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Digital Edition

Steel City hosts 2024 Golden Ticket Awards

## Kennywood welcomes amusement industry with tradition, charm

WEST MIFFLIN, Penn. — Whenever a visitor has an opportunity to visit an old-fashioned amusement park, there's something special that happens. **Kennywood** dates back to 1899, and there are enough markers and plaques spread throughout this traditional park that a sense of history is immediate.

However, make no mistake, Kennywood offers some huge rides, which is made apparent as guests walk toward the front gate near the towering first drop of Phantom's Revenge. Perhaps it is that harmonious balance between the classic and modern that has made the park such a beloved part of the greater Pittsburgh area. No matter one's age, a first ride on Thunderbolt was most likely a rite of passage at some point in life. With rides like Turtle, Auto Race and Old Mill, there is no mistaking that things from the past can be every bit as fun as newer rides today.

Attendees at the Golden Ticket Awards were welcomed on September 7 to the Networking Event of the Year.

"Being a part of the whole process to set up this great event has been so exciting," said General Manager **Ricky Spicuzza**, prior to the arrival of hundreds of professionals from the amusement industry. "But what I am looking forward to the most is being able to welcome so many industry peers to Kennywood! The anticipation of seeing familiar



Sandcastle Waterpark (above left) was the host of Friday evening's reception. Kennywood's Thunderbolt harkens back to the olden days of roller coasters (above right). AT/GARY SLADE; COURTESY KENNYWOOD



faces and meeting new colleagues, all while sharing the vibrant energy of the park, is truly amazing! It's a rare opportunity to connect, collaborate and celebrate our shared passion in such a lively and iconic setting."

The event first began with an opening reception at Sandcastle Waterpark in nearby Homestead, Pennsylvania. Food, drink and entertainment from **RWS Global** made it a night of connection, which is what the industry event is all about.

"I look forward to this weekend each year when we can all just take a moment to relax," said *Amusement Today* Publisher **Gary Slade**. "Friendships and rela-

tionships are made stronger from the opportunity to simply talk and discuss the industry issues — and successes — we see together as a whole."

While at the park, many enjoyed behind-the-scenes tours that brought the park's history to life.

"There is so much to experience here," said **Tim Baldwin**, Golden Ticket Awards Communications Coordinator. "You can enjoy something so vintage like an old Whip or walk through Noah's Ark and at the same time see the newer offerings like Spinvasion from **Zamperla**. No visit is truly complete until you hop aboard the Kangaroo, which was recently restored and preserved by **Premier Rides**.

And, of course, the coasters are truly classic."

Kennywood boasts three wooden coasters, all of historical significance. Each of them has been designated as an ACE Roller Coaster Landmark by **American Coaster Enthusiasts**, the most such distinctions found in any park.

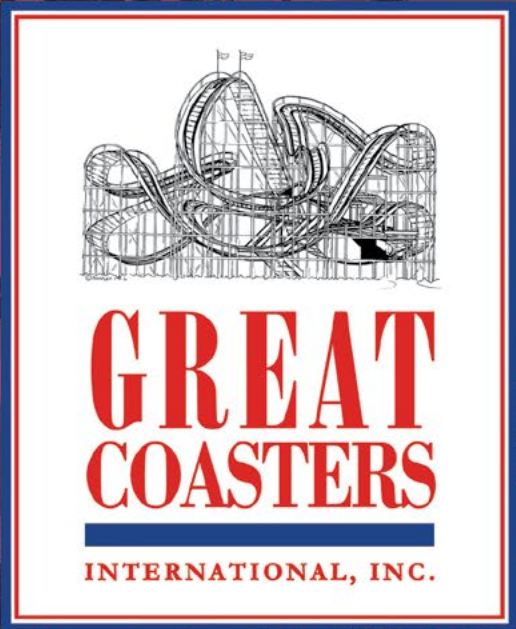
Operated by **Palace Entertainment**, Kennywood has undergone an award-winning refresh in past years, making the park vibrant and welcoming.

Spicuzza said, "I hope everyone remembers the rich history of Kennywood and its deep connection to the city of Pittsburgh. It's not just a theme park; it's a cherished landmark that has provided joy for

so many generations. I also hope our industry friends noticed the incredible, talented and passionate team that tirelessly works to maintain Kennywood's unique and classic charm. Their dedication is what makes every visit special and unforgettable."

During the ceremony, Golden Ticket Awards were presented to winners in 25 categories, including three Publisher's Picks. **AIMS Safety Awards** were also given, as well as recognition of industry Legends. Full coverage of the weekend event will appear in the November 1 issue of *Amusement Today*.

*All stories this issue  
by Tim Baldwin  
unless otherwise noted*



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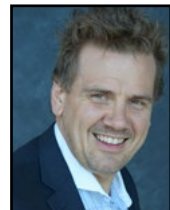
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# GOLDEN TICKET AWARDS

**AT NOTEBOOK:** John W.C. Robinson, [jrobinson@amusementtoday.com](mailto:jrobinson@amusementtoday.com)

## Enjoying a legacy



Robinson

The other evening, I got to see Joe Satriani play guitar alongside Sammy Hagar live in concert. Being a lifelong rocker, Satriani was a name I have long known but have never seen play. In person, we often found ourselves slack-jawed at just how awe-inspiring his guitar licks were to witness before our very eyes.

However, the concert was setup as a pseudo-tribute to another legendary guitarist... Eddie Van Halen. Eddie's passing saddened the music world a few years ago, and I realized during this recent concert that while I had seen Eddie Van Halen in concert (as a teenager) ... I had no respect for the greatness I had witnessed then.

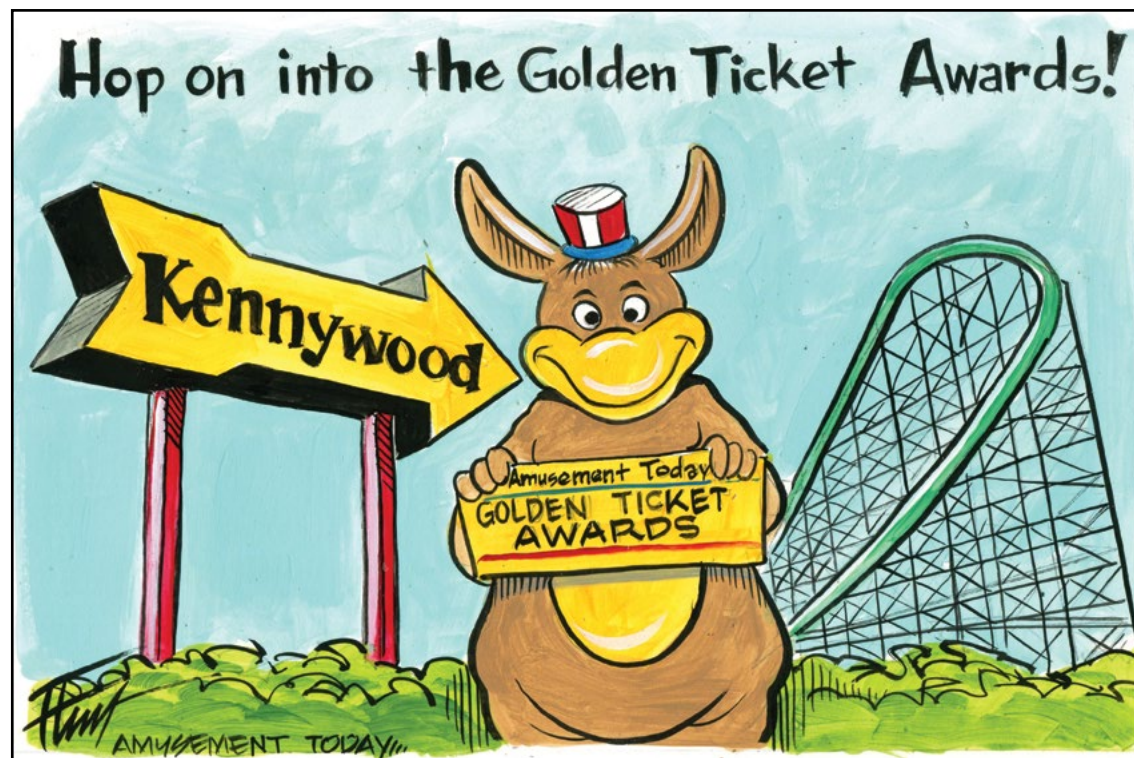
How many people saw Babe Ruth play baseball and just thought they were seeing a good/great baseball player, but not realizing they were witnessing the hallmark that all great baseball players would forever be held to or judged against? Two hundred years ago, the paintings of Vincent Van Gogh were all but ignored in the art community ... only to have his work become some of the most inspirational and influential in all of Western art.

We all too often ignore — or just do not see — the legacies, the legends, right in front of us. We fail to embrace the greatness we've been given a chance to enjoy.

For our beloved amusement industry, the Golden Ticket Awards have become a way to make note of the "Best of the Best" and spread the word so that others can enjoy them alongside us. The historical treasure that is Knoebels' Grand Carousel is shown respect rather than treated as just another merry-go-round. The wicked twists of Mystic Timbers are enjoyed with adoration while physically neighboring The (legendary) Beast. Parks like Dollywood and Europa-Park are spotlighted as greatness while in their prime, encouraging more and more guests to give their turnstiles a spin.

And the Golden Ticket "Legend" Awards are our way of noting a legacy that has truly left — or is leaving — its mark on the business of fun. They are our way of saying "thank you" while we often still have an opportunity to watch them continue to make their mark and pave the way for tomorrow's "Best of the Best!"

**FLINT'S VIEW:** Bubba Flint



**AMUSEMENT VOICE:** Tim Baldwin, Golden Ticket Awards Communications Coordinator

## Spirit and respect

Every time the Golden Ticket Awards fall in an Olympic year, particularly with the recent summer Olympics, I can't help but find parallels between the two.

It is so easy to get all geared up for the tight races that inevitably materialize. I'm always astonished by how many medals are determined by fractions of a second. It's shocking.

Likewise, certain categories in the Golden Ticket Awards are determined by just mere votes. Each individual ballot really does count. Our panel is never the same year after year, so there are never guarantees, never assumptions.

My heart breaks for those athletes who train and train and miss out on the gold by a tenth of a second, even though the race itself was tense and incredibly exciting. At the same time, my spirit is renewed when I see groups of athletes — who are literally competitors — come up to each other and offer hugs and continual encouragement, whether they have won or lost.



Baldwin

I find this kinship in the amusement industry as well. A common link among us is the desire for the industry to be strong, to be healthy. There certainly is that competition for the customer's dollar, but overall, we want everyone to do well.

The attraction industry has a common goal: to make people smile. It would be heartbreaking for those smiles to go away by the loss of a park or facility that was considered to be in the same region. Theme parks, water parks, and family entertainment centers all provide a vital energy and quality of life to each of the communities in which they operate.

As the Golden Ticket Awards celebrate the "gold," just like so many Olympians, just making it to the charts is an amazing accomplishment to be celebrated, and to those who miss being a finalist by the thinnest of margins, there are people still cheering you on, appreciating what you do.

A team spirit is one of respect.

*Opinions expressed on this page are those of the columnist(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the publisher.*



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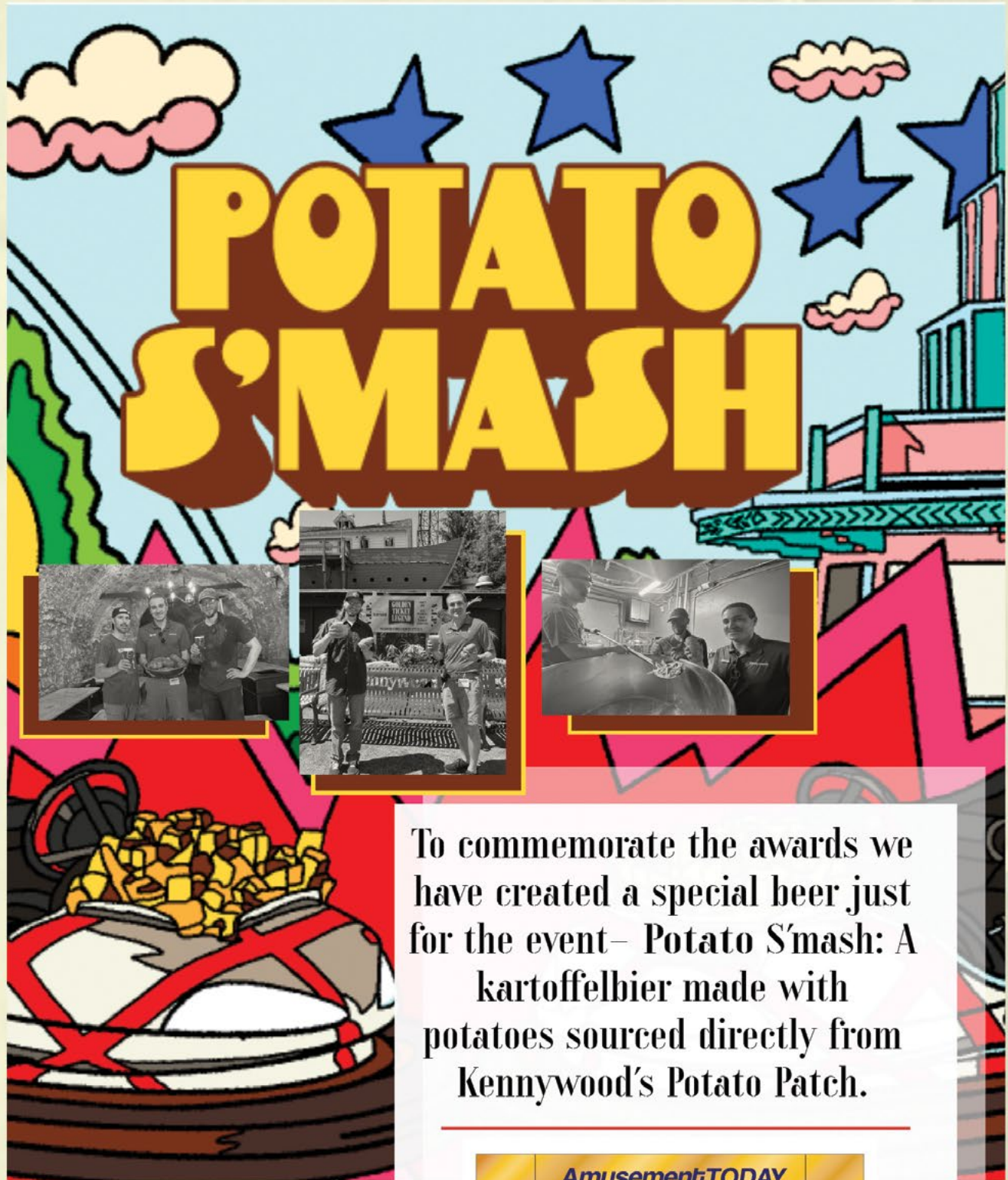


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# Holiday Legends: Universal Studios Florida, Dollywood shine bright

The concept of the Memorial Day-to-Labor Day season for the amusement industry has long vanished. What were once “shoulder” seasons have become the busiest times of the year for many parks.

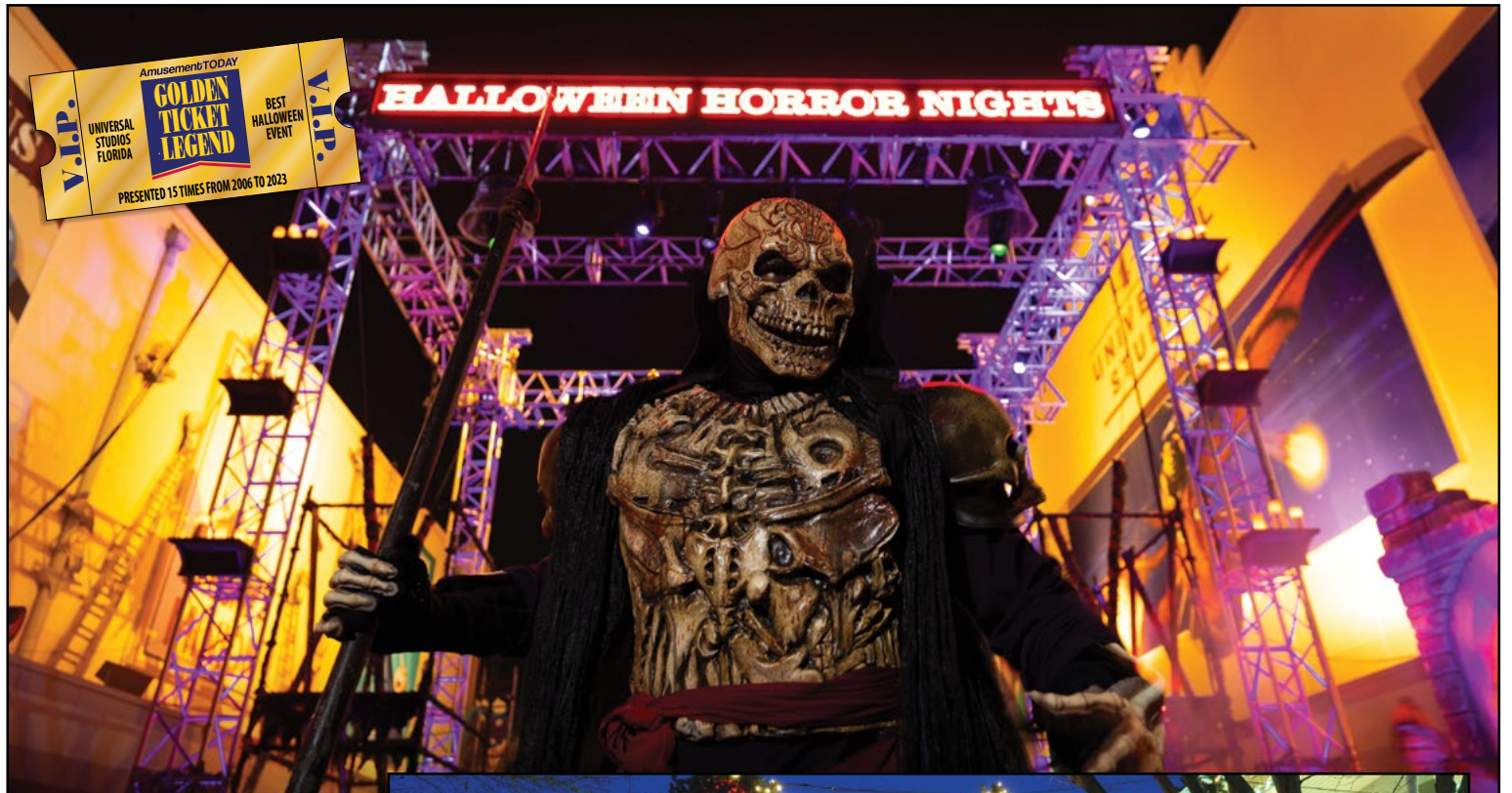
Observing this trend, *Amusement Today* introduced **Best Halloween Event** into the Golden Ticket Awards in 2005 and **Best Christmas Event** in 2008.

