prepared for. COURTESY URBNSURF/WAVEGARDEN



aren't surf parks. We can't treat them like we do a water park, but they're not open water either. They are this interesting hybrid of natural, open water lifeguarding techniques combined with a wave pool."

Urbnsurf, with facilities in Australia, currently uses wave technology developed by **Wavegarden**, which incorporates a large triangular-shaped divided pool with a wave-generating sweep in the middle. The sweep can generate 1,000 waves an hour on both sides of the pool, and a new wave can start before the previous surfing wave has reached the end. That means that multiple surfers can be in the pool at the same time in various locations, potentially having different abilities and moving at different speeds.

Long added that Urbnsurf has already done a tremendous job of building an **Australian Professional Ocean Lifesaving**

Association (APOLA)-recognized program at its facility. By combining that with what StarGuard has developed as the risk prevention agency for **Waco Surf** (Texas) they can bring everything together into an international certification.

The Surf Park Safety program will better prepare operators for the unique challenges that come with an inland surfing venue. The goal is to develop a program that is a consensus of experts such as surf-lifesaving specialists, doctors, lawyers, operators and lifeguard trainers and layering that into the various technologies used by different companies such as Wavegarden, **American Wave Machines**, **SurfLoch**, **Endless Surf**, **ADG Epic Surf** and others. Once that program is developed, it can be presented to government authorities who are looking to implement regulations. It is much better to get ahead of the game and be ready

to present government entities with an already developed program, so that they can implement informed regulation, rather than letting them create one themselves, with far less know-how and ability.

According to Long, "This partnership represents a watershed moment for surf park safety. By combining SGE's evidence-driven safety programs with Urbnsurf's expertise as a proven operator, along with other surf park safety experts, we envision a standardized safety program that will provide Surf Parks the foundation to deliver a safe experience and elevate industry benchmarks.

"As more facilities rapidly open globally and more people embrace the sport of surfing, it is imperative that all surf venues operate safely to maintain consumer confidence and avoid overreaching or reactionary regulations. The water park industry has done an excel-

lent job of finding this balance over the past 40 years, and I'm confident we can do the same for surf parks," Long added.

Together SGE and Urbnsurf can help steer the industry in the right direction. Surf parks are in the same situation as water parks. If something bad were to happen at a venue, the community reaction would likely be that the particular venue is unsafe, but public perception may be that all surf parks are unsafe. Safety is always the number one priority, and no one wants an injury or loss at their park, but that is a genuine concern in a new, growing, emerging market. No one can afford to have an incident cause a negative perception of the entire industry. With the right type of program in place, operators can be assured that they are taking advantage of the best and most recently developed best practices.

NAARSO annual seminar advances safety through communication

AT: David Fake
Special to Amusement Today

ORLANDO — The National Association of Amusement Ride Safety Officials (NAARSO) held its 37th Annual Safety Seminar at the DoubleTree SeaWorld by Hilton in Orlando, Florida, from January 28 through February 2, 2024. A virtual Safety Seminar began on September 1, 2023, and concluded on March 1, 2024.

This year more than 450 individuals participated in the seminar as attendees, instructors and other contributors, either in-person or virtually, for the three offered track options: Primary/Inspections, Operations and Aquatics.

The safety seminar consists of classroom and hands-on field training. This year Fun Spot America Kissimmee, SeaWorld Orlando and Aquatica Orlando provided behind-the-scenes hands-on field safety training to seminar participants.

Each year, NAARSO recognizes members of the organization for their service, dedication and devotion from the past year. This year's award recipients were:

- *The Dan Dudley Award*, awarded to **Dan Dudley** himself for his devotion and dedication to the amusement industry

- *Person of the Year Award*, awarded to **Debbie Karu** for outstanding service to the amusement industry



More than 450 individuals participated in the 37th Annual NAARSO Safety Seminar as attendees, instructors and other contributors, either in-person or virtually, for the three offered track options, Primary/Inspections, Operations and Aquatics. AT/GARY SLADE; COURTESY NAARSO



- *Walter Carl Dills Award*, awarded to **John Dodson**, for dedication to preserving Dill's legacy and beliefs

- *Red Wood Safety Award*, awarded to **Ed LaSalle** for devotion and dedication to the safety programs in the amusement ride industry

- *Jimmy Floyd Award*, awarded to **Jeff Alberts** for outstanding service to the

amusement industry

- *Jack Silar Award*, awarded to **John Riggleman** for outstanding service to the amusement industry

- *President's Award*, awarded to **Ty Vanderstappen** for outstanding service to the amusement industry

NAARSO is a nonprofit membership-based organization that provides education, training and other resources

for amusement industry professionals dedicated to the safety of the industry and its patrons through programs such as an annual safety forum, outreach programs, and recently introduced online safety classes.