**Universal Studios Florida** was the winner in the second year of Best Halloween Event and of all the years for this category has taken the Golden Ticket 15 times. Soon, the theme park developed the reputation of being the benchmark when it came to putting on a Halloween event.

In 1991, a simple three-day event was all it was. The following year, the park branded it Halloween Horror Nights and ran it for five nights. Fast forward to the new millennium and the park is now starting the festival on August 30, with the scares going into November 3 for a total of 48 select dates — a huge leap from that three-night original event.

“Universal Destinations & Experiences is thrilled to be named a Legend in the Halloween category of *Amusement Today*’s annual Golden Ticket Awards,” said **Jim Timon**, senior vice president of entertainment at **Universal Orlando Resort**. “Universal’s rich history in the creation and evolution of the horror genre remains at the core of the incredible experiences we bring to life for our guests around the globe every year during Halloween Horror Nights.”

According to Timon, Halloween Horror Nights never stops at Universal Orlando. The concept, design, and production of the event encompass an entire year. “We opened



Universal scared up the Golden Ticket win 15 times and has set the standard for Halloween events.

AT retires the category honoring Universal Studios Florida’s Halloween Horror Nights (above) as a Golden Ticket Legend. Undefeated for 15 years, Dollywood owned the Best Christmas Event category. Smoky Mountain Christmas (right) is acknowledged as a Golden Ticket Legend as the category is retired.

COURTESY UNIVERSAL, DOLLYWOOD

the 2024 event in August, but we are already heavily designed for 2025. The horror never ends!”

Using numerous movie-themed intellectual properties, the scare zones, haunted mazes and outlandish shows make a Halloween Horror Nights ticket a hot night out. The ever-growing success is, well, scary. So much so that *Amusement Today* is acknowledging the park as the King of Terror, recognizing Universal Studios Florida’s Halloween Horror Nights as a Golden Ticket Legend.

Along those lines, but with a much jollier outlook is **Dollywood**.

When *Amusement Today* introduced the category of Best Christmas



Event, the Pigeon Forge theme park seemed like a suitable winner.

And win it did.

The park’s first foray into Christmas was in 1990, and now it is the most magical time of year at the park, having grown in both size and brightness. In 2024, the event begins on November 1 and runs through January 5.

In time, the amusement industry found success with Christmas events, assuming Mother Nature cooperated. Many of them made it to the list of finalists in the Golden Tickets, but in the entire

run, only Dollywood made it to the top.

“Dollywood’s Smoky Mountain Christmas has become the standard within the industry,” said **Pete Owens**, vice president of marketing, Dollywood Parks & Resorts. “Our hosts put so much effort into providing the perfect Christmas atmosphere for our guests, going so far as to start hanging our 6 million Christmas lights during the heat of the early summer. It is their attention to detail and care for the guest experience that has made our Smoky

Mountain Christmas a family tradition for more than three decades. We are honored to be the only park to win the Best Christmas Award for its entire 15-year run. We are even more honored to earn the Legend Award for Smoky Mountain Christmas, which further cements the status of this unparalleled event for decades more.”

Before retiring the category, *Amusement Today* is honored to give one last gift of acknowledging Dollywood’s Smoky Mountain Christmas as a Golden Ticket Legend.



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# Paul Nelson guided Waldameer Park through its greatest successes

At the age of 11, **Paul Nelson** visited **Waldameer Park** for the first time. His parents were friends with the owner, Alex Moeller, and he became enchanted with the park. Working there every summer and living with the Moellers on the park grounds, he learned various aspects of running the park throughout his childhood. After serving in the Army and graduating college, he found his way back to Waldameer, becoming the park's manager at the age of 23.

When Moeller died, Nelson was given ownership of the park with the caveat that he would always take care of his wife Ruth.

And that he did. Throughout his career, Nelson never lost touch with the childhood magic he experienced in his youth.

Until his passing in 2023, Nelson was the heart and soul of the park. While others his age would most likely have retired, Nelson never did. He worked tirelessly to make Waldameer bigger and better.

"He was married to the park," said his wife, **Lane Nelson**. "It was No. 1; he just loved it. It was his whole life."

Within a day's drive were large theme parks, but Nelson made the right decisions to see the appropriate growth of the park.

"He knew Waldameer was a medium-sized park; our attendance wouldn't allow huge roller coasters



Paul Nelson (above) sits with a long-in-the-works project, Ravine Flyer II, a labor of love. Below, Paul stands with team members from Waldameer, designers from The Gravity Group and Tom Rebbie of PTCI. COURTESY WALDAMEER, JOEL STYER

like a corporate theme park," said President **Steve Gorman**. "It would be too much to pay back. He grew the park enough to put in a big ride, Ravine Flyer II, and that put us on the map."

To be sure, the wooden coaster from **The Gravity Group** did give the park a great ride. But there were rides for everyone, both classic and modern.

"He didn't want a teenage thrill park. He wanted rides that the whole family could go on," said his daughter, **Nancy Gorman**.

**Water World**, Waldameer's water park, also saw great success and notable expansions over the years.

Nelson's last deci-



sion that came to fruition was the **ProSlide** Rocket Blast that opened in 2023 just after his passing. The attraction won a Golden Ticket Award last year.

When asked what he respected most about

Nelson, Steve Gorman said, "His work ethic was uncanny. I don't know anyone else who was so devoted to his job and love for his business."

Nelson's involvement in Erie was significant. City

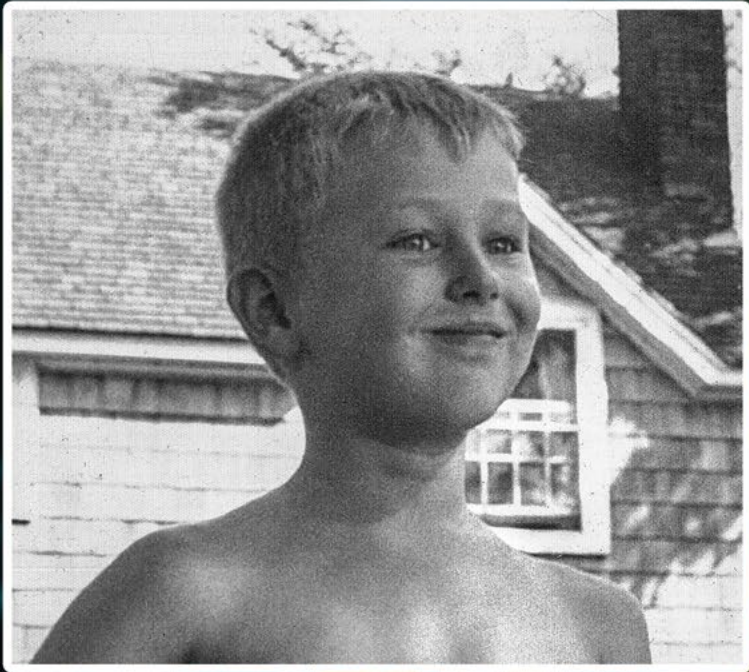
leaders spoke only of praise in regard to Nelson's passion and desire for the betterment of the city. During his life, he received many honors and awards from city leaders and the local newspaper. He was also passionate about Erie's attractions and Presque Isle State Park.

"He loved the Erie community," said Lane. "He wanted to provide a safe place for all walks of life. He wanted the park to be affordable for the community."

For his seven decades of devotion to Waldameer Park & Water World, *Amusement Today* honors Paul Nelson as a Golden Ticket Legend.



Rocket Blast (above left) was Nelson's final vision, and it went on to win a Golden Ticket in 2023. Above right, Paul Nelson sits in a car, waiting to enter Waldameer's classic Whacky Shack dark ride. COURTESY WALDAMEER



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# Palace Entertainment's John Reilly recognized as industry Legend

Finding the right person for the right job is a win-win. With a career spanning close to 40 years in the amusement industry, **John Reilly** has been involved in the business of attractions in countless ways.

His passion began in his teenage years at **Busch Gardens Williamsburg**. He eventually became park president of that park, as well as **SeaWorld San Diego**. In time, he became the chief operating officer at **SeaWorld Parks and Entertainment**. Before leaving that company, he served as interim CEO and turned previous losses in years prior into profitable revenue.

In 2019, Reilly was appointed chief operating officer of **Palace Entertainment**, which operates more than 20 properties in 10 different states and Australia. Host parks **Kennywood** and **Sandcastle** are just two of them.

"John is an excellent leader and has proven that over and over again," Palace Entertainment Vice President of Operations **Mark Pauls** told *Amusement Today*. "I have worked with John for over 30 years and have the utmost respect for his friendship and leadership."

Coming aboard when he did, Reilly was the calm decision-maker who steered Palace through the COVID pandemic and kept the company grounded. In times of uncertainty, strong leadership is essential.



John Reilly

"John is a leader who gets the best out of his teams," said Palace Entertainment Vice President of Marketing **Suzanne Pfordresher**. "He builds talented teams and knows how to both inspire and support them."

A strategic move came when he relocated the headquarters from Newport Beach, California, to Pittsburgh. With the majority of Palace's properties being on the East Coast, being in the same time zone was a wise decision. Reilly likes to term the headquarters as the "Support Center."

He built this Support Center from the ground up, his team will say. Bringing in close to 40 individuals, where there were none before, made the process of doing business stronger and more efficient. This was particularly helpful for the Australian parks.

Palace has also received investments in state-of-the-art facility security, as well as control systems and other technologies to make rides as safe as they can



Reilly (far right) is seen with the team from Story Land in New Hampshire. COURTESY PALACE ENTERTAINMENT

be. Kennywood's Kangaroo could have been lost forever, but reinvestment in the classic ride (as well as The Turtle) has made these last examples of such rides a preserved treat for families. Roller coasters such as the two wooden coasters at **Lake Compounce** have seen beneficial TLC. **Castle Park** went through a large park update at the front entrance in 2023. The park's log flume ride, Saw Mill Plunge, was also completely upgraded with a new control system and sensors. The park continues to

grow its event lineup with Daniel Tiger days this season and constant improvements to its Halloween event, Castle Dark.

During Reilly's tenure, **Adventureland Park** in Iowa was acquired. Palace has upgraded the park's main gate area, several food and beverage locations and added seven new rides. The park's season has also been extended, adding its first ever Halloween event, Phantom Fall Fest.

Many of the parks have received beauti-

ful transformations while under his direction. The thought leader behind the refresh and transformation of these facilities — most particularly Kennywood, Lake Compounce and Adventureland — has led to major growth at some parks and aesthetic makeovers at others. These park beautifications were his vision. Under his watch, millions have been invested in the parks.

In 2024, Reilly was appointed CEO of Palace Entertainment, but still maintains the COO position with **Parques Reunidos**.

"John is, simply put, the best in this business," said Palace Entertainment Senior Vice President of Business Development and Park Support **Anil Rao**. "A true servant leader and mentor who has set the bar extremely high for the next generation of theme park leaders."

In recognition of a career dedicated to the amusement industry, *Amusement Today* is honored to recognize John Reilly as a Golden Ticket Legend.



Members of the Palace team and Kennywood staff pose with Reilly (third from left). COURTESY PALACE ENTERTAINMENT



**CONGRATULATIONS ON YOUR  
GOLDEN TICKET LEGEND AWARD, JOHN!**



# Legends: ACE Founders gave fans a voice, changed the industry

Long before the internet existed — and hardly computers — roller coaster fans found it challenging to find each other. A promotional stunt for the Universal film *Rollercoaster* in 1977 invited devoted enthusiasts to participate in a marathon to bring exposure to the movie. While they didn't win the contest, three young men started talking.

**Richard Munch, Roy Brashears** and **Paul Greenwald** had no idea how their conversation would affect the industry. By forming a club of enthusiasts, parks around the world suddenly found a marketing tool, but even more, a loyal fan base that became so much more.

"A simple idea — 'let's start a club!' — has enriched countless lives," said **Elizabeth Ringas**, president of **American Coaster Enthusiasts**. "From the start, they aimed to be an industry partner, with fun and preservation at the core of their mission. Now, 46 years later, it is an honor to have the dedication of these three gentlemen who laid the foundation for what ACE has become celebrated."

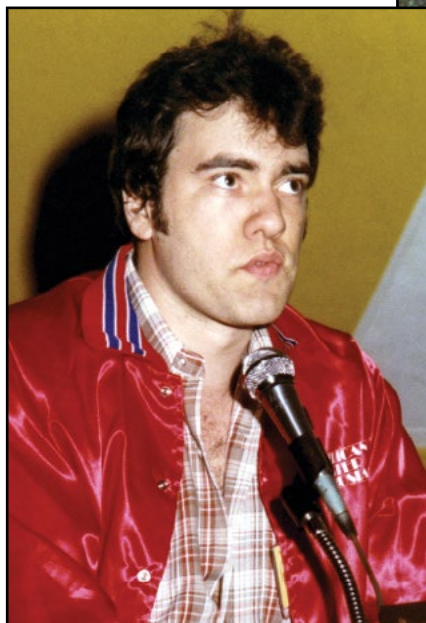
Pooling their resources to find like-minded individuals, they managed to organize a first event that brought about 50 people together and officially formed a club. Over the decades, American Coaster Enthusiasts, commonly known as ACE, has



worked with parks and the industry to provide historical background, research and promotional literature. The club started by Munch, Brashears and Greenwald even started a term: ERT. Finding the value in working with ACE, parks offered up "exclusive ride time," and the beginning of roller coaster events blossomed into national conferences, annual conventions and international tours.

The support ACE showed the industry was embraced by many. News stories appeared on television, and suddenly those "quirky coaster nerds" became legitimate voices.

Even more impactful is the dedication to history and education. Parks around the globe now boast historic ACE Roller Coaster Landmark plaques that inform guests about the significance of the attraction they are about to ride (or just got off). Kennywood has three: Jack Rabbit, The Racer and Thunderbolt. From the beginning, ACE had an interest in establishing a museum dedicated to roller coasters. Those slow efforts over time have resulted in the collection of amazing pieces that document roller coasters



Richard Munch (left), Roy Brashears and Paul Greenwald (right) came up with the idea to form ACE, the largest and longest-running organization for enthusiasts. COURTESY ACE ARCHIVES



From its humble beginnings of about 50 people in 1978, more than 7,000 members belong to ACE today. COURTESY ACE ARCHIVES

and the amusement industry. The formation of the **National Roller Coaster Museum and Archives** is an ongoing effort to preserve the past. Munch has diligently served on the Board of Directors.

Today, ACE has more than 7,000 members and has special funds dedicated to Preservation, Archives and the support of the National Roller Coaster Museum.

Sadly, Greenwald

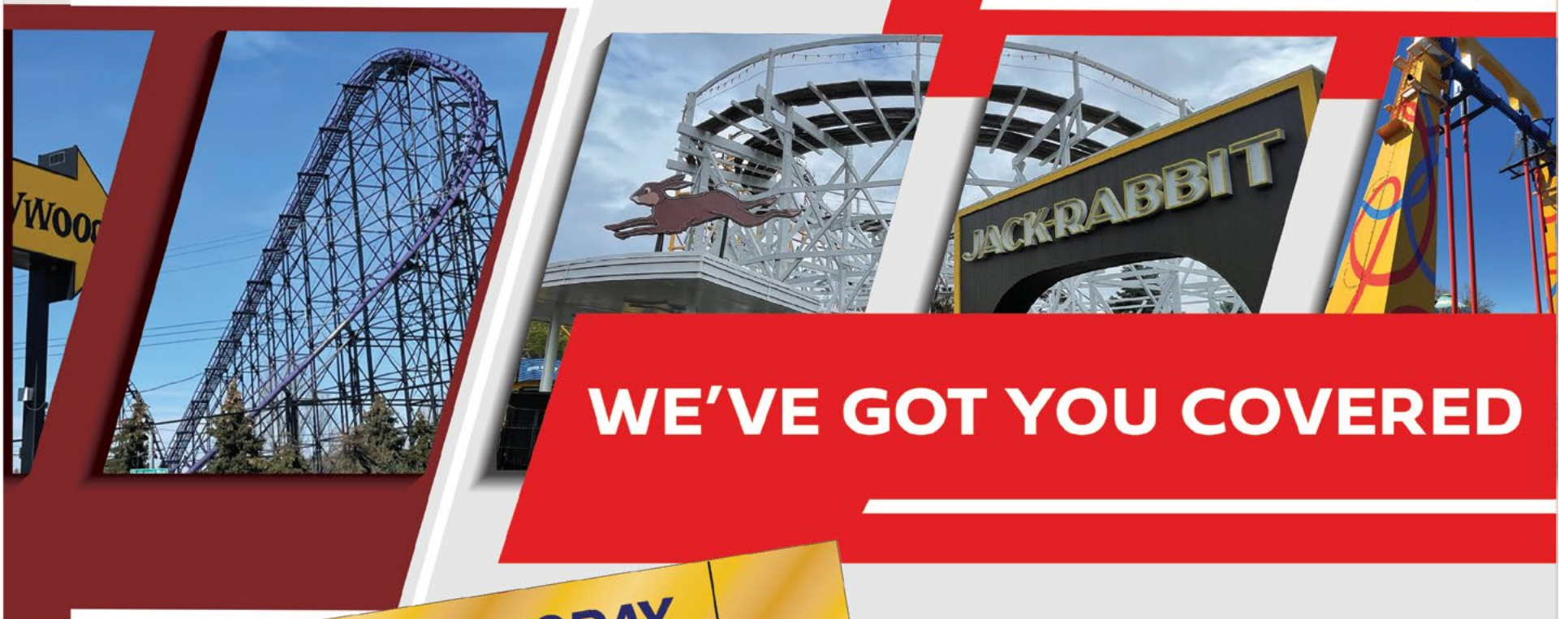
passed away in 2015. But the inspiration from these three gentlemen is stronger than ever.

*Amusement Today* is pleased to honor the founders of ACE as Golden Ticket Legends.



Brashears and Greenwald participate in a stunt on Loch Ness Monster (above left). Richard Munch and his wife Carole stand upon Thunderbolt at Coaster Con III in 1980 (above middle). Tom Rebbie honored ACE's founders with the Philadelphia Toboggan Coaster Inc.'s Manufacturing Award in 1997 (above right). COURTESY ACE ARCHIVES

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# Gary Slade: a head for news, a heart for the amusement industry

Starting as a ride operator on the Shock Wave roller coaster at **Six Flags Over Texas** as a teenager, **Gary Slade** became a fan of the industry at a young age. As he learned more about theme parks, their operations and what was happening in the industry, he became more knowledgeable and more involved.

Soon, he was a driving force behind two fan publications and spearheaded regional activities for **American Coaster Enthusiasts** (ACE) in Texas, creating lasting relationships with parks in the area. One of those connections, **Bruce Neal** of Six Flags Over Texas, encouraged him to start a paper focusing on the business side of the industry. In 1997, *Amusement Today* launched its first issue.

Immediately, relationships were formed with both parks and suppliers alike.

With just a handful of staff to get him going, the term "small but mighty" took hold. As the amusement industry had no shortage of news, pages filled. Over time, Slade expanded the coverage of *AT* to include family entertainment centers, fairs and more. One of his most rewarding decisions he has shared was when the publication dedicat-



Gary Slade

ed a section to Safety, championing the industry's efforts to make attractions one of the safest types of recreation for families everywhere.

"When *Amusement Today* first came out, the publisher of *Amusement Business* was very upset," said retired *AT* staff member, **Sue Nichols**, who was a former employee of *Amusement Business*. "Each issue was passed around the Nashville office, with a long sticky note attached to the front page with everyone's name on it. We had to check that we had looked through each issue. In ad sales, each ad in *AT* was noted and us sales reps were questioned as to why the advertiser would run in *AT*. If the advertiser ran in *AT* but NOT in *AB*, then we were really questioned about it. We told the publisher it was



*Amusement Today* began publication in 1997. COURTESY GARY SLADE

because Gary focused on the manufacturers and suppliers, when *AB* would not allow them to be mentioned in stories, which was an antiquated policy that had continued."

In 1998, on the advice of friends in the industry, Slade and his team created the Golden Ticket Awards as a way to honor the Best of the Best in the industry. That first eight-page insert has grown in the last quarter century into globally recognized awards that help celebrate, promote and market, as well as form the focal point to an event where industry colleagues can meet, socialize, network and discuss best practices.

"Gary has created and nurtured an industry publication that covers it all — from safety and park features to manufacturer and supplier successes," said **Brian Knoebel, Knoebels Amusement Resort**. "That's not to mention the fact that he also knows how to throw one heck of a gathering for the Golden Ticket Awards. The event is relaxed and fun, and because of this, he is responsible for countless industry partnerships and perhaps just as important... friendships."

"It's this industry's family reunion," added **Pete Owens, Dollywood**. "Whether it was as a ride operator or the founder of *Amusement*

*Today*, who chased every story in the industry for more than 25 years, Gary loves theme parks, carnivals, boardwalks, peers, and traveling shows, but most importantly, Gary loves the people."

But Slade's efforts don't stop there. From his very early days, he has had a keen interest in the history of the amusement industry. His volunteerism and dedication to the **National Roller Coaster Museum** are unmatched, and so often unrecognized behind the scenes.

Throughout his career, he has been honored as a Hall of Fame recipient of the **World Waterpark Association** and **New England Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions**, as well as having served on safety committees. For his commitment to safety, he has received an **AIMS** Lifetime Achievement Award. He is also an honorary member of ACE.

For his contributions to the amusement industry in its various forms, both the staff of *Amusement Today* and industry dignitaries are pleased to collaborate and acknowledge Gary Slade as a Golden Ticket Legend.



Gary Slade worked as a ride operator on Shock Wave at Six Flags Over Texas in his younger years (above left). Slade and Pete Owens unveil the acquisition of an original Loch Ness Monster car to a group of visitors at the National Roller Coaster Museum and Archives (above right). COURTESY GARY SLADE, DAVID LIPNICKY







**CONGRATULATIONS GARY!**  
THANK YOU FOR EVERYTHING YOU DO FOR THIS INDUSTRY.

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# Reflecting on yesterdays of Amusement Today's Gary Slade, GTA Legend



The launch of *Amusement Today* garnered IAAPA's Impact Award in 1997 (above left), followed by a Brass Ring Award in 2004 (above right). COURTESY GARY SLADE

Networking fun took place at Gibtown this past winter. COURTESY GARY SLADE



Winners pose at the 2003 Golden Ticket Awards at Schlitterbahn (above left). Almost 20 years later, the awards ceremony has grown into the popular networking event, with more than six times the attendees. Winners from the 2022 ceremony are seen above right. COURTESY JASON KNUTSON; AT/JOHN W.C. ROBINSON

For his commitment to industry safety, Slade received the AIMS Lifetime Achievement Award during the 2019 Golden Ticket ceremony. AT/JOHN W.C. ROBINSON



Slade visits with Dana Morgan at the IAAPA Expo in 1997, the first year of *AT*'s publication. AT/FILE



Gary Slade was made an Honorary ACE Member in 2000 in appreciation of his major work dedicated to preservation. COURTESY S. MADONNA HORCHER



Gary Slade, along with Ron Gustafson, was inducted into the NEAAPA Hall of Fame in 2023. COURTESY GARY SLADE



Under Slade's guidance, the GTA event has evolved into the "Networking event of the year." AT/TIM BALDWIN

Slade was inducted into the WWA Hall of Fame in 2023. AT/JEFFREY SEIFERT





**This issue tells of golden tickets made.**

**We cheer every person, park and arcade,**

**For there are no losers in this, our trade,**

**Only legends that move forth, unafraid.**

**In an era that so often throws shade,**

**Together we help bring fun, sun, and aid.**

**And now it's time to joyfully parade,**

**The hard work of one great man, here displayed.**

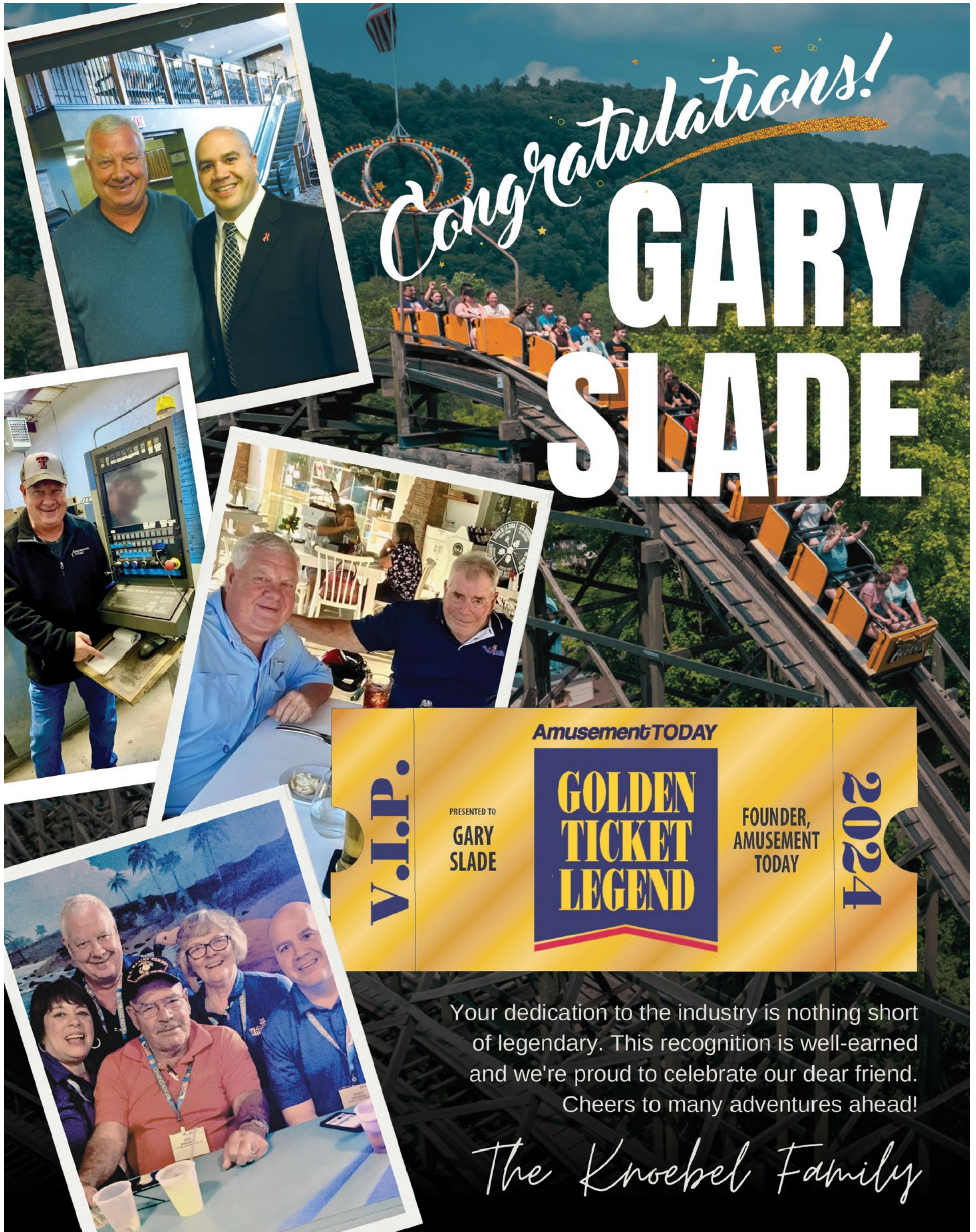
**He's legacy now, and always, pervade;**

**CONGRATULATIONS TO THE GREAT GARY SLADE,**

**AND ALL THE GOLDEN TICKET WINNERS**

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# 2024 GOLDEN TICKET AWARDS

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**THANK YOU AMUSEMENT TODAY FOR HONORING LEGENDS IN OUR INDUSTRY!**



The GCI team extends our warmest congratulations to **Gary Slade** on his outstanding 'Legends Award' at the **2024 Golden Tickets**. Gary has undoubtedly left an incredible mark on the hearts and minds of all parks, riders, and fellow vendors with his exceptional work. His commitment, dedication, and passion for our business and the industry have earned him this well-deserved recognition. We hope to continue the success with future generations and future projects. Congratulations once again to Gary Slade for this incredible achievement and all the 2024 Golden Ticket Award recipients!



GTA LEGEND **GARY SLADE** WITH 2023 RECIPIENTS **CLAIR HAIN** AND **MICHAEL BOODLEY**



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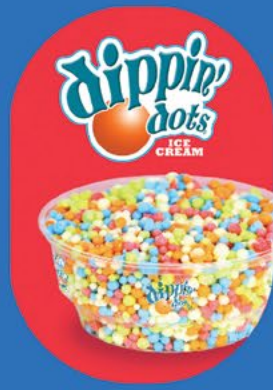
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Adventure Park USA is Maryland's largest family entertainment — and is growing! It takes the Golden Ticket for Breakout FEC. COURTESY KRIS ROWBERYY

## Adventure Park USA wins Breakout FEC, Dutch Wonderland retains Best Family Park

**Adventure Park USA** in Monrovia, Maryland, has seen rapid attendance gains and has continued its expansion of the arcade area. A brand-new **RCI** ropes course opened in 2024, following a renovated smokehouse restaurant in 2023 (with the ability to order from Uber Eats for locals). The restaurant has a full bar. The park also offers three coasters, a Skycoaster and **Qubica** AMF bowling. Indoor attractions have been added over the last four years to offset the nonpeak winter and unfavorable outdoor seasons. It has won the Golden Ticket for **Breakout FEC**.

"I'm a second-generation entrepreneur with a family with deep roots in the entertainment industry. We've been working in the FEC world since I was just seven years old in 1979," said **Eric Stottlemeyer**, CEO. "Being in this industry for 43 years I can say I am truly grateful, beyond words, for the people whom I have had the great fortune to get to know over the years. They are the reason why Adventure Park USA has won this prestigious award."

This park is Maryland's largest family entertainment center. It also offers childcare within the facil-

ity that offers separate classrooms for specific age groups from 2 to 13. Strategic growth targeting new experiences and new demographics are where Adventure Park USA is focusing its resources.

"The Adventure Park USA team is always forward-thinking," said Stottlemeyer. "Part of being forward thinking is being open to listening to and sharing with others. Networking with owners and operators through a Masterminds network has offered a constant flow of ideas. This has proven to be vital to the success that we are achieving."

At No. 2 is **Malibu Jacks Quad Cities** in Bettendorf, Iowa. Located on the banks of the Mississippi River in the Quad Cities area, Bettendorf is one of Iowa's best small cities. But it's never exactly been a thrill-seeker's destination — until now! The arrival of the state's first Malibu Jack's — a new family entertainment center in Iowa — delivers laser tag, a spinning roller coaster, a drop tower, go karts, a full arcade and more!

"We have something for every age. That's kind of what Malibu Jack's is," said Malibu Jacks Vice President **Steve Hatton**. "From the

toddlers to grandparents, we want something to do for everybody."

**Craig's Cruisers** (No. 3) in Wyoming, Michigan, a suburb of Grand Rapids, has demonstrated continuous innovation and dedication to providing exceptional entertainment experiences. The recent introduction of two groundbreaking attractions, The Immortal Jungle (glow-golf) and Slide Zone (Slick City Slides), highlights Craig's Cruisers' commitment to enhancing guest enjoyment and setting new standards in family entertainment centers.

**The WWE Experience** (No. 4) in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, offers a different kind of family entertainment experience.

For more than 50 years, WWE has captivated fans globally with its legendary narratives and unforgettable moments. Despite its history, WWE lacked a permanent venue for fans to engage deeply with its iconic IP. That changed in 2024 with the launch of the WWE Experience KSA. This all-ages interactive attraction captures WWE's excitement, offering fans unparalleled access to their favorite brand.

► See FAMILY, page 28



**THANK YOU!**

FOR VOTING **W DUTCH WONDERLAND**

*Best Family Park*

► **FAMILY**

Continued from page 26

Attractions include The Superdome, a 360-degree special effects show space; "Become a Superstar," which lets visitors create their own persona; The Hall of Immortals, three museums in one; and The Undertaker: Graveyard Escape, an escape room.

**In The Game** (No. 5) opened in Liberty Township, Ohio. The new 17,000-square-foot space includes an arcade with virtual reality technology; challenge games; a 3D motion ride theater; axe throwing; a Las Vegas-themed escape room; and a full-service restaurant and bar.

The venue has an outdoor patio and bar with seating for up to 150 patrons.

The Liberty Township location has consistently drawn packed-house crowds in its opening year thanks to innovative events, specials and entertainment.



Families on Merlin's Mayhem from S&S fly over Dutch Wonderland, which is a repeat winner for Best Family Park. COURTESY DUTCH WONDERLAND

The category of **Best Family Park** spotlights amusement parks where families can play together. Parents can ride with kids on the majority of the rides. Attractions are thrilling but don't go upside down or qualify as "extreme" rides.

For the fifth year, **Dutch Wonderland** has held onto the gold.

"At Dutch Wonderland,

we pride ourselves on offering an unmatched experience for families," said **Megan Hartman**, general manager. "We are thrilled to receive this award once again as we continue to strive to provide a welcoming environment where families can enjoy a full season of fun through our seasonal events, a unique mix of rides, shows and

entertainment offerings."

**Santa's Village** in Jefferson, New Hampshire, has nestled into the No. 2 spot for a second year in a row. Even in the summer months, all things Christmas are pure joy. The park includes a water park as well as rides themed to the December holiday. New for this year was Midnight Flyer, a family roller coaster.

**Legoland Florida** (No. 3), boasts the fun attractions of the famed brand as well as the beautiful gardens of the historic **Cypress Gardens**. New in 2024 was the Ferrari Build & Race, an attraction that lets a life-size Ferrari made of Lego bricks inspire guests to build their own and then check it out in the "test zone."

With the purpose of creating a place where people of all abilities can play together, **Morgan's Wonderland** (No. 4) has continued to grow with 2024 seeing the park's largest expansion to date. Four new attractions were installed, including the park's first thrill ride, a zip line. All four attractions suitably accommodated people in wheelchairs and with other special needs.

Tucked in a beautiful, forested setting, **Idlewild & SoakZone** (No. 5), offers both amusement rides and water park slides for families. The park has been entertaining families since 1878.

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# Europa-Park reclaims Best Park; Schlitterbahn remains undefeated

The 2024 results for **Best Park** look different than last year. In fact, not a single park in the top five holds the spot it did last year.

**Europa-Park** takes the Golden Ticket once again, after being in the No. 2 spot in 2023 — which was the highest-rated park in Europe. In five decades, Germany's largest theme park resort has installed one of the largest collections of rides, shows and dining options — all in wonderfully themed environments.

"Winning the Golden Ticket Award for Best Park for the ninth time is just as thrilling to the Mack family, our team members and our fans as it was the first time, as it is a recognition of our relentless pursuit of making Europa-Park as perfect as it can be," said **Roland Mack**, co-founder. "No detail is too small, and no dream is too large for us not to pursue it. As we head toward our 50th anniversary season, what a wonderful recognition of what we are working for every day. We thank all the fans who voted for us!"

Europa-Park had major investments this season. A brand-new land featuring the park's largest roller coaster, a major upgrade and refurbishment to a classic dark ride, and a redeveloped area with new attractions made for an incredible season.

**Dollywood**, the top-rated park in the United States, lands at No. 2. Both it and Europa-Park made slow climbs over the years



Beautiful environments and a wide variety of rides makes Europa-Park (above) the most visited park in Germany. It takes the Best Park Golden Ticket for the ninth time. The undefeated Schlitterbahn (right) takes Best Water Park for a 26th consecutive time. AT/TIM BALDWIN

until reaching the top of the Golden Ticket charts. A new resort hotel and a new Dolly Parton Experience highlighted the resort this season.

**Tokyo DisneySea** finds its highest rating ever at No. 3. Fans have long commented that the park is so unique among the Disney properties, and the themed attractions, imaginative environments and beautiful lands make for a captivating visit.

**Knoebels Amusement Resort** (No. 4) enters the top five again. The tree-filled setting, classic rides and outstanding coasters have made this nostalgic, traditional park revered among even the most well-traveled experts.

**Disneyland** in Anaheim completes the top five. Virtually a guide

map for all theme parks, the Disney original returns to the top five for the first time since 2019.

There was a lot of shuffling in the category of **Best Water Park** as well, but not at the top. **Schlitterbahn** has been the sole winner in this category since the Golden Tickets began in 1998.

"It's always tremendously gratifying when our commitment to serving guests is recognized and celebrated, especially for an unprecedented 26 years," said Vice President and General Manager of Schlitterbahn Waterparks **Darren Hill**. "With our unique collection of attractions in a one-of-a-kind natural setting, there is no other waterpark like Schlitterbahn New Braunfels. Making people



happy is what we do best, and we salute our park and team for consistently delivering amazing experiences to guests of all ages."

**Volcano Bay**, the water park at **Universal Orlando Resort**, nudges its way to the No. 2 spot for the first time. The highly themed water park, with its volcanic centerpiece, makes for a

photogenic getaway.

**Splashin' Safari** (No. 3) bills itself as the "Water Coaster Capital of the World." One award-winning attraction after another has been added to the park over the years. Its simple beginnings in 1993 have exploded into the water park powerhouse that it is today.

**Rulantica** (No. 4), Europa-Park resort's indoor/outdoor water park, returns to the top five. The heavily immersive environment dazzles with its attention to detail and incredible theming.

**Dollywood's Splash Country** pops back into the top five, closing out the finalists. The beauty of the Smoky Mountains is integrated into the diversity of attractions.