In 1987 a small group of individuals, consisting mostly of state amusement ride inspectors, gathered together because of

their shared commitment to amusement ride safety. Out of this initial meeting, the framework for the organization was born, and NAARSO was organized and incorporated later the same year. The founding ideals were that through communication and knowledge sharing, safety could

► See NAARSO, page 51



This year's NAARSO partnered with Fun Spot America Kissimmee, SeaWorld Orlando and Aquatica Orlando to provide behind-the-scenes, hands-on field safety training to seminar participants. COURTESY NAARSO



Avery Wheelock, Worldwide Safety Group, Inc and Michelle Faulk, Florida Department of Agriculture and Bureau Chief for Fair Rides Inspection talk safety during the NAARSO seminar break (above left). Drew Tewksbury, director of sales and marketing for McGowen Allied Specialty Insurance, presents a class on "Why Accidents Happen" (above right). AT/GARY SLADE



► **NAARSO**
Continued from page 50

be improved by disseminating individual experiences, observations and best practices throughout the amusement ride safety industry.

Today NAARSO remains dedicated to those same ideals and the advancement of amusement ride and device safety through the doctrine of "Safety Through

Communication."

It is comprised of individuals who are passionate about and dedicated to providing a better and safer environment for all amusement ride industry stakeholders. These individuals represent an array of interests within the industry, including amusement ride inspectors, operators, owners, manufacturers, jurisdictional agencies, insurance companies, pri-

vate consultants, as well as safety professionals from amusement facilities and traveling shows.

Since its formation, NAARSO has administered more than 4,355 certifications, including 4,046 Inspector Certifications and 309 Operations Certifications. More than 200 individuals hold dual certifications in both inspections and operations.

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International Ride Training excited about 2024 Ride Camp success

AT: Pam Sherborne
psherborne@amusementtoday.com

GALVESTON, Texas — Ride Camp 2024 turned out to be a roaring success, according to an **International Ride Training LLC (IRT)** representative who reported over 125 new International Ride Operator Certification (iROC) instructors were certified at the event. These now-certified instructors will go on to train trainers and operators at their parks.

The 2024 IRT annual event was hosted by the **Historic Galveston Island Pleasure Pier** in Galveston, Texas, and was held Feb. 5-9. Classes were held at the **Galveston Island Convention Center at The San Luis Resort**.

“Ride Camp was a smashing hit in 2024,” said Cindee Huddy of IRT. “Operational leaders arrived on Sunday, Feb. 4, for a meet-and-greet reception and sessions began bright and early on Monday morning, Feb. 5.”

Monday morning kicked off with **Shaun McKeogh** from **Attractions Academy** in Australia, delivering the keynote address. McKeogh is a dynamic force in the industry and speaks all over the world. His expertise lies in organizational development, employee engagement, service excellence systems, attractions training and operations.

Following, attendees



International Ride Training's (IRT) Ride Camp 2024 turned out to be a great success. Planners reported that 125 new International Ride Certification (iROC) instructors were awarded during the event. The Ride Camp's opening reception (above) took place on Sunday, Feb. 4. Following opening comments to a packed house on Monday, Feb. 5, IRT Ride Camp attendees split into break-out sessions (below). Classes were held at the Galveston Island Convention Center at The San Luis Resort. AT/GARY SLADE

went to break-out sessions on topics specific to their needs. Ride Camp provided more than 100 ride operations-specific educational sessions, led by 14 industry professionals.

A handful of topics included Ride Operations Leadership, Recruiting and Retaining Ride Operators, Teaching and Advising Staff on ADA requirements, Leading Leaders in Ride Ops, Genuine Training Needs of Trainers and those they train and many more.

On Tuesday, Feb. 6, attendees heard from **Nathan Caldwell**, a No. 1 bestselling author of *Empowering Kindness*.

Attendees got the

chance to hear from **Kathryn Woodcock**, speaking on Human Factors. Woodcock is a professor at **Toronto Metropolitan University**, Toronto, Ontario, and director of the THRILL Lab. The THRILL Lab is involved in unique extracurricular training, research and knowledge mobilization activities focused on human factors of amusement rides and attractions.

Attendees enjoyed the Galveston Island Historic Pleasure Pier that evening with a shrimp boil and rode the Pleasure Pier's rides.

During the afternoons of Tuesday, Feb. 7, and Wednesday, Feb. 8, attendees spent time at the Pleasure Pier for rides learning



training techniques, operational best practices, ADA considerations and much more.

Ride Camp ended with a three-hour interactive session on ride evacuation

procedures taught by **Erik Beard** of IRT.