Nestled in the Great Smoky Mountains, Dollywood (No. 2) boasts being the top-rated U.S. park (above left). Moving into the No. 2 spot, Volcano Bay impresses with its iconic centerpiece (above right). AT/TIM BALDWIN

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## **WINNERS AND FINALISTS**



# Morgan's Wonderland honored with the GTA Leadership Award

Some ideas are good ones; others are inspired.

When **Gordon Hartman** witnessed other children not wanting to engage with his daughter, Morgan, who has special needs, he felt there needed to be a place — or places — where children of all abilities were able to play together. It resonated with him so much that he gathered the resources to build **Morgan's Wonderland** (San Antonio, Texas) in 2010, the world's first fully accessible theme park. All the attractions were to be enjoyed by everybody, regardless of cognitive or physical abilities.

"Gordon Hartman is a true visionary who's passionate about making the world a more inclusive place for everyone, especially for individuals like his inspirational daughter, Morgan, who's dealt with physical and cognitive special needs since birth," said **Bob McCullough**, communications, **Gordon Hartman Family Foundation**. "He's definitely a man of action who leads by example. He didn't just envision the world's first ultra-accessible, fully-inclusive theme park, he built it and much more."

The phenomenal success of Morgan's Wonderland has led to the creation of other unique ventures such as an award-winning splash park, sports complex, year-round camp and massive **Morgan's MAC** (Multi-Assistance Center) offering coordinated care and solutions to problems confronting children and adults with special needs.

"Gordon has accomplished so much in a decade and a half, and there's much more on the way, including a revolutionary, ultra-accommodating hotel," noted McCullough.

With the extraordinary growth of numerous ideas, the leadership at



Morgan's Inspiration Island is an ultra-accessible water park (above). AT/TIM BALDWIN



Gordon Hartman poses with his daughter Morgan (above left). Richard Pretlow., current park president appears above middle. Four new rides opened this spring at Morgan's Wonderland (above right). AT/TIM BALDWIN

Morgan's Wonderland has brought about the largest expansion to the original park in its history in 2024 with four new attractions, including the park's first thrill ride. The park's mission has made an impact on industry suppliers such

as **Zamperla**, **SimEx** and **Altitude Attractions**.

**Richard Pretlow** is the current park president.

"Richard is a very calm and thoughtful leader," said **Mary Martinez Worth**, chief marketing officer. "Richard was

eager to learn all about Morgan's and has naturally embraced our mission of inclusion. When the park was undergoing renovations last year to prepare for the 2024 season, he brought a wheelchair to one of the rides he had

concerns with to ensure the pathway being built to the ride would work with a wheelchair, naturally showing his commitment to our mission. Richard leads with humility and is not afraid to

► See LEADER, page 36



*Thank You!*

Amusement Today for recognizing Morgan's Wonderland Gordon Hartman and Richard Pretlow with the 2024 Leadership Award.

## Leadership Award: Honorable Mentions

**Ellis & Associates (E&A)** marked the end of its 40th year with the launch of two new aquatics education resources designed to enhance safety for lifeguards and swimmers alike. E&A education resources are developed utilizing original source research, best practice studies, constantly advancing technology and data analysis.

With the rapid expansion of aquatic facilities to include an ever-growing variety of attractions and experiences, including splash zones, artificial swimming lagoons and surf venues, the new Shallow Water Attraction Lifeguard certification and Surf Park Training Module will give aquatic facility operators more resources to elevate safety and risk management, as well as expand staffing opportunities.

"For more than 40 years, E&A has continually pushed to meet the needs of the aquatics industry, focusing on results-driven objectives and field-tested protocols that elevate the entire industry," said Senior Vice President and COO **RAC Carroll**. "Our work partnering with water park, resort, surf and mixed-use developers and operators means that we can help clients build aquatic safety into both design and operations from the very beginning."

In addition, Ellis Aquatic Innovations (a division of E&A) recently unveiled its newest innovation, the Ellis Aquatic Vigilance System (EAVS). EAVS utilizes high-definition "smart" cameras strategically placed to monitor movement on land, on the water and underwater to help identify items before they become a problem.

**The Helping Hands Foundation** was created in 2013 with the goal of helping Long Island reach its potential. **Tony Gentile**, one of the founding fathers of **Adventureland**, always wanted to give back to the Long Island community, and this foundation was created in his memory to do just that.

Gentile and his team created community events like Pumpkin Park, designated as a safe Halloween event for Long Island families; developed philanthropic relationships with local non-profits like **The Helen Keller School** and became more and more involved with community groups like **Boy Scouts & Girl Scouts** and **Nassau-Suffolk Services for Autism**.

Thanks to the tireless efforts of the Helping Hands Foundation supporters and Adventureland, over \$1 million has been raised for Long Island, including more than \$200,000 in scholarships awarded through the Vivian and Tony Gentile Scholarship Program, over \$100,000 in grants/donations to Long Island nonprofits, and support of numerous regional programs.



**Rocket's Sky Flight Adventure**, from **Altitude Attractions**, gives **Morgan's Wonderland** a high-speed thrill ride.

AT/JOHN W.C. ROBINSON

### ► LEADER

Continued from page 34



get his hands dirty."

With such passionate people in place, there is much on the horizon to make the world a better place to live.

"The privilege of collaborating with Gordon has been the thrill of a lifetime," said McCullough. "As I've proudly pointed out on innumerable occasions, I share a very special distinction with Gordon in that both of us have daughters with special needs. It's been truly uplifting to have had a front-row seat and witness the impact Gordon's inspired leadership has had on my daughter and countless others. In the infancy of Morgan's Wonderland, Gordon would declare: 'Together, we can make a difference!' Now, after many successes and many more to come, Gordon has amended that assertion: 'Together, we are making a difference!'"

For the continued excellence and leadership it's displayed in making amusement accessible to all, Morgan's Wonderland receives the Golden Ticket Award for **Leadership**.



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Silver Dollar City, Dollywood and Mount Olympus shine

# New-for-2024 categories spotlight multiple park accomplishments

Nothing makes guests more eager to visit one of their favorite parks than to discover “what’s new?” There was much to engage the guests in 2024.

**Best New Family Attraction** goes to **Fire In The Hole** at **Silver Dollar City**. At a \$30 million price tag, the park heavily invested in reimagining one of the most cherished rides in the park’s history. Rebuilding the attraction from the ground up, this new version is part dark ride/part roller coaster/part historical storytelling. And the public loved it!

“Fire In The Hole is integral to the Silver Dollar City experience, telling a story based on a factual Ozarks evening when a group of hill-folk burned a town to the ground over 130 years ago,” said **Brad Thomas**, president of the Silver Dollar City Company. “We’re honored Fire In The Hole earned Golden Ticket Award wins, an honor that stands on the shoulders of a legacy over 50 years in the making.”

The attraction was a collaboration between **Rocky Mountain Construction**, **Herschend Creative Studios** and the park.

At No. 2 is **Anna and Elsa’s Frozen Journey** at **Tokyo DisneySea**. A float-through dark ride that lasts more than six minutes retells the story of the movie *Frozen* through large sets, projections, forward and backward directions, video map-



Silver Dollar City’s classic Fire In The Hole was recreated in a bold new — bigger, better, more modern. It wins Best New Family Attraction. A \$30 million investment for the park, Fire In The Hole was exactly what guests were hoping for. It wins Best New Attraction Installation. COURTESY SILVER DOLLAR CITY



ping and multiple drops. It’s dazzling.

Also in Asia is **Zootopia: Hot Pursuit** (No. 3) at **Shanghai Disneyland**. Ten-passenger trackless vehicles whisk visitors through several scenes on a madcap romp with the characters from the movie’s IP. The ride lasts almost six minutes.

Back in the U.S., **Tiana’s Bayou Adventure** (No. 4) at **Walt Disney World’s Magic Kingdom** was a makeover of the former **Splash Mountain**. Now the thrilling boat ride is themed to the movie *The Princess and the Frog*.

Wrapping up the top five finalists is **SpongeBob’s Crazy Carnival Ride** at



**Circus Circus** in Las Vegas. The beloved cartoon character takes riders on a comical, interactive adventure through many games. It was created by **Sally Dark Rides**.

The show must go on! Nominations for **Best**

**New Show of 2024** were viewed and judged by a large group of entertainment aficionados.

Taking the Golden Ticket is “**From The Heart: The Dolly Parton Story**” at **Dollywood**.

“In creating ‘From the

Heart,’ **Dolly** and **John Dietrich** (co-writer/director) wanted guests to feel the emotional pull Dolly faced as she left everything she had ever known in Sevier County to move

► See NEW, page 40



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Thank you Amusement Today and Golden Ticket voters for selecting Fire In The Hole<sup>®</sup> as the Best New Family Attraction and Best New Attraction Installation in 2024!



*The Heart of the Ozarks*

## ►NEW

Continued from page 38

away in pursuit of her dreams,” said **Page Bales**, entertainment director. “Audiences quickly learn that Dolly’s confidence in herself and her immeasurable talent — along with the love and support of her family — pushed her to continue chasing those dreams in Nashville despite the challenges she faced. It was that same determination, talent and love for others that has led her to become the icon she is today. ‘From the Heart’ does a phenomenal job of telling her unmatched story through her own words and her legendary music catalog. It really is unlike any other show in the industry.”

Coming in at No. 2 is **“CineSational”** at **Universal Studios Florida**. This nighttime spectacular transports audiences through the emotions of their favorite stories and characters in cinema. Curated music, projected images, visual effects, 600 drones, lasers, fountains and pyrotechnics are all choreographed over the park’s lagoon.

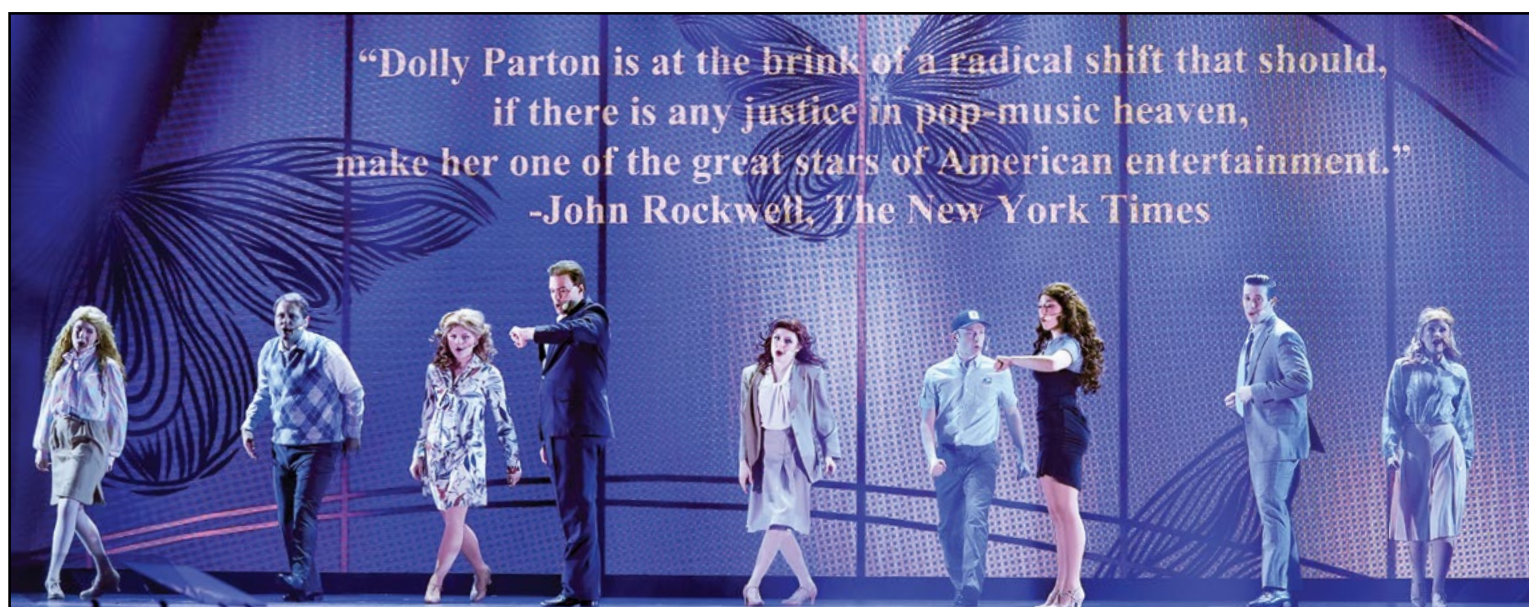
**Six Flags Fiesta Texas** claims two shows in the finalists. **“Forever Hollywood”** (No. 3) featured live performers and musicians taking audiences through favorite songs of multiple decades. **“A Christmas Carol: A Spirited New Musical”** (No. 4) was written and produced in-house by the park. Fiesta Texas hopes it will become a new annual holiday tradition.

At No. 5 is **“Holidays In The Sky.”** **Holiday World** redoes this show each year. With 500 drones reaching widths of 800 feet, the sky was the limit, and audiences got to determine the penultimate scene.

Summers can be hot. Enjoyable ways to cool off are a welcome relief.



A large cast takes audiences through the life of Dolly Parton in Dollywood's “From The Heart,” which wins Best New Show of 2024. COURTESY DOLLYWOOD



Taking the Golden Ticket for **Best New Water Park Ride** is **The Rise of Icarus** at **Mount Olympus Water & Theme Park**.

“We continually strive to introduce new and innovative attractions,” said **Fontini Laskaris Backhaus**, director of marketing. “With The Rise of Icarus, we aimed to create a thrilling, myth-inspired, record-breaking waterslide that combines excitement with a unique story. We’ve been thrilled by the overwhelmingly positive and enthusiastic reactions. Riders can’t get enough! They’re rushing back up the tower to experience all the fast body slides. Each slide is fast and exhilarating,

definitely worth the wait and anticipation!”

The multi-slide tower was supplied by **WhiteWater West** and offers multiple slides, including America’s tallest waterslide.

**Icon Tower**, the centerpiece multislide tower comes in at No. 2. It is located at **Meryal Water Park** in Doha, Qatar. Standing at 85 meters (260 feet), it is virtually a waterpark on one tower with 12 slides, two on each of the tower’s six levels. Among them is the world’s tallest waterslide, **Vertigo**. Intense! The attractions are from **WhiteWater West**.

**Wilderness at the Smokies** claims No. 3 and 4 on the finalist list.

**Kaleidoscope Kavern Lazy River** is a unique variation on the lazy river genre as riders float through colorful tunnels with captivating projections created by **Moment Factory**. **Ridge Runner** is an uphill water coaster provided by **WhiteWater West**.

**Eagle Hunt** (No. 5) at **Silverwood’s Boulder Beach** is the longest dueling water coaster in the U.S. It was provided by **ProSlide**. It features three high-speed saucers and four uphill blasts.

**Best New Attraction Installation** is a category that emphasizes the impact a ride can make on the park. **Silver Dollar City** and its **Fire In The Hole** take the gold again. Knowing the loss of the original

attraction would not set well with guests, this bigger, better version resulted in universal acclaim.

“The experience entertains multiple generations of family visitors, combining a height requirement of 36 inches with the experience of a moderate-thrill roller coaster,” explained Park President Thomas. “Best of all, the experience is housed in a climate-controlled building, ensuring the ride’s operation regardless of weather — rain or shine, hot or cold, during the park’s March-to-December season. The three-minute ride is the largest indoor family coaster in the heartland

► See NEW, page 42



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The Rise of Icarus at Mt. Olympus Water & Theme Park is the tallest waterslide in North America and earns Best New Water Park Ride. COURTESY MT. OLYMPUS WATER & THEME PARK



## ►NEW Continued from page 40

of the U.S.”  
**Darren Torr**, president of Rocky Mountain Construction, added, “Fire In The Hole was an incredible project for RMC. It gave us the opportunity to work with the Herschend family again and redevelop a classic ride that has been enjoyed by millions. Developing RMC’s first powered dark ride in conjunction with **Dennis Clevenger’s** team was a great experience. We sincerely hope that the new ride will be enjoyed by Silver Dollar City guests for the next 50 years.”

**Voltron Nevera** at **Europa-Park** placed at No. 2. While the park boasts a strong lineup of thrilling coasters, this masterpiece not only anchored the new land of Croatia, but broadened the park’s appeal with its first extreme ride, which features seven inversions, four launches, a turntable

and dark-ride elements. It is unlike anything else at the park (which operates more than 70 rides).

**The Bobcat** (No. 3) at **Six Flags Great Escape** brought the first new roller coaster to the park in almost two decades. Built by **The Gravity Group**, this family-friendly wooden coaster was deemed the perfect amount of thrill for family audiences.

**Lagoon’s** seven-years-in-the-making **Primordial** was a collaboration between park visionaries, **Triotech** and **ART Engineering**. Part coast-

er/part interactive dark ride, **Primordial** features multiple endings that keep guests guessing as to which finale they will experience.

**Good Gravy!** (No. 5) at **Holiday World** filled the void of a fun family coaster for those coaster riders who haven’t grown enough to be thrill seekers. Themed to all things Thanksgiving dinner, it was considered the perfect addition by park fans everywhere. **Good Gravy!** was the first installation of a **Vekoma** family boomerang in the U.S.



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ICARUS HIGH THRILL TOWER,  
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# Voltron is Best New Coaster, Big Bear Mountain digs claws into gold

Nothing thrills park fans like new roller coasters. **Best New Roller Coaster** saw a wide birth of different genres, from record-breakers to family rides, from innovative concepts to traditional wood coasters.

**Voltron Nevera** at **Europa-Park** takes the Golden Ticket for Best New Roller Coaster. It is the first international ride to ever do so. As a centerpiece to the new Croatia area, the seven-inversion, multi-launch coaster has incredible spectator appeal, particularly with its world-record launch at 105 degrees.

"I am so proud of our entire team of **Mack Rides**, Europa Park, **Mack Solutions** and **Mack One** for their work on this ground-breaking attraction and for the effect of Voltron Nevera powered by **Rimac** on the season so far," said **Michael Mack**, CEO, Mack One. "Voltron Nevera is definitely a phenomenon with our guests and fans from beginning to end."

Master planned with Europa-Park's **Patrick Marx**, Voltron Nevera was a crowning achievement for Mack Rides.

"Every project is spe-



Europa-Park's new Voltron Nevera wowed audiences with its exciting elements, theming and seven-train operation. AT/TIM BALDWIN

cial, but the scope of Voltron Nevera at the new land Croatia was an incredibly exciting project," said **Christian von Elverfeldt**, CEO, Mack Rides. "There were so many new elements for us, and with seven trains, it met the capacity Europa-Park needed and was looking for. The fact that people continue to

line up to enthusiastically ride it again and again really makes us proud."

At No. 2 is **Bobcat** at **Six Flags Great Escape**. This fun, family-friendly woodie was considered a perfect fit for the park and was the sole wooden coaster to open in the U.S. in 2024. It was a creation of **The Gravity Group**.