At the annual Ride Camp Awards show, the recipients of the prestigious iROC Audit Excellence Awards for Ride Operations for the 2023 season went to **Morey's Piers**, Wildwood, New Jersey; **Cedar Point**, Sandusky, Ohio; **California's Great America**, Santa Clara, California; **Valleyfair**, Shakopee, Minnesota; and **Lost Island**, Waterloo, Iowa.

The iROC Newcomer Audit Excellence Award went to **I-Drive South**, Orlando, Florida; and **Idlewild**, Pittsburg, Pennsylvania.

The award winners achieved the highest rankings in IRT's International Ride Operator



During the afternoons of Tuesday, Feb. 7, and Wednesday, Feb. 8, attendees spent time at the Pleasure Pier for some hands-on training techniques, operational best practices, ADA considerations and more. AT/GARY SLADE

iROC Audit Excellence Awards for Ride Operations for the 2023 season:

Morey's Piers, Wildwood, New Jersey



Cedar Point, Sandusky, Ohio



California's Great America, Santa Clara, California



Valleyfair, Shakopee, Minnesota



Lost Island, Waterloo, Iowa

iROC Newcomer Audit Excellence Award:

I-Drive South, Slingshot, Orlando, Florida



Idlewild, Ligonier, Pennsylvania

► See CAMP, page 53



IRT is proud of the Ride Camp sponsors because it makes it possible for the company to go beyond and above. Ride Camp planners show it off here. AT/GARY SLADE

► **CAMP**
Continued from page 52

Certification audit program.

The iROC Audit program assesses ride operator safety, efficiency and professionalism through a proprietary methodology focused on IRT's Ten Critical Components of ride operation. In unannounced audits each summer, parks are evaluated on over 30 specific performance criteria designed to improve and maintain excellence in amusement ride safety, professionalism and efficiency.

During the awards ceremony, **Patty Beazley**, IRT, said the company audited almost 1,500 rides in 2023.

"These parks consistently demonstrated overall excellence in ride operations," Beazley said. "It is impressive to watch a team of operators so focused on guest safety, while consistently engaging with each rider. Their passion is evident and overwhelming."

Huddy added: "Safe and efficient ride operation is a learned skill that requires multitasking and attention to detail each and every cycle."

"We estimate over 25,000 operators will be iROC certified in 2024," Huddy said.

New parks added to IRT's growing auditing program also were announced during the opening ceremony. They are (along with I-Drive Slingshot and Idlewild): **Dreamworld and WhiteWater World**, Queensland, Australia; **Ark**



Shaun McKeogh

Encounter, Williamstown, Kentucky.; **Pleasure Pier**, Galveston Island, Texas; **Kemah Boardwalk**, Kemah, Texas; **Tivoli Gardens**, Denmark; **Rye Playland**, Rye, New York; **Castle Park**, Riverside, California;

Downtown Aquarium, Houston, Texas; and **San Antonio Zoo**, San Antonio, Texas.

IRT is a global leader in ride operations auditing, providing a gold standard in safety services to the amusement industry. As a company, IRT has, for over 20 years, provided direct operations training, auditing, advisory services, interactive safety education and coaching, training, auditing and leadership development, Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) development and general ride safety consulting to theme parks worldwide.

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Seen at the 2024 AIMS International Safety Seminar



The cocktail hour hosted during the 2023 AIMS International Safety Seminar was very popular and opened the door for attendees to both renew and make new industry connections.



Representatives from Uremet Corporation offered a course on inspecting and maintaining wheels on coasters and other attractions.



Chris Jaskiewicz, president and CEO of Orlando's ICON Park, delivered the event's keynote address. Jaskiewicz was representing Visit Orlando Board of Directors.



IAAPA CEO Jakob Wahl was just one of multiple popular speakers during the 2024 AIMS International Safety Seminar.



The 2024 AIMS International Safety Seminar marked the organization's first with Amy Lowenstein serving as executive director.



Seminar attendees not only used lunch breaks to refuel but also to socialize and network with other attendees and exhibitors.



David Bromilow (Mobar) addressed safety seminar attendees as the outgoing AIMS International chairman.

Eye-catching donations brought extra attention to this year's AIMS silent auction. More than \$4,500 was raised for various AIMS International programs via the silent auction.



AIMS International held a silent auction during the event to help raise additional funds for AIMS safety programs. Donated items came in all shapes and sizes, which organizers were quite grateful for.

Even with social functions and exhibiting sponsors, the primary focus of the 2024 AIMS International Safety Seminar was education.





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Lowenstein reflects on a successful first year as AIMS' Executive Director

As I approach my one-year mark serving as executive director of AIMS International, I look back on a year that was both challenging and rewarding: a year driven by projects, schedules, and deadlines; a year of meeting new professionals and reconnecting with former colleagues and industry icons; a year of forward progress and the launch of new initiatives.