Another record-breaker for Mack Rides is **Hyperia** (No. 3) at **Thorpe Park**. Setting a height record for roller coasters in the U.K., Hyperia stands at 236 feet and features some dramatic maneuvers, including three inversions.

**Good Gravy!** (No. 4) at **Holiday World** took a family ride and made it into a thematic experience that makes going through the line just as captivating as the ride itself. The ride is a custom-designed layout for Holiday World built by **Vekoma**.

**Primordial** (No. 5) at **Lagoon** pushes the creativity of what a coaster can do by incorporating 3-D gaming into immersive theming. **Art Engineering** and **Triotech** worked with the park to bring an in-house vision to life. Multiple endings make this ride even more tantalizing for rerides.

For the second year of honoring **Best Family Coaster**, once again Dollywood takes top bill with **Big Bear Mountain**. Expanding the park's

Wildwood Grove in 2023, the Vekoma-built launched coaster with onboard sound was a real crowd pleaser.

"With Big Bear Mountain, I am convinced that we created a new category of coasters, one that is not only family-thrill and can accommodate different age groups but can also please and excite riders with different expectations and thrill tolerances. It is democratically fun!" said **Ricardo Tonding-Edges**, marketing, Vekoma. "The combination of a long track, multiple launches, exciting elements, all with a 39-inch rider height restriction is so special that I believe this ride changed the paradigm for family coasters. But my favorite thing about Big Bear Mountain is to see young kids (3- and 4-year-olds) having the best time of their lives and riding over and over again, together with their parents who are also having a blast."

Holiday World dishes up seconds as Good Gravy! places at No. 2 in this category as well.

**Slinky Dog Dash** (No. 3) at **Disney's Hollywood Studios** brings all the fun of toys into one smile-inducing attraction. Supplied by Mack Rides, the Toy Story overlay makes the ride not only fun but incredibly photogenic.

Bobcat (No. 4) at Six Flags Great Escape also pounces onto this chart. The Gravity Group woodie was just the right size at 55 feet to be the next step up for the smaller riders.

Rounding out the finalists is **Wooden Warrior** (No. 5) at **Quassy Amusement Park**. Like its new sibling, this woodie was the one that started the mid-size coaster for The Gravity Group in 2011 and has since created a line of coasters that are "the right size" for family fun.



Introduced in 2023, the category of Best Family Coaster goes to Dollywood's Big Bear Mountain for a second year in a row. COURTESY DOLLYWOOD



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and "Best New Roller Coaster Category"  
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and runners-up!



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**CONGRATULATIONS TO HOLIDAY WORLD!  
WINNER OF THE GOLDEN TICKET AWARD  
BEST NEW THEME CONCEPT!**



<b>V.I.P.</b>	PRESENTED TO <b>HOLIDAY WORLD &amp; SPLASHIN' SAFARI</b>	AmusementTODAY <b>GOLDEN TICKET AWARD</b>	<b>GOOD GRAVY!</b>  <b>BEST NEW THEME CONCEPT</b>	<b>2024</b>
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**#5**

**BEST FAMILY COASTER**  
WOODEN WARRIOR - QUASSY AMUSEMENT PARK

**#10**

**BEST WOODEN COASTER**  
RAVINE FLYER II - WALDAMEER PARK



**BEST NEW COASTER**  
THE BOBCAT - SIX FLAGS GREAT ESCAPE

**#2**

**BEST WOODEN COASTER**  
THE VOYAGE - HOLIDAY WORLD

**#2**

**#4**

**BEST FAMILY COASTER**  
THE BOBCAT - SIX FLAGS GREAT ESCAPE

# New category: Holiday World wins for Best New Theme Concept

To celebrate creative thinking for new theming ideas, *Amusement Today* has created an original category for **Best New Theme Concept**. In doing so, imagination is acknowledged, which celebrates parks that come up with fresh ideas instead of themes that have been used repeatedly.

In 2024, several attractions told new stories, some that were diabolical, some that were inventive and some that were downright comical.

Taking the very first Golden Ticket is **Holiday World** and **Good Gravy!** This tongue-in-cheek idea took off from silly beginnings and was wonderfully developed around an old-fashioned trip to Grandma's house and the preparation of Thanksgiving dinner. The heavily themed queue strolling through the retro vibes of yesteryear culminates with a ride on a coaster themed to a gravy boat.

"When we started the concept for Good Gravy!, we knew we wouldn't have the flashiest roller coaster of 2024, but we knew we could turn it into something special," said **Leah Koch**, communications. "As we developed the story behind the ride, we unofficially dubbed it 'America's Kitschiest Coaster.' We



Both the front and the back of Holiday World's new family coaster resembles a gravy boat as it zips through various larger-than-life objects that prepare Thanksgiving dinner. AT/TIM BALDWIN

knew we were going to have a train shaped like a gravy boat from the beginning, but we had so much fun expanding the world of the Van Snoodles from our Sally dark ride, Gobbler Getaway. We made up an elaborate backstory to Grandma Gracy, the gravy-making prodigy, but at the end of the day, guests can just enjoy walking through Grandma's house on Thanksgiving Day."

The roller coaster was supplied by **Vekoma**.

At No. 2 is **Europa-Park** with **Voltron Nevera**. Croatia was the birthplace of Nikola Tesla, and the park got creative with his inventiveness and desire to use electric energy in all sorts of mechanical devices. Tesla's idea of transporting people through electricity is the basis for the roller coaster's storyline. Experiments and machines are seen throughout the queuing, including startling Tesla coils.

The seven-train roller coaster masterpiece was manufactured by **Mack Rides**.

**Dorney Park** ranks No. 3 with **Iron Menace**. Reaching into the regional steel indus-



try roots of the Pennsylvania area, the ride spins a tale of Hiram S. McTavish, a steel industry mogul who led his company to ruin.

The roller coaster was created by **Bolliger & Mabillard**.

At No. 4 is the completely new makeover of the former flume at both **Magic Kingdom** and **Disneyland**. **Tiana's Bayou Adventure** uses Disney IP

from *The Princess and the Frog* where the culture of New Orleans comes to life.

At **Lagoon** (No. 5), the park management envisioned a mythical quest where figures of a magical land were taken captive, and riders waged battle to release the warriors while experiencing **Primordial**. **ART Engineering** and **Triotech** partnered with the park on this attraction.

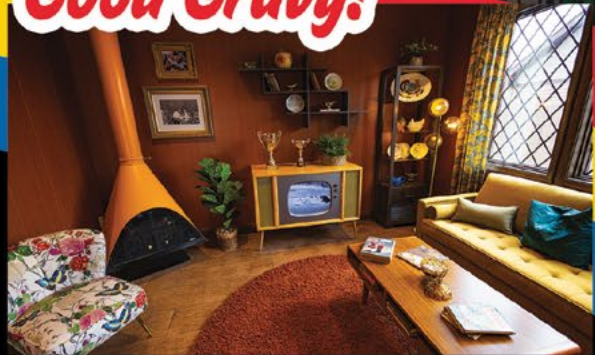


A storyline surrounding Nikola Tesla's experiments with electricity energize Europa-Park's Voltron Nevera coaster (above left). The steel industry's roots in Eastern Pennsylvania helped craft a tale for Dorney Park's Iron Menace (above right). AT/TIM BALDWIN; COURTESY DORNEY PARK

# Holiday World & Splashin' SAFARI



## Good Gravy!



## Holidays in the Sky



## Wildebeest



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AmusementTODAY **GOLDEN TICKET AWARD**

GOOD GRAVY! BEST NEW THEME CONCEPT

2024

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AmusementTODAY **GOLDEN TICKET AWARD**

AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION DRONE SHOW BEST INNOVATION

2024

V.I.P. PRESENTED TO HOLIDAY WORLD & SPLASHIN' SAFARI

AmusementTODAY **GOLDEN TICKET AWARD**

WILDEBEEST BEST WATER PARK RIDE

2024

**THANKS TO AMUSEMENT TODAY FOR MAKING HOLIDAY WORLD & SPLASHIN' SAFARI A TRIPLE WINNER!**

# Nemesis Reborn at Alton Towers earns the Renaissance Award

In 1994, three significant installations in the U.K. made England quite the hotbed for roller coaster fans. Among them was a roller coaster with the brilliant name and theme of Nemesis. **Alton Towers** took roller coasters to a creative new level with the concept behind the ride. Inverted coasters from — a rather young company at the time — **Bolliger & Mabillard** were in their infancy. Creator **John Wardley** took local restrictions of not being able to build above the tree line and conceived of an even more ingenious design owing to this limitation. Instead of building high, below-ground trenches were dug to make for a great storyline. The coaster flew below ground level.

Nemesis, with its monstrous alien motif, was a masterstroke of theming and was an anchor for a new land within the park. Even with numerous attractions added in the 21st century, Nemesis lived up to its reputation of being a signature attraction. But after almost three decades, it became necessary for the ride to close for all of 2023 to undergo a major refurbishment.

Alton Towers could have just installed new track and given it a refresh, but instead, the park seized an opportunity.

Keeping with the original lore, the attraction



The lore of the original attraction from 1994 has seen a rebirth as Nemesis Reborn. The eerie eye staring back at spectators is off-the-scale dramatic (below left). Red veins now adorn the new black track, adding to the thematic vibe (below right). COURTESY ALTON TOWERS



was renamed Nemesis Reborn, and the experience was elevated to new heights, particularly for spectators. While the ride layout remained the same, the entire thematic atmosphere was taken far

beyond a simple paint job.

"We are truly honored to receive a Golden Ticket for our work on Nemesis Reborn," said **Bianca Sammut**, divisional director at Alton Towers Resort. "Bringing back such a cult classic was no easy feat, and to receive recognition on such a global scale is incredible. This means so much to me and the whole team here at Alton Towers Resort who worked hard to not only bring the ride back but elevate the entire experience beyond all expectations. We're so proud of the response to date and winning this award tops off what's been a fantastic project."

Alton Towers played up a flair for the dramatic as the ride prepared for its makeover. As the ride was



announced to be closing, a new team of scientists, Phalanx, began investigations of the Nemesis creature and their presence only added to the storytelling. Today, guests in the queue see eerily themed new track with red veins, as well as new props and elements added to the queue area. Once inside the station, guests are wowed by the transformation of being "inside" the macabre monster.

Outside, the most dramatic component of the attraction's rebirth is a horrifying eye scanning the area. It is perhaps one of the finest

photo ops placed on a ride in the history of roller coasters. Scanning the walkways, this eye draws spectators into the mysterious and threatening realm of Forbidden Valley. Selfies are a must.

Those fortunate enough to experience a ride at night will find the environment even more deliciously menacing.

For 30 years, Nemesis has sustained its popularity. With its new transformation, *Amusement Today* awards Alton Towers and Nemesis Reborn with the **Publisher's Pick Renaissance Award**.



The queue, the track and the station have all been enhanced to immerse guests into the ominous environment. COURTESY ALTON TOWERS

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# Europa-Park's dedication to history, traditions earn Turnstile Award

For any amusement park, a fire is a horrible tragedy. In June of 2023, **Europa-Park** experienced such an incident. While fortunately no loss of life occurred, it did take out two long-loved attractions at the park. For the rest of that season, the **Alpenexpress** roller coaster and the log ride were closed off. It was heartbreaking to lose both rides. These were among the park's earliest attractions, including Europa-Park's first roller coaster. The lost rides had already crossed many generations through shared memories.

But Europa-Park didn't dwell on the frustration for too long. Instead, management became determined to bring the rides back for the next season.

Already under construction was the park's newest land, Croatia. A huge multi-element coaster, **Voltron Nevera**, was already reaching the end of construction. The



Created for 2024, aesthetic **Austrian Mountains** brought new opportunities for play (above). The log flume was brought back better than ever, engineered with modern safety standards (right). AT/TIM BALDWIN

2024 capital had already been invested.

Management at the park refused to wait. The loss of the two rides was too impactful to the guest experience, so plans were put into place. **Mack Rides** was challenged to meet a 2024 deadline. A soft opening took place in late April, and a grand reopening occurred by mid-May.

"Mr. **Roland Mack** and the whole Mack family

have a deep commitment to Europa-Park's guests and to their visits to the park. It was important for them to have the two damaged rides returned to the park as quickly as possible, and Mack Rides worked diligently to make it a reality," said **Christian von Elverfeldt**, CEO, Mack Rides. "Alpenexpress and Tirol Log Flume have returned better and brighter than ever. These



rides are very close to the resort hotels, so that made it even more important to bring them back to life."

And so, they did. But as the former diamond mine that caught fire would not meet today's fire codes in time for 2024 if rebuilt as it was, the park got creative. Mack Rides supplied the attractions, but the land of Austria, where the fire happened, saw an entirely new look. Mountains appeared within the two rides. Jutting skyward, they created dramatic new views. This new thematic angle allowed children and families to find new adventures. Within the rock were trails and slides. Tunnels, bridges and crawl spaces invited exploration. Not only did kids enjoy it, so did adults! This creative foresight broadened the scope of what the area could be as guests ventured throughout the intertwined additions. It made for even better interactions for

guests to enjoy what was new — and restored.

The park's own IP, the Yomi elf creatures, are seen throughout the adventure trail. To pay homage to what was lost, the gift shop within the mountain still offers a fanciful setting decorated with gems, making it a true Valley of the Diamonds.

The Austrian Mountains area is open early each morning for the resort guests, so the return of these attractions was a bold move, if not a bit of a strain on the budget. Still, the guests always come first at Europa-Park, and their experience each day is of utmost importance.

This endeavor was no small feat, particularly in a year with a huge expansion already in place. For returning rides from the past and making them better than ever, *Amusement Today* is proud to present the **Publisher's Pick Turnstile Award** to Europa-Park.



Within the mountain, a gift shop is an homage to the diamond mine that existed before the fire (above left). The **Alpenexpress** now zips through caverns and tunnels (above right). AT/TIM BALDWIN



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# WLSL founder Beth Root's life-saving efforts honored as Person of the Year

Tragically, drowning is one of the leading causes of accidental death for children under the age of 14, due in large part, to a lack of basic water safety and swimming skills and a lack of adult supervision while kids are in the water. According to a research study conducted by the **American Red Cross** in 2020, 56 percent of children ages 4 to 17 cannot perform the basic water safety skills they need to save their own life.

Those alarming statistics led **Beth Root** to make the decision to step up and do something.

Fifteen years ago, Root started looking for ideas in conjunction with the **World Waterpark Association** to find ways to drive media exposure to the importance of swimming lessons.

Root, owner of the communication company, **Buzzonic**, is the wife of **Rick Root**, president of the World Waterpark Association. They looked at a variety of ideas, and decided an event to attract media attention all over the globe was needed — something big, something record-breaking. The idea of the World's Largest Swimming Lesson (WLSL) started to take hold. She initially managed all elements of the program, bringing the concept to life with branding, marketing materials, a PR campaign, social media and a "how-to guide" for facilities.

Working with partners, such as The American Red Cross, **Ellis & Associates** and the **YMCA**, the first event was held in 2010 with 3,892 participants in six countries. More importantly, that first event was recognized by **Guinness World Records** as "the largest swimming lesson conducted at multiple venues." That brought the desired media attention, and every year the event has continued to grow.

Now in its 15th season, the World's Largest Swim Lesson hosted 39,000 kids and parents on six continents in 2024. And even though it



Beth Root

is a one-day event, getting children introduced to the water, helping them realize that water can be safe and fun and sparking an interest in learning how to swim, can go a long way to preventing accidental drownings.

"They won't come away knowing how to swim, but they will come away with the skills to save their life," Root said at the event this year.

"The thousands of hours that Beth has devoted to drowning prevention and the leadership she has provided to the World's Largest Swimming Lesson has made families safer in and around the water," said her husband, Rick. "I am so proud of the difference she is making by sparing parents the unimaginable loss of a child to drowning. Swimming lessons save lives, and she's committed to doing everything she can to make every child a swimmer."

She has volunteered with the World Waterpark Association for the last 21 years, helping to build



and support the organization's water safety initiatives, including National Water Safety Month and campaigns like "His Super Powers Don't Work in Water." Since its inception, the event has generated more than three billion "Swimming Lessons Save Lives" media impressions.

"What Beth and WWA leadership pulled off with the launch of the World's Largest Swimming Lesson in 2010 is one of those memorable and very impactful initiatives that will live on forever," said **RAC Carroll**, COO, Ellis and Associates. "You need to be brave to be first, exhibit true passion and never stop striving to improve. With the launch and growth of the World's Largest Swimming Lesson, Beth, her WWA colleagues, and countless aquatics facilities and suppliers around the globe have truly, as we like to say, 'Made A Difference' in aquatic safety."

For her part in leading the charge to initiate that first World's Largest Swimming Lesson in 2010, it is a tremendous honor for *Amusement Today* to recognize Beth Root as *Amusement Today's Person of The Year*.

—Jeffrey Seifert



Each year, participants practice life-saving skills that could change their lives. COURTESY WORLD WATERPARK ASSOCIATION



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## Guests Experience Beauty at Dollywood, enjoy Best Food at Knoebels

The magic of **Dollywood** has made it a finalist in numerous categories, but in 2024, it takes the Golden Ticket for **Most Beautiful**.

"Dollywood is blessed to be located — literally — in the middle of the Great Smoky Mountains. Our home in the Smokies allows our world-class attractions to shine against one of the most spectacular backdrops in the entire theme park industry," said **Eugene Naughton**, president, **Dollywood Parks & Resorts**. "There really is nothing like riding Wild Eagle or Drop Line while experiencing the magnificent view of the rolling foothills as they meet the towering mountains. It also provides us with the opportunity to bring that beauty down into the park as part of the theming and atmosphere our guests enjoy while they are here throughout the year. Each season in the Smokies offers a completely different experience and we feel the same about each time of year at Dollywood."

Coming in at No. 2 is **Busch Gardens Williamsburg**. This incredibly beautiful park has a reputation for its colorful landscaping. Busch Gardens Williamsburg has previously won the Golden Ticket a staggering 24 times for Most Beautiful or Best Landscaping.

The remainder of the finalists are all found in Europe.

**Europa-Park** (No. 3) spreads its landscaping throughout the park with lush flowerbeds complimenting the themed architecture.

**Efteling** (No. 4) in The Netherlands offers beautiful lagoons, colorful flower beds, fanciful architecture and lush forests.

Coming in at No. 5 is **Phantasialand**. The



Surrounded by the Smoky Mountains, Dollywood adds its own beauty that changes with the seasons. AT/JEFFREY SEIFERT



park's flowerbeds and immersive architecture are nothing short of eye-popping.

Although a handful of winners have claimed the Golden Ticket for **Best Food**, **Knoebels Amusement Resort** has had its oven mitts on the prize for many years. Hardcore park travelers continue to give Knoebels high marks for the delicious comfort food, restaurant specials, affordable pricing and diverse variety. But that doesn't mean the park sits back and rests on its laurels.

"We've recognized the ever-increasing effort our industry has put into food and beverage offerings," said **Brian Knoebel**. "Considering this award



Friendly employees and solid operations help make Dollywood a repeat winner for Best Guest Experience. COURTESY DOLLYWOOD

is extremely important to my family, we challenged our team to create new, exciting additions to the award-winning tastes of Knoebels. Rarely am I at a loss for words, but I found myself speechless when I heard they introduced 40 brand-new menu items.

The offerings were such a hit that we had to create a guide for our guests to locate all of these tasty treats as they eat their way around the park."

**Silver Dollar City** (No. 2) is a fan favorite with its delightful, gigantic skilllets and new Rivertown

Smokehouse. Many guests arrive early enough to enjoy the morning breakfast buffet at the front of the park.

**EPCOT** (No. 3), with all its many nations, finds favor with those who enjoy

► See GUESTS, page 62

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## BEST NEW SHOW MOST BEAUTIFUL PARK

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From sit-down meals (above) to impulsive snacks (right), Knoebels always has guests' stomachs satisfied. COURTESY KNOEBELS



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**►GUESTS**  
Continued from page 60

international cuisine.

Country fixin's can always be found at Dollywood (No. 4). It's like eating with family. **Dolly Parton** herself has often said, "If you leave hungry, it's not our fault." And who doesn't need a fix of cinnamon bread?

Europa-Park (No. 5), with its lineup of countries, closes out the list. The park boasts numerous places to eat indoors or in covered areas, many of which are highly themed.

The category of **Best Guest Experience** focuses on friendly employees, solid operations and cleanliness. Many names on this list can be found elsewhere on this page and throughout the issue. It's an example of good decisions.

Dollywood takes the Golden Ticket in this category once again. People leave the park satisfied, already looking forward to a return visit.

At No. 2 is Europa-Park, which many park experts hold in high regard as being among the best ride operations on the planet.

**Holiday World** (No. 3) has instilled friendliness and cleanliness in the park expectations and its



employees for decades.

Knoebels Amusement Resort (No. 4) finds the traditional ways of doing things far superior to the overwrought policies of some modern approaches. Making people happy is a big priority.

**Kings Island** (No. 5) hops on the chart again in this category for the third time. The Ohio theme park has a loyal following thanks to all the cornerstones the Best Guest Experience emphasizes.



Busch Gardens Williamsburg — No. 2 finalist for Most Beautiful Park has a reputation for its colorful landscaping. COURTESY BUSCH GARDENS

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# Disney's irresistible Best Dark Ride, Dollywood wins Best Kids' Area

Aside from roller coasters, one of the favorite types of rides among fans are dark rides. Many have supreme loyalty. **Walt Disney** himself took them to a new level when he opened **Disneyland** in 1955, and that type of attraction has been evolving ever since.

Taking the Golden Ticket for **Best Dark Ride** is **Star Wars: Rise of the Resistance** at **Disney's Hollywood Studios** in Florida. The multifaceted attraction has guests traveling through many experiences, including facing an army of stormtroopers. Trackless ride vehicles navigate through immersive sets, jaw-dropping animatronics and all sorts of galactic imagery.

"It's an honor to help our guests live their own *Star Wars* adventure every day at Disney's Hollywood Studios!" said **Jackie Swisher**, vice president. "Whether they choose to be members of the Resistance or the First Order, the world-class technology and Disney storytelling they experience on *Star Wars: Rise of the Resistance* is unlike anything else in the galaxy."

This is the third year that *Rise of the Resistance* has claimed the gold.

At No. 2 is a previous Golden Ticket winner, **Pirates of the Caribbean: Battle for the Sunken Treasure**. Located at **Shanghai Disneyland**, the



Larger-than-life, immersive sets that place riders into the imaginative worlds of a galaxy far, far away are just part of the wow factor of *Star Wars: Rise of the Resistance*, winner of Best Dark Ride. AT/JOHN W.C. ROBINSON

eight-minute ride is based on the IP of the popular film franchise. It was the "must-do" attraction when the park opened in 2016. It had a completely different storyline than any *Pirates of the Caribbean* attractions that had come before.

The **Disneyland** cousin of *Star Wars: Rise of the Resistance* (No. 3) enjoys similar popularity in California as its counterpart in Florida.

Also in California is **Guardians of the Galaxy: Mission BREAKOUT** (No. 4) at **Disney California**

**Adventure**. Having opened in 2017, the newly themed attraction replaced the former **Twilight Zone Tower of Terror**. Disney Imagineers worked with **Otis Elevator Co.** to make the drop ride.

**Jurassic World Adventure** (No. 5) at **Universal Studios Beijing** places riders in an adventurous chase from — you guessed it — dinosaurs.

Of note, only two of these finalists appeared on the list on the 2023 chart, so it is clear that Golden Ticket panelists are finding what is

to be seen out there.

In recent years, parks have been expanding their children's areas. From flat rides to coasters, as well as meet-and-greet spaces, lands devoted to the younger set are considered a wise investment.

Taking the Golden Ticket for **Best Kids' Area** for the fifth time is **Dollywood's Wildwood Grove**. In 2023, the land was expanded with **Big Bear Mountain** from **Vekoma**, which is the longest ride at Dollywood. Multiple children's and family rides, as well as splash pads, indoor play and meet-and-greet areas, make Wildwood Grove delightful. The land enjoys a natural setting with greenery and water. At its center is the Wildwood Tree, which at night comes to life with lighted butterflies.

Making a comeback on the chart is **Efteling** (No. 2). Visitors have enjoyed its *Fairy Tale Forest* for decades, and the numerous stories brought to life can entertain kiddos for a very long time.

**Kings Island**, a long-time Golden Ticket winner in this category, stays solidly entrenched on the list at No. 3. *Planet Snoopy* saw an expansion this year with *Camp Snoopy*, which brought a new family coaster from **Vekoma**, a new eatery and lots of shaded space with play equipment and a meet-and-greet *Peanuts* stage.

New on the chart is **Universal Studios Florida** (No. 4). A redesigned *DreamWorks Land* provided a fresh makeover to the kids' area. The roller coaster was rethemed to the *Trolls* film franchise. Also new were attractions themed to the *Shrek* and *Kung Fu Panda* films.

A long-time finalist, **Universal Islands of Adventure**, closes out the top five. The park's hysterical *Suess Landing* invites visitors to play with *The Cat in the Hat* and take a spin on *One Fish Two Fish*. And who hasn't seen a family wearing shirts sporting *Thing 1 and Thing 2* (and 3 and 4...)?



Dollywood's Wildwood Grove has a lot to do for kids, as well as their families. It is a repeat winner for Best Kids' Area. AT/TIM BALDWIN



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V.I.P.	PRESENTED BY DOLLYWOOD	AmusementTODAY	WILDWOOD GROVE BEST KIDS' AREA	2024
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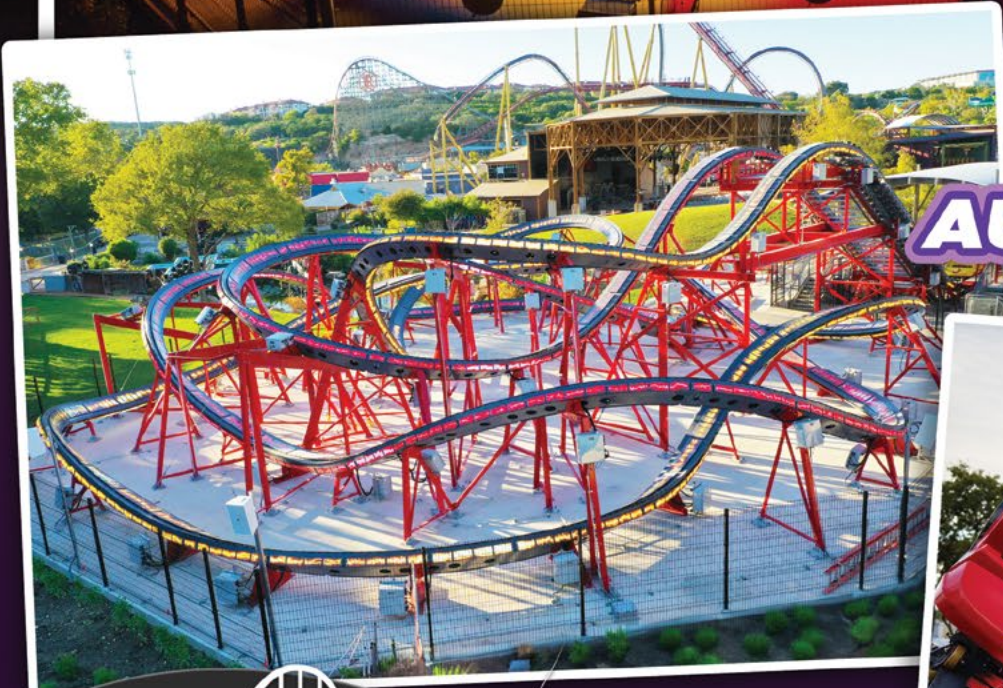
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# Wildebeest, Chiapas take Golden Ticket back in water categories

In 2023, Best Water Park Ride was a huge upset — but within the same park. **Splashin' Safari** had won **Best Water Park Ride** with **Wildebeest** for 11 consecutive years until last year. Its adjacent sibling within the park, the six-passenger **Mammoth**, snagged it from its older brother. This year, **Wildebeest** has its revenge as it takes the No. 1 spot for a 12th time.

"The battle between **Wildebeest** and **Mammoth** is on!" laughed **Leah Koch**, communications. "We're immensely proud of our world-class trio of water coasters, but **Wildebeest**, my dad's last project, will always have a special place in our hearts."

That said, **Mammoth** is at its heels in the No. 2 spot. Both are manufactured by **ProSlide**.

**Icon Tower**, the new multi-slide attraction at **Meryal Water Park** in Doha, Qatar takes the No. 3 spot. The 262-foot structure features the world's tallest waterslides, one with a drop capsule and

one a traditional body flume. The mind-boggling attraction is from **WhiteWater West**.

At No. 4 is **Krakatau Aqua Coaster** at **Volcano Bay**. Housed inside the park's iconic structure, the hydromagnetic water coaster seats four passengers in rafts that zip through the mists and waterfalls of the volcano with several uphill sections.

**Splashin' Safari** has the bragging rights to three of the attractions on this list, an impressive feat. **Cheetah Chase** (No. 5) is the park's third water coaster. Also from **ProSlide**, it opened in 2020 featuring several firsts, such as the first head-to-head dueling zone and the first at-grade launch.

Getting wet inside the theme parks is fun too. Returning to take the gold for **Best Water Ride** is **Chiapas** at **Phantasialand**. This water attraction opened in 2014 with claims of the world's steepest drop on a log

► See **WATER**, page 70



**Wildebeest** (above) jumps back into first place in **Best Water Park Ride** after being nudged out by a bigger brother in 2023. **Chiapas** at **Phantasialand** (right) takes the **Golden Ticket** for **Best Water Ride** for a second time. COURTESY HOLIDAY WORLD; AT/JEFFREY SEIFERT



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## ► WATER

Continued from page 68

flume. This Intamin-supplied attraction has riders plummeting from a height of 49 feet and over a speed bump before the final splashdown. A long-time finalist in this category, Chiapas also took the Golden Ticket in 2022.

“Chiapas is more than just a water ride — it is a feeling,” said **Christina Herrmann**, Phantasialand communications. “It’s an iconic experience that offers an unparalleled level of immersion for all senses. From the lush vegetation to the Mayan ruins, every detail is designed to transport guests to sunny Mexico.”

“We are absolutely excited to see that Chiapas has been voted Best Water Ride,” said **Sascha Czibulka**, executive vice president, Intamin. “Like with every attraction Phantasialand creates, they had clear ideas about the experience and features of their one-of-a-kind water attraction. Intamin introduced at that time boats with inline seating and individual restraints seating up to six passengers, the steepest drop on a water ride as well as high-speed lifts and switches to change the direction of the boats in a few seconds, resulting in an exceptionally high hourly capacity (1,600 people per hour).”

Coming in at No. 2 is a long-time winner in this category, **Valhalla** at **Pleasure Beach Resort** (Blackpool). The heavily themed indoor flume (also from Intamin) saw major updates when it was reintroduced in 2023.

**Timber Mountain Log Ride** (No. 3) at **Knott’s Berry Farm** is the measuring stick for all log flumes. Classic yet updated and high on capacity, this heavily themed flume is one of the “must-do” rides at Knott’s. It was manufactured by **Arrow** and opened in the summer of 1969.

**Jurassic World: The Ride** (No. 5) at **Universal Studios Hollywood** completes the list. This ride combines the fun of a dark ride with a shoot-the-chute experience (along with dinosaurs). Originally built in 1996, it went through a major refurbishment (and name update) in 2019.

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**BEST INNOVATION**

# Holiday World takes Best Innovation with audience participation

**Best Innovation** is one of the categories voted on strictly by industry leaders and journalists. Of numerous nominations, **Holiday World** was selected to receive the Golden Ticket in recognition of its audience participation in creating a segment in the park's nighttime show, "Holidays in the Sky."

"We embedded the link on our 'Today in the Park' page and added signage with QR codes around the park to get votes, and the winner was determined each day at 5 p.m.," explained **Leah Koch**, communications. "Essentially, **Firefly Drones** had four shows ready and would load the 'winning' show each night. Last year, it would not have been possible to load a different show at a moment's notice — it takes a while to load the flight path to each individual drone."

Audiences determined one of the scenes near the end of the show. Guests each day determined which mas-

cot would star in that particular scene: Holidog would be featured to the song "Hound Dog," Kitty Claws sparkled to "Girls Just Want to Have Fun," George the Eagle brought a techno version of "Yankee Doodle," and Safari Sam had people jamming to "Crocodile Rock."

The park used the vote, powered by **Avius**, each night.

According to the park, the advancement is with the drone. Previously, when Firefly laid out the drones in their grid for takeoff, drone #1 had to go in spot #1, #35 in spot #35, etc. With the newer generation of drones, any drone can be placed in any spot, and it automatically loads the correct flight plan.

"When we first started 'Holidays in the Sky,' I described it like a marching band — the drones didn't know or care about anyone else's mark except its own," explained Koch. "It knew where to be and when. With the new drones, it's like a marching band where any



**Holiday World's closing summer show, 'Holidays In The Sky,' allowed guests to select one of the closing numbers each night using new technology not available before.**  
COURTESY HOLIDAY WORLD

member can trade places with another band member at any time. And the drones can learn their marks in a matter of minutes, rather than days."

She added, "The advancement of allowing audience members to vote

to decide on a portion of the show may not seem revolutionary — after all, it's a simple vote. However, each drone has to have its own flight plan downloaded, and until this year, it was too slow a process to be able to change those 500 indi-

vidual flight paths each day. It's amazing to see the way technology has come leaps and bounds since we first began 'Holidays in the Sky' in 2022, and we can't wait to see what Firefly Drones will come up with next."

**Skyline Attractions** came in second with its Aurora Track-Mounted Lighting System. Aurora creates a visual spectacle with its state-of-the-art, track-mounted LED display. This custom LED lighting package can be installed on the top, bottom, and sides of the roller coaster track, transforming it into a canvas of vibrant lights and imagery.

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▶ See INNOVATION, page 72

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## Best Innovation of 2024: Honorable Mentions

### Roblox Six Flags Game

**Six Flags** is helping to revolutionize virtual entertainment by launching a metaverse experience on **Roblox**, the global platform for communication, gaming and connection. The Six Flags metaverse features a variety of virtual roller coasters, Fright Fest mazes and engaging games. Users can collect "Coastercoin" in the virtual experience, which can be redeemed exclusively for rewards and activities at physical Six Flags parks. This unique metaverse experience seamlessly blends the virtual and physical worlds, marking a first in the theme park industry.

### Harmony Helper Concierge Services

The **Harmony Helper** app is a portable digital rehearsal room that allows vocal performers to practice anytime, anywhere. Harmony Helper's new Concierge Service provides packages that preload a facility's entire show into a customized practice format for their singers, breaking each song into the correct number of named parts, scrolling on-screen lyrics, adjusting octaves and optimizing audio for practice.

## ► INNOVATION Continued from page 71

FECs, theme parks and other facilities to strategically place smart QR codes around their facility which allows visitors and employees to alert management about any issues with games, restrooms, trash cans, unsafe environments, unfriendly employees, etc.

RTF empowers guests to send employees and management actionable feedback in real time using their patent-pending smart codes. With RTF's smart code stickers placed on all machines, guests can scan and alert techs about issues they are experiencing. Game techs are immediately alerted on their smart phone or tablet. AI helps quickly respond to the guest while the tech shows up at the game

like a modern-day superhero ready to save the day.

RTF's smart QR codes can also be placed in other high-traffic areas such as restrooms, birthday/corporate rooms, dining areas, etc. to quickly alert staff when guests need assistance or an area needs attention.

A new device, **DMT RideGuard** (No. 4), offers additional safety as well as high efficiency through optimized maintenance processes.

DMT RideGuard complements the standards for monitoring amusement park rides. The system enables seamless monitoring of vibrations, shocks and movements for the very first time. This provides additional safety and makes maintenance more efficient.

Using state-of-the-art IoT sensor technology and

AI algorithms, the system continuously records all relevant data and streams it to a cloud-based application in real-time. As a result, park operators receive a comprehensive status overview of their attractions and are provided with support in identifying and rectifying potential risks at an early stage.

**WhiteWater West/Vantage Technology** supplies **Smart Pay** (No. 5), which revolutionizes cashless payments with the convenience of sharing and limiting transactions. Smart Pay stands out with its features of sharing and setting limits, combined with the enhanced security of tokenization. These capabilities redefine convenience and security in financial transactions, aligning perfectly with modern guest demands.