It has been a great year made possible by the contributions of many.

I will start at the beginning by thanking my predecessor, **M.J. Brewer**, for her work organizing and preparing for a smooth transition. In addition to working closely with me throughout the handoff, M.J. followed best practice in our industry: she wrote a manual!

I also could not have hit the ground running without the dedication of **Rick Achard**, operations manager/certification committee chair and **Eric Fluet**, our marketing partner. Our seminar could not have been the

success that it was without our Young Professional/Ambassador group led by **Adriana Cajigas** and **Cayce Cobaugh**.

AIMS is guided by a talented and experienced Board of Directors composed of industry leaders and legends who have provided me with support and guidance. Special thanks go to **David Bromilow**, AIMS board president, for his leadership. I am thankful for the opportunity to get to know him and learn from him.

AIMS International has been an industry association for over 50 years and provides safety education and CEU certification programs for public and private ride inspectors, amusement facility operators, aquatic facility operators and maintenance personnel. As the industry has grown and evolved, the experience levels of incoming staff have changed. To meet this challenge, AIMS continues to develop new content and strategies.

The growth of the Adventure

Attractions sector necessitated the development of a new certification. Through the work of our Adventure Attractions Committee, Certification Committee and AIMS board, the Adventure Attractions Level I Certification was launched at this year's seminar with opportunities for individual accreditations coming soon.

AIMS International offers a wide array of educational opportunities. It wasn't until I stepped into this role that I fully understood the breadth of programs that AIMS International offers. These include AIMS ConnectED and the online safety education content, online exams, AIMS on the Road opportunities, international events and our annual seminar.

I have attended industry meetings throughout this year, including ASTM, IAAPA, AIMS on the Road events and more. It is rewarding to see the number of individuals who volunteer time, knowledge and expertise (even

sweat) to develop content, instruct and facilitate, all to keep enhancing the product and experience for our industry colleagues.

2024 was another record year of attendance at the AIMS safety seminar. Nearly half of the students were first-time attendees! Planning is already underway for course and content review for 2025. Initiatives include high-level fresh content for seasoned professionals as well as "Back to the Basics" for colleagues new to the industry.

2024 and 2025 will also see an expansion of our international programs with additional translations of our safety content. It is an incredibly exciting time!

AIMS is experiencing record growth and development while increasing its global presence. I am thrilled to lead AIMS into its next chapter as it provides cutting-edge resources and networking opportunities that are so vital to the success of our industry.

—Amy Lowenstein

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Cashless payments can lead to revenue increases with decreases in expenses

DALLAS, Texas — With the growing popularity of cashless payments — credit cards, mobile payments, etc. — many amusement venues struggle with the question of what to do with the necessary convenience fees and surcharges that come with the territory. *Amusement Today* spoke recently with **Jeremy Dickamore**, payment gateway guru on **Embed**'s recently-launched Success Squad about this very issue.



Jeremy Dickamore

“Cashless payments actually benefit operators with lower costs and increased profitability,” stated Dickamore. “Research by the **IHL Group** has shown that it can actually be three times more expensive for vendors to handle and process cash payments. In addition, the **British Retail Consortium** has shown evidence that patrons prefer to use cashless payment meth-

ods and are likely to spend more than they would using cash payments.”

In related research, a 2020 **American Express** survey observed that 86% of customers are likely to no longer frequent venues who pass on surcharges and convenience fees to their patrons, while 76% of customers feel it's unfair to pay extra for their choice of payment method.

If an attraction is con-

sidering charging card payment convenience fees or surcharges, Dickamore suggests they they raise prices by three to four percent instead and try to get the best payment processing rates to avoid unnecessary losses. This will avoid angering customers that see they are being charged an extra fee to pay with card. “Embed actually offers a free payment gateway calculator to see potential savings from simply changing payment providers.”

“Ideally, I would recommend that operators consider accepting digital payments instead,” offered Dickamore. “Compared to cash handling costs a not to mention the time/manhours/manpower incurred in this, card and mobile payments cost significantly less and mobile payments take zero employee hours to process.”

•embedcard.com

Parque do Cristo joins SINDEPAT association



POÇOS DE CALDAS, Brazil — Parque do Cristo is the newest member of SINDEPAT. The park offers attractions such as tree climbing, zip-lining and ATV rides, as well as various food services and events. The main means of access to the park — which is located at an altitude of 1,600 meters (5,249 feet) — is the Cable Car that departs from the central station of Poços de Caldas, Brazil. SINDEPAT represents the interests of the parks and tourist attractions sector throughout Brazil. COURTESY SINDEPAT

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