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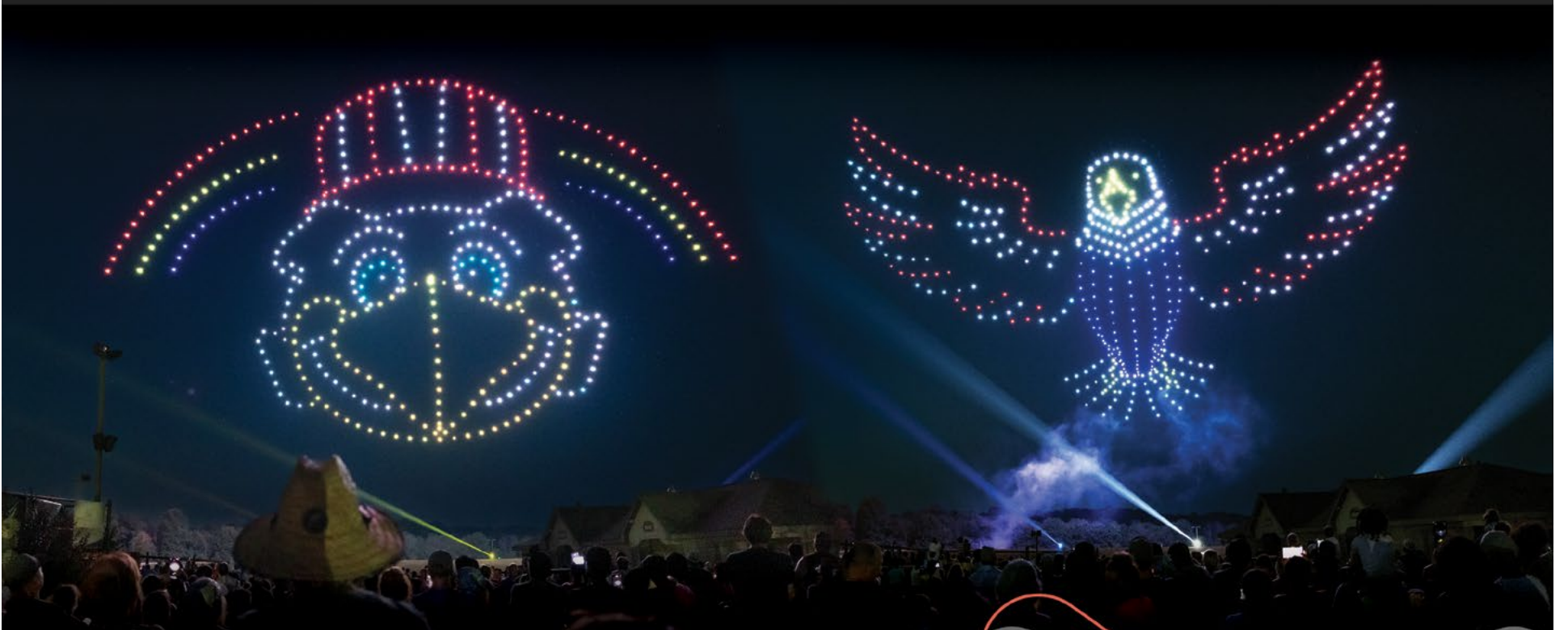
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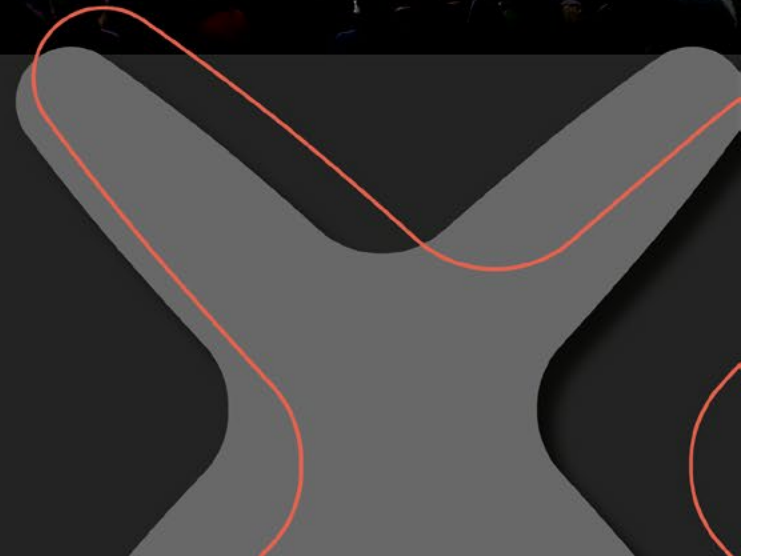
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# AIMS announces Safety Award recipients: Patty Beazley, Jim Seay

AIMS International recognizes two amusement industry veterans as part of *Amusement Today's* Golden Ticket Awards. **Patty Beazley** of **International Ride Training** has been awarded the 2024 AIMS International Safety Award and **Premier Rides' Jim Seay** has been given the prestigious AIMS International Lifetime Contribution Award.

The AIMS International Safety Award is presented annually to the individual or organization that demonstrates leadership, innovation and foresight in improving safety in the amusement industry.

Beazley, a native of Nashville, Tennessee, is a managing member of International Ride Training, LLC and **When Pigs Fly: Creative Operational Concepts, LLC**. She has over 40 years of operational experience in the areas of amusement rides and water park safety, educational facilitation, leadership training and human resource functions.

Beazley began her career at **Opryland USA Theme Park** in Nashville, Tennessee, as a



Patty Beazley

front-line employee. When Opryland closed in 1997, Beazley was the director of operations. She then took on the role of general manager at **Nashville Shores Water Park**. She has serviced the amusement industry since 2002 as a consultant. During this time, she has serviced more than 90 clients worldwide.

Beazley graduated from the **University of Tennessee** with a Master of Science in Counseling Psychology. A former full-time secondary and post-secondary instructor and guidance counselor, she continues to teach as an adjunct faculty member for a local college. Patty served



Jim Seay

as the education chairperson and seminar director of Amusement Industry Manufacturer and Suppliers (AIMS) from 2007 to 2014.

She is a member of **ASTM International, International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions (IAAPA)** and the **World Waterpark Association (WWA)**. Beazley was awarded the Harold Chance Award for Best Presentation at the AIMS Safety Seminar in 2004; Antonio Zamperla Safety Award in 2005 and Best Presentation at the WWA Seminar in 2005. She has had published works in various industry publications. In

September of 2018, Beazley was the featured subject of *Amusement Today's* "Women of Influence" column

"After 40 years in the business, Patty continues to be instrumental in pushing the industry to greater levels of safe operation through education, training and auditing of amusement facilities and attractions around the world," said **Tony Claassen**, AIMS International board secretary. "Patty's past contributions and continued passion for safety and greater education in the amusement industry makes her an ideal candidate for the 2024 AIMS International Safety Award."

Presented for only the third time in its 30-year history, the AIMS International Lifetime Contribution Award recognizes outstanding dedication and service to AIMS International.

Seay is president and owner of Premier Rides, building highly innovative thrill rides that incorporate cutting-edge tech like magnetic launch systems. Premier Rides' attractions have been loved globally by hundreds of millions of guests and its work is recognized by **Guinness World Records**.

A **Cornell University** graduate, he earned a Bachelor of Science degree in mechanical / aerospace engineering and did graduate studies at **Cal State University Long Beach**. He was an aerospace engineer at **Hughes Aircraft Company** working on stealth technologies, then was an engineering and maintenance executive at **Six Flags** before joining Premier Rides in 1995 as executive vice president of engineering and becoming president in 1996.

Seay spends much of his time volunteering to ensure the industry is as safe as possible. He is past chair of the IAAPA Global Safety Committee and past chair of ASTM Global Ride Safety Committee F24 developing and refining global ride safety standards. He has also testified before the **United States Congress** on industry safety.

Seay has been honored with numerous awards including the IAAPA Lifetime Service Award. For his contributions

to the field of global voluntary standards, he received the ASTM International William T. Cavanaugh Memorial Award and in 2019 received the ASTM Award of Merit along with the honorary title of Fellow.

Seay serves as chairman of the IAAPA Foundation Board, is a member of the AIMS International Board, the **Themed Entertainment Association** and several regional associations. He has served on many philanthropic boards in Baltimore, Maryland, including the **National Aquarium**, The **Pride of Baltimore**, singer/actor **Mario's The Mario Do Right Foundation**, the **Signal 13 Foundation**, and the **Living Classrooms Foundation**. Seay is also a supporter of **Give Kids the World Foundation** and is a founding sponsor of the annual IAAPA Charity Motorcycle Run benefiting Give Kids the World.

"Jim has been a passionate supporter of AIMS and industry safety for many years both individually and through his company, Premier Rides. He has contributed the work of the AIMS board and continues to provide a balanced and challenging view," said **David Bromilow** AIMS International past president. "Jim always makes himself available when it comes to amusement safety and contributes to serve industry safety committees."

—Amy Lowenstein

## PREVIOUS WINNERS

### AIMS International Safety Award

Jeff Abendshien (2023)  
ASTM F24 Committee (2023)  
C.W. Craven (2022)  
Hugo Loyola (2021)  
John Riggleman (2020)  
Ronald E. Burbach (2019)  
Patrick Hoffman (2018)  
Har Kupers (2017)  
Harold Hudson (2016)

### AIMS International Lifetime Contribution Award

Gary Slade (2019)  
Mark Moore (2018)  
Pat Hoffman (2006)

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# CONGRATULATIONS

## AIMS INTERNATIONAL SAFETY AWARD RECIPIENTS

Patty Beazley Awarded 2024 Safety Award;  
Jim Seay Awarded Lifetime Contribution Award



# Steel Coasters: Fury 325 remains top, European coasters climb

When **Fury 325** opened in 2015, it won the Golden Ticket for Best New Ride (before *Amusement Today* divided the award into Best New Roller Coaster and Best New Family Attraction) and debuted on the charts at No. 4. Since then, it has eight consecutive wins for **Best Steel Coaster**, counting its continued victory in 2024. Standing at 325 feet tall and built by **Bolliger & Mabillard**, it can be seen for miles as visitors approach the park.

"Fury 325 offers an experience that is unmatched by other steel coasters by combining height, speed and intensity while delivering a seamless and smooth flow that keeps riders engaged from start to finish," said **Manny Gonzales**, vice president and general manager, Carowinds. "Every element, from the first drop to the final turn, is meticulously designed to maximize exhilaration, making it an unforgettable experience for riders long after they've left the park. It's an incredible honor for Fury 325 to receive its eighth consecutive win for the Best Steel Coaster, marking the longest continuous run in the category. This recognition is a testament to our purpose, to make people happy."

But the rest of the Steel list, with the majority of 2023's top ten moving around on the chart, makes for surprising observations. Inching ever closer to the top spot is **Jurassic World VelociCoaster** at **Universal Islands of Adventure**. It climbed to its highest ranking ever at No. 2. The themed launch coaster from Intamin opened in 2021 and is already a fast climber.

Also rising a notch is **Steel Vengeance** at **Cedar Point** to No. 3. Built by **Rocky Mountain Construction** (RMC), the coaster won Best New Ride when it opened in 2018 and has always placed in



**Fury 325** makes it eight consecutive years as Best Steel Coaster. COURTESY CAROWINDS

the top five.

Also at Cedar Point is **Millennium Force** (No. 4), a previous holder of the Golden Ticket 11 times. It was built by Intamin and opened in 2000.

Keeping its spot at No. 5 is **Iron Gwazi** at **Busch Gardens Tampa Bay**, an RMC thriller that opened in 2022 and immediately developed a huge following. It won Best New Roller Coaster and leaped into the top five in its opening year.

The other half of the top ten is even bigger news. **Taron** at **Phantasialand** rises to the No. 6 position, making it the new highest-rated roller coaster in Europe or any country outside North America. The manufacturer was Intamin.

Two new top-ten entries have made incredible gains, starting with **The Ride to Happiness** (No. 7) at **Plopsaland De Panne**. This **Mack Rides** coaster appeared last year in the No. 31 position. Sharing that astounding leap is **Zadra** at Energylandia (RMC's third entry into the top ten) also makes a dramatic leap in the charts, appearing last year at No. 32 and climbing up to No. 8 in 2024.

**Expedition GeForce**



**Jurassic World VelociCoaster (No. 2).** COURTESY UNIVERSAL ORLANDO RESORT

at **Holiday Park**, which boasted Europe's highest-rated coaster status since 2002, still lands in the top ten at No. 9. Cedar Point's **Maverick** comes in at No. 10, giving "America's Roller Coast" three roller coasters in the top ten, the only park ever to do so. Both these coasters are from Intamin, giving that supplier five of the top ten steel coasters.

Only one new-for-2024 roller coaster cracked AT's list of Top 50. **Voltron Nevara** (No. 11) at **Europa Park**, winner of Best New Roller Coaster, just missed out

▶ See STEEL, page 78



**Steel Vengeance (No. 3).**  
AT/TIM BALDWIN

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► **STEEL**

Continued from page 76

on cracking the top ten by mere points.

Vekoma's **F.L.Y.** at Phantasialand makes another huge jump from No. 46 to No. 16. Energylandia's **Hyperion** makes its first appearance at No. 24.

[See a complete list of 50 coasters at GoldenTicketAwards.com]

The Steel Coasters chart celebrates the young. Only two roller coasters from the 20th century make the list of 50: **Apollo's Chariot** (No. 25) at **Busch Gardens Williamsburg** opened in 1999. The oldest of all is Cedar Point's **Magnum XL-200** (No. 36) which was built in 1989 by **Arrow**.

Speaking to the scope of our enthusiast panel's expertise, 17 coasters of the 50 are from outside the United States, representing nine international countries.

Of the 50, B&M claim 15, Intamin has 12 and Rocky Mountain



**Millenium Force (No. 4).** AT/TIM BADLWIN

Construction has 10. As Mack Rides and Vekoma secure larger projects, their status as power players is becoming more notable; each has five on the charts.

As new restraints are now allowing for more upper-body freedom and greater comfort, a gradual reversal has taken place.

Ten years ago, not a single coaster in the top ten went upside down. In the past, the upper half of the chart (Nos. 1 through 25) was dominated by "hyper coasters" over 200 feet. While 12 such coasters are in the top 25, five of the top ten go upside down, three of which fit the 200-foot-plus design-



**Iron Gwazi (No. 5).** COURTESY BUSCH GARDENS

nation. Inversions are seeing a comeback; 17 of the 25 coasters between No. 26 and 50 go upside down.

Voltron Nevera made the highest debut, but five others in addition to Hyperion appear for the first time: **Kondaa** (No. 28) at **Walibi Belgium**; **Untamed** (No. 42) at **Walibi Holland**;

**Lech Coaster** (No. 45) at **Legandia**; **Railblazer** (No. 47) at **California's Great America**, the first single-rail coaster to ever chart; and **Toutatis** (No. 48) at **Parc Astérix**.

After being closed last season, **Nemesis Reborn** at **Alton Towers** returns to the chart at No. 37.

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# THE LIST

## 2024 TOP 25 STEEL ROLLER COASTERS



RANK	NAME	PARK	LOCATION	SUPPLIER	YEAR
1	Fury 325	Carowinds	Charlotte, N.C.	B&M	2015
2	Jurassic World VelociCoaster	Universal Islands of Adventure	Orlando, Fla.	Intamin	2021
3	Steel Vengeance	Cedar Point	Sandusky, Ohio	Rocky Mountain Const.	2018
4	Millennium Force	Cedar Point	Sandusky, Ohio	Intamin	2000
5	Iron Gwazi	Busch Gardens Tampa Bay	Tampa, Fla.	Rocky Mountain Const.	2022
6	Taron	Phantasialand	Brühl, Germany	Intamin	2016
7	The Ride to Happiness	Plopsaland De Panne	Adinkerke-De Panne, Belgium	Mack	2021
8	Zadra	Energylandia	Zator, Poland	Rocky Mountain Const.	2019
9	Expedition GeForce	Holiday Park	Hassloch, Germany	Intamin	2001
10	Maverick	Cedar Point	Sandusky, Ohio	Intamin	2007
11	Voltron Nevera	Europa-Park	Rust, Germany	Mack	2024
12	Superman The Ride	Six Flags New England	Agawam, Mass.	Intamin	2000
13	Leviathan	Canada's Wonderland	Vaughan, Ontario, Canada	B&M	2012
14	Project 305	Kings Dominion	Doswell, Va.	Intamin	2010
15	Phantom's Revenge	Kennywood	West Mifflin, Pa.	Morgan/Arrow	2001
16	F.L.Y.	Phantasialand	Brühl, Germany	Vekoma	2020
17	ArieForce One	Fun Spot America Atlanta	Fayetteville, Ga.	Rocky Mountain Const.	2023
18	Guardians of the Galaxy: Cosmic Rewind	EPCOT	Lake Buena Vista, Fla.	Vekoma	2022
19	Mako	SeaWorld Orlando	Orlando, Fla.	B&M	2016
20 - tie	Diamondback	Kings Island	Mason, Ohio	B&M	2009
20 - tie	Iron Rattler	Six Flags Fiesta Texas	San Antonio, Texas	Rocky Mountain Const.	2013
22 - tie	Hagrid's Magical Creatures Motorbike Adventure	Universal Islands of Adventure	Orlando, Fla.	Intamin	2019
22 - tie	Lightning Rod	Dollywood	Pigeon Forge, Tenn.	Rocky Mountain Const.	2016
24	Hyperion	Energylandia	Zator, Poland	Intamin	2018
25	Apollo's Chariot	Busch Gardens Williamsburg	Williamsburg, Va.	B&M	1999

**View the Top 50 steel roller coasters at [www.GoldenTicketAwards.com](http://www.GoldenTicketAwards.com)**

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# Wooden Coasters: Knoebels' Phoenix sets record, top ten jumbles

No wooden roller coaster has held the Golden Ticket title more than five times ... until now.

**Phoenix** at **Knoebels Amusement Resort** made its sixth consecutive win for **Best Wooden Coaster**.

"We are honored to have Phoenix receive this distinction for a sixth consecutive year. It is no small feat to maintain wooden roller coasters the way our team does," said **Dick Knoebel**, owner. "This past off-season alone, our team performed 800 feet of Phoenix track work, which means 7,800 board feet of track was replaced. Seeing guests' excitement as they exit the ride — some of whom will hop right back in line to ride again — is what keeps us motivated to continue this meticulous care."

Opened in 1985, Phoenix is considered one of the finest acts of preservation among coaster enthusiasts. Rescuing a beloved **Herbert Schneck** design from **Philadelphia Toboggan Company** in San Antonio, Texas, the relocation was done with the help of **Charles Dinn** and has long been considered to be a woodie among the elite thanks to the constant love from the Knoebels team.

**The Voyage** at **Holiday World** held the Golden Ticket for five consecutive years but still claims legions of fans, keeping it at No. 2. Designed by The Gravity Group, the raucous out-and-back has enormous drops and wild maneuvers, redefining the term *one-of-a-kind*.

**Kings Island** has given much love to **The Beast** over the past years, and in 2024, the 1979 behemoth rose to its highest ranking since 1998, No. 3. The Beast set records when it opened as the longest roller coaster in the world. Making use of its forested terrain, the wooden monster still boasts being



Phoenix becomes the longest-running winner of Best Wooden Coaster. AT/TIM BALDWIN



The Voyage (No. 2). AT/TIM BALDWIN

the longest wooden roller coaster in the world after 45 years — a stunning amount of time to hold on to such a record.

Keeping its ranking of No. 4, **Thunderhead** at **Dollywood**, also a recipient of multi-year TLC, is one of three designs by **Great Coasters International, Inc.** (GCII) in the top ten.

It's uncommon for a theme park to even have two wooden coasters, but to have two in the top

five is quite a brag. Kings Island's **Mystic Timbers**, also by GCII, rises to its highest ranking to date, No. 5.

"The thrill that riding a wooden roller coaster provides is unlike any other amusement park experience," said **Mike Koontz**, vice president and general manager. "And, with 18,806 feet of wooden roller coaster track, including

► See **WOOD**, page 84



The Beast (No. 3). COURTESY JON ROOST



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►WOOD

Continued from page 82

The Beast, the world's longest wooden roller coaster; and Mystic Timbers, 2017's Golden Ticket Award winner for Best New Ride, we are proud to provide our guests with one of the best wooden roller coaster riding experiences in the world."

"In 2022, we extended the length of The Beast's first drop by two feet. To me, that additional two feet speaks volumes about the park's commitment to wooden roller coasters, added **Chad Showalter**, Kings Island communications. "Not only do we have iconic wood coasters (new and old), but Kings Island is passionately committed to taking good care of them and doing everything we can to make sure our guests have a great ride experience. To put that in perspective, since 2020 Kings Island has retracked nearly 6,000 feet



Thunderhead (No. 4). AT/TIM BALDWIN



Mystic Timbers (No. 5). COURTESY KINGS ISLAND

of wood track on The Racer and The Beast. It's work like this that demonstrates the park is dedicated to the next generation of thrill seekers, especially when it comes to wooden roller coasters. It's an honor that your readers and GTA voters recognize that."

**Six Flags Great Adventure** has the No. 6 spot with **El Toro**, a wooden coaster from **Intamin**. Its wickedly steep drops and extreme speed deliver an abundance of airtime.

**Boulder Dash** at **Lake Compounce**, also a five-time winner of the

gold, stays in the top ten at No. 7. It was one of "Class of 2000" woodies from **Custom Coasters International**.

**GhostRider** at **Knott's Berry Farm** (No. 8) has the distinction of being a Custom Coaster design but a total refurbishment from

GCI. Since then, it has risen to the upper heights of the chart.

Entering the top ten is **Wodan Timbur Coaster** (No. 9) at **Europa-Park**. It is the highest ranking of this sensational 62 mph crowd-

► See WOOD, page 86



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Kings Island



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Joris en de Draak made the largest leap in 2024. Not appearing on the charts last year, the GCII woodie found a new legion of fans and rose to No. 15. AT/JEFFREY SEIFERT

►WOOD

Continued from page 84

pleaser from GCII.

Completing the top ten is **Ravine Flyer II** at **Waldameer**. Built by The Gravity Group, this woodie provides breathtaking views of Lake Erie before it plummets into a tangle of wooden rails and wild screams.

Making the largest climb of any coaster is **Joris en de Draak**, a racing coaster from GCII at **Efteling**. Its placement is a massive leap

onto the charts, all the way up to No. 15. It is a creation from GCII.

Twelve of the top 50 [see all 50 rankings at [www.GoldenTicketAwards.com](http://www.GoldenTicketAwards.com)] are from outside of the United States.

In sharp contrast to steel coasters, 18 entries are from the 20th century, the oldest dating back to 1914: **Rutschebanan** (No. 29) at **Tivoli Gardens**. Other coasters up there in age are **Cyclone** (No. 12) **Luna Park**, 1927; **Jack Rabbit** (No.

17), **Kennywood**, 1920; and **Giant Dipper** (No. 32) at **Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk** that celebrates 100 years this season.

When the Golden Ticket Awards originated in 1998, wooden coasters did not go upside down. Now, a quarter century later, three on the charts do: **Outlaw Run** at **Silver Dollar City** (No. 11), **Wildfire** (No. 19) at **Kolmården**, and **Hades 360** (No. 39) at **Mount Olympus Water & Theme Park**. The first two are from **Rocky**



Wodan Timbur Coaster (No. 9) enters the top ten for the first time. AT/TIM BALDWIN

**Mountain Construction**; the latter is a creation of The Gravity Group.

Three parks boast a trio of wooden wonders in the list of 50: **Kennywood**, whose **Jack Rabbit** is joined by **Thunderbolt** (No.

21) and **Racer** (No. 37); **Knoebels**, whose **Phoenix** is joined by **Twister** (No. 28) and the only-one-of-its-kind **Flying Turns** (No. 31); and **Kings Island**, with **Racer** (No. 42) joining its top-five siblings.

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# THE LIST

## 2024 TOP 25 WOODEN ROLLER COASTERS



RANK	NAME	PARK	LOCATION	SUPPLIER	YEAR
1	Phoenix	Knoebels Amusement Resort	Elysburg, Pa.	Dinn-PTC/Schmeck	1985
2	The Voyage	Holiday World	Santa Claus, Ind.	The Gravity Group	2006
3	The Beast	Kings Island	Mason, Ohio	KECO	1979
4	Thunderhead	Dollywood	Pigeon Forge, Tenn.	Great Coasters Int.	2004
5	Mystic Timbers	Kings Island	Mason, Ohio	Great Coasters Int.	2017
6	El Toro	Six Flags Great Adventure	Jackson, N.J.	Intamin	2006
7	BoulderDash	Lake Compounce	Bristol, Conn.	Custom Coasters Int.	2000
8	GhostRider	Knott's Berry Farm	Buena Park, Calif.	Custom Coasters/GCII	1998
9	Wodan	Europa-Park	Rust, Germany	Great Coasters Int.	2012
10	Ravine Flyer II	Waldameer	Erie, Pa.	The Gravity Group	2008
11	Outlaw Run	Silver Dollar City	Branson, Mo.	Rocky Mountain Const.	2013
12	Cyclone	Luna Park	Brooklyn, N.Y.	Baker/Keenan	1927
13	Balder	Liseberg	Gothenburg, Sweden	Intamin	2003
14	Gold Striker	California's Great America	Santa Clara, Calif.	Great Coasters Int.	2013
15	Joris en de Draak	Efteling	Kaatsheuvel, Netherlands	Great Coasters Int.	2010
16	Shivering Timbers	Michigan's Adventure	Muskegon, Mich.	Custom Coasters Int.	1998
17	Jack Rabbit	Kennywood	West Mifflin, Pa.	Miller	1920
18	The Legend	Holiday World	Santa Claus, Ind.	Custom Coasters Int.	2000
19	Wildfire	Kolmården	Norrköping, Sweden	Rocky Mountain Const.	2016
20	Lightning Racer	Hersheypark	Hershey, Pa.	Great Coasters Int.	2000
21	Thunderbolt	Kennywood	West Mifflin, Pa.	Vettel/Miller	1968
22	Troy	Toverland	Sevenum, Netherlands	Great Coasters Int.	2007
23	Prowler	Worlds of Fun	Kansas City, Mo.	Great Coasters Int.	2009
24	Goliath	Six Flags Great America	Gurnee, Ill.	Rocky Mountain Const.	2014
25	Boardwalk Bullet	Kemah Boardwalk	Kemah, Texas	The Gravity Group/MVR	2007

*View the Top 50 wooden roller coasters at [www.GoldenTicketAwards.com](http://www.GoldenTicketAwards.com)*



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# 2024 GOLDEN TICKET AWARD WINNERS

## BEST PARK OF 2024

- 1) Europa-Park
- 2) Dollywood
- 3) Tokyo DisneySea
- 4) Knoebels Amusement Resort
- 5) Disneyland

- 1) Rust, Germany
- 2) Pigeon Forge, Tenn.
- 3) Urayasu, Japan
- 4) Elysburg, Pa.
- 5) Anaheim, Calif.

## BEST WATER PARK OF 2024

- 1) Schlitterbahn
- 2) Volcano Bay
- 3) Splashin' Safari
- 4) Rulantica
- 5) Dollywood's Splash Country

- 1) New Braunfels, Texas
- 2) Orlando, Fla.
- 3) Santa Claus, Ind.
- 4) Rust, Germany
- 5) Pigeon Forge, Tenn.

## BEST FAMILY PARK OF 2024

- 1) Dutch Wonderland
- 2) Santa's Village
- 3) Legoland Florida
- 4) Morgan's Wonderland
- 5) Idlewild & SoakZone

- 1) Lancaster, Pa.
- 2) Jefferson, N.H.
- 3) Winter Haven, Fla.
- 4) San Antonio, Texas
- 5) Ligonier, Penn

## BEST FAMILY COASTER OF 2024

- 1) Big Bear Mountain
- 2) Good Gravy!
- 3) Slinky Dog Dash
- 4) The Bobcat
- 5) Wooden Warrior

- 1) Dollywood
- 2) Holiday World
- 3) Disney's Hollywood Studios
- 4) Six Flags Great Escape
- 5) Quassy Amusement Park

## BREAKOUT FAMILY ENTERTAINMENT CENTER OF 2024

- 1) Adventure Park U.S.A.
- 2) Malibu Jacks Quad Cities
- 3) Craig's Cruisers (Grand Rapids)
- 4) The WWE Experience
- 5) In The Game

- 1) Monrovia, Md.
- 2) Bettendorf, Iowa
- 3) Wyoming, Mich.
- 4) Riyadh, Saudi Arabia
- 5) Liberty Township, Ohio

## MOST BEAUTIFUL PARK OF 2024

- 1) Dollywood
- 2) Busch Gardens Williamsburg
- 3) Europa-Park
- 4) Efteling
- 5) Phantasialand

- 1) Pigeon Forge, Tenn.
- 2) Williamsburg, Va.
- 3) Rust, Germany
- 4) Kaatsheuvel, The Netherlands
- 5) Brühl, Germany

## BEST WATER RIDE OF 2024

- 1) Chiapas
- 2) Valhalla
- 3) Timber Mountain Log Ride
- 4) Dudley Do-Right's Ripsaw Falls
- 5) Jurassic World — The Ride

- 1) Phantasialand
- 2) Pleasure Beach Resort (Blackpool)
- 3) Knott's Berry Farm
- 4) Universal Islands of Adventure
- 5) Universal Studios Hollywood

## BEST KIDS' AREA OF 2024

- 1) Dollywood
- 2) Efteling
- 3) Kings Island
- 4) Universal Studios Florida
- 5) Universal Islands of Adventure

- 1) Pigeon Forge, Tenn.
- 2) Kaatsheuvel, The Netherlands
- 3) Mason, Ohio
- 4) Orlando, Fla.
- 5) Orlando, Fla.

## BEST NEW SHOW OF 2024

- 1) "From The Heart"
- 2) "CineSational"
- 3) "Forever Hollywood"
- 4) "A Christmas Carol"
- 5) "Holidays In The Sky"

- 1) Dollywood
- 2) Universal Studios Hollywood
- 3) Six Flags Fiesta Texas
- 4) Six Flags Fiesta Texas
- 5) Holiday World

## LEADERSHIP AWARD

- 1) Morgan's Wonderland
- 2) Ellis & Associates
- 3) Adventureland

- 1) San Antonio, Texas
- 2) Maitland, Fla.
- 3) Farmingdale, N.Y.

## BEST NEW ROLLERCOASTER OF 2024

- 1) Voltron Nevera
- 2) The Bobcat
- 3) Hyperia
- 4) Good Gravy!
- 5) Primordial

- 1) Europa-Park
- 2) Six Flags Great Escape
- 3) Thorpe Park
- 4) Holiday World
- 5) Lagoon

## BEST NEW FAMILY ATTRACTION OF 2024

- 1) Fire In The Hole
- 2) Anna and Elsa's Frozen Journey
- 3) Zootopia: Hot Pursuit
- 4) Tiana's Bayou Adventure
- 5) SpongeBob's Crazy Carnival Ride

- 1) Silver Dollar City
- 2) Tokyo DisneySea
- 3) Shanghai Disneyland
- 4) Magic Kingdom
- 5) Circus Circus

## BEST NEW WATER PARK RIDE OF 2024

- 1) Rise of Icarus
- 2) Icon Tower
- 3) Kaleidoscope Kavern Lazy River
- 4) Ridge Runner
- 5) Eagle Hunt

- 1) Mount Olympus Water ... Park
- 2) Meryal Waterpark
- 3) Wilderness at the Smokies
- 4) Wilderness at the Smokies
- 5) Boulder Beach

## BEST NEW ATTRACTION INSTALLATION OF 2024

- 1) Fire In The Hole
- 2) Voltron Nevera
- 3) The Bobcat
- 4) Primordial
- 5) Good Gravy!

- 1) Silver Dollar City
- 2) Europa-Park
- 3) Six Flags Great Escape
- 4) Lagoon
- 5) Holiday World

## BEST GUEST EXPERIENCE OF 2024

- 1) Dollywood
- 2) Europa-Park
- 3) Holiday World & Splashin' Safari
- 4) Knoebels Amusement Resort
- 5) Kings Island

- 1) Pigeon Forge, Tenn.
- 2) Rust, Germany
- 3) Santa Claus, Ind.
- 4) Elysburg, Pa.
- 5) Mason, Ohio

## BEST DARK RIDE OF 2024

- 1) Star Wars: Rise Of The Resistance
- 2) Pirates of the Caribbean
- 3) Star Wars: Rise Of The Resistance
- 4) Guardians of the Galaxy: Mission Breakout
- 5) Jurassic World Adventure

- 1) Disney's Hollywood Studios
- 2) Shanghai Disneyland
- 3) Disneyland
- 4) Disney California Adventure Park
- 5) Universal Studios Beijing

## BEST WATER PARK RIDE OF 2024

- 1) Wildebeest
- 2) Mammoth
- 3) Icon Tower
- 4) Krakatau Aqua Coaster
- 5) Cheetah Chase

- 1) Splashin' Safari
- 2) Splashin' Safari
- 3) Meryal Waterpark
- 4) Volcano Bay
- 5) Splashin' Safari

## BEST FOOD OF 2024

- 1) Knoebels Amusement Resort
- 2) Silver Dollar City
- 3) EPCOT
- 4) Dollywood
- 5) Europa-Park

- 1) Elysburg, Pa.
- 2) Branson, Mo.
- 3) Lake Buena Vista, Fla.
- 4) Pigeon Forge, Tenn.
- 5) Rust, Germany

## BEST NEW THEME CONCEPT OF 2024

- 1) Good Gravy!
- 2) Voltron Nevera
- 3) Iron Menace
- 4) Tiana's Bayou Adventure
- 5) Primordial

- 1) Holiday World
- 2) Europa-Park
- 3) Dorney Park
- 4) Magic Kingdom
- 5) Lagoon





# Thank you for recognizing these parks among the **BEST OF THE BEST** in the **GOLDEN TICKET AWARDS!**

## BEST STEEL COASTER

- #1 **Fury 325® – Carowinds®**
- #3 **Steel Vengeance®**  
Cedar Point®
- #4 **Millennium Force®**  
Cedar Point®
- #10 **Maverick® – Cedar Point®**
- #12 **Superman: The Ride**  
Six Flags New England
- #13 **Leviathan®**  
Canada's Wonderland®
- #14 **Project 305**  
Kings Dominion®
- #20 **Diamondback®**  
Kings Island®
- #21 **Iron Rattler**  
Six Flags Fiesta Texas

## BEST WOOD COASTER

- #3 **The Beast® – Kings Island®**
- #5 **Mystic Timbers®**  
Kings Island®
- #6 **El Toro**  
Six Flags Great Adventure
- #8 **GhostRider**  
Knott's Berry Farm®
- #14 **Gold Striker®**  
California's Great America
- #16 **Shivering Timbers**  
Michigan's Adventure®
- #23 **Prowler® – Worlds of Fun®**
- #24 **Goliath**  
Six Flags Great America

## BEST NEW ATTRACTION INSTALLATION

- #3 **The Bobcat**  
Six Flags Great Escape

## BEST GUEST EXPERIENCE

- #5 **Kings Island®**

## BEST PARK

- #7 **Cedar Point®**

## BEST WATERPARK

- #1 **Schlitterbahn®**  
**New Braunfels**

## BEST NEW SHOW

- #3 **Forever Hollywood**  
Six Flags Fiesta Texas
- #4 **A Christmas Carol**  
Six Flags Fiesta Texas

## BEST KIDS AREA

- #3 **Kings Island®**

## BEST WATER RIDE IN AN AMUSEMENT PARK

- #3 **Timber Mountain Log Ride,**  
Knott's Berry Farm®

## BEST FAMILY COASTER

- #4 **The Bobcat**  
Six Flags Great Escape

## BEST NEW THEME CONCEPT

- #3 **Iron Menace – Dorney Park®**

## BEST NEW COASTER

- #2 **The Bobcat**  
Six Flags Great Escape

**V.I.P. Amusement TODAY GOLDEN TICKET AWARDS 2024 BEST OF THE BEST!**

**MEXICO**

- Six Flags México Mexico City, MX
- Six Flags Hurricane Harbor Oaxtepec Oaxtepec, MX

**United States:**

- Six Flages Discovery Kingdom Vallejo, CA
- Six Flages Hurricane Harbor Concord Concord, CA
- California's Great America & South Bay Shores Santa Clara, CA
- Six Flages Magic Mountain Hurricane Harbor Valencia, CA
- Knott's Berry Farm Knott's Soak City Buena Park, CA
- Six Flages Hurricane Harbor Phoenix Glendale, AZ
- Six Flages Over Texas Hurricane Harbor Arlington, TX
- Schlitterbahn Resort New Braunfels, TX
- Six Flages Hurricane Harbor Splashtown Spring, TX
- Schlitterbahn Waterpark Galveston, TX
- Six Flages Fiesta Texas & Hurricane Harbor San Antonio, TX
- Worlds of Fun Oceans of Fun Kansas City, MO
- Six Flages St. Louis & Hurricane Harbor Eureka, MO
- Six Flages Hurricane Harbor Rockford Cherry Valley, IL
- Six Flages Great America & Hurricane Harbor Gurnee, IL
- Michigan's Adventure & WildWater Adventure Muskegon, MI
- Valleyfair & Soak City Shakopee, MN
- Cedar Point Cedar Point Shores Sandusky, OH
- Kings Island & Soak City Mason, OH
- Six Flages White Water Marietta, GA
- Six Flages Over Georgia & Hurricane Harbor Austell, GA
- Carowinds & Carolina Harbor Charlotte, NC/SC
- Six Flages America & Hurricane Harbor Bowie, MD
- Six Flages Great Adventure Hurricane Harbor Wild Safari Adventure Jackson, NJ
- Six Flages New England & Hurricane Harbor Agawam, MA
- Six Flages Darien Lake & Hurricane Harbor Corfu, NY
- Six Flages Great Escape Resort & Hurricane Harbor Queensbury, NY
- Canada's Wonderland & Splash Works Vaughan, ON
- La Ronde Montréal, QC



# Golden Rule

P R O J E C T

Life is great when you treat others the way you want to be treated!

Patient \* Kind \* Trusting \* Unselfish  
Truthful \* Forgiving \* Dedicated



Safe!



Clean!



Fun!



# Congratulations

**TO ALL GOLDEN TICKET AWARD WINNERS AND NOMINEES**

From the Entire Fun Spot America Family

*Celebrating People, Creating Fun and Making Memories*



# Masters in the Art of Insuring Amusement & Entertainment Risks



## Congratulations to all nominees and winners!

We are so proud to be part of this incredible industry.



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