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The Universal Kids Resort Hotel contains 300 rooms and suites and stretches over the entrance to the theme park. AT/TIM BALDWIN

Built with children at the forefront, Universal Kids Resort debuts

AT: Tim Baldwin
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FRISCO, Texas — The **Universal Studios** brand is globally known. Since its announcement in January of 2023, **Universal Kids Resort** has had the challenge of educating people that the park is not designed to be Universal Studios Texas. This is a completely new concept: smaller scale and a specific demographic. Imagined for children ages 3 to 8 years old, the park is seen through a completely different lens. The park likes to phrase it so that the destination is "built for kids and their grown-ups."

"This is a special place. Designed from the ground up for young children, Universal Kids Resort represents an exciting first for our company as a new kind of regional theme park experience," said **Dan Cuffe**, vice president and general manager. "North Texas, one of the fastest-growing regions in the country, is the ideal home to bring this vision to life."

"Universal Kids Resort is designed for the kids (and their family) to come out and enjoy things from their point of view," said **Sharon Parker**, director of marketing. "It's about kid-size thrills and entertainment

dedicated to kids ages 3 to 8, allowing them to take it and share the experience, whether it is excitement or imagination or creativity with their family so they can have those priceless memories."

Following some soft-opening previews, the resort officially opened on July 1.

To enter the park, guests walk below the **Universal Kids Resort Hotel**, which spans over the entrance. It not only provides shade but also provides that grand reveal.

Once inside the park, visitors have seven themed lands. Capitalizing on Universal IPs, each land is decorated with sculpts and colors to fit that area. DreamWorks' TrollsFest is awash in brushstrokes of pink and blue. DreamWorks' Shrek's Swamp is plunged into appropriate swampy greens and browns. And it is no surprise that Illumination's Minions vs. Minions: Bello Bay Club has its share of yellow touches. Truth be told, color is the first thing one notices in the park. It's undeniable, and for younger kids, it is a veritable box of crayons.

Because Universal Kids Resort is such a new concept, many people — includ-

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Tormenta Rampaging Run takes Texas by the horns

B&M record-breaking coaster dives into Six Flags Over Texas

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ARLINGTON, Texas — As **Six Flags Over Texas**, the original Six Flags park, celebrates its 65th anniversary, those visiting the park for the last half year have witnessed the rise of something so massive and monumental, its presence is inescapable — for miles!

New for 2026 is **Tormenta: Rampaging Run**. Manufactured by **Bolliger & Mabillard**, it is only the second B&M coaster at the park, installed 27 years after **Batman The Ride** in 1999. But the differences are staggering. Almost three times the height of the inverted coaster, **Tormenta** stands at 309 feet tall. It sets the record for the tallest dive coaster in the world.

One could accumulate a list of records for quite some time, both world records and those for the state of Texas. **Tormenta** beats the nearby **Titan** for the tallest roller coaster in the Lone Star State and is one of the five tallest in North America.

Park President **Pete Carmichael** is new to this property but was pleased to be a part of the ride's debut.

"A project of this magnitude is a once-in-a-generation type of experience," he excitedly said. "**Tormenta** sets six new world records, including the tallest dive coaster and tallest vertical loop in the world!"

A unique distinction of this new addition is the sustained time at the top of the 300-foot-tall hulk. With close to 15 seconds to take in the Dallas skyline, as well as the

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The first drop is not only record-setting for a B&M dive coaster, it is also taken at 95 degrees. AT/TIM BALDWIN



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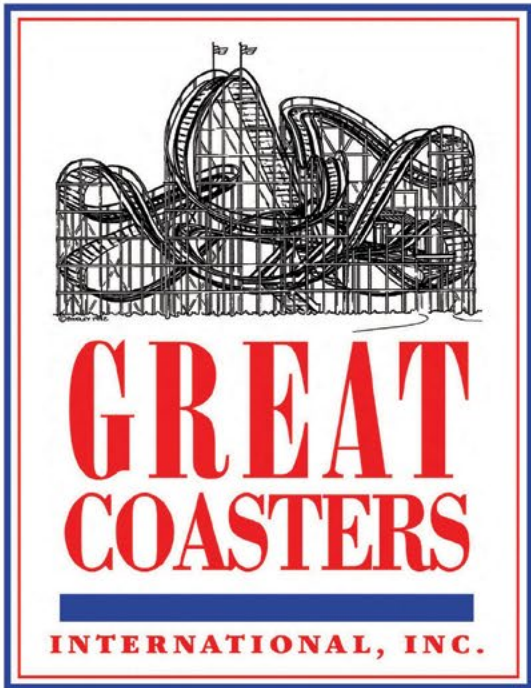
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AMUSEMENT VIEWS



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

FLINT'S VIEW: Bubba Flint

American dream found



Robinson

The American Dream ... It is one of the most oft-used terms in the U.S.A. Yet, ironically, it's a struggle to define. Hunter S. Thompson actually had an infamous adventure in the desert in search of it (documented and cemented in pop culture with "Fear and Loathing In Las Vegas"). However, he never seemed to find it. Walk down the street today and pose the question

"What is the American Dream?" to a dozen people, odds are you'll get more than a half-dozen answers at the minimum.

From my own experience, the American Dream is capturing that lightning in a bottle where the land of opportunity meets hard work, vision, perspiration and drive colliding for a moment of magic that transcends definition and rises above.

It's the immigrant son of a Holocaust survivor seeing The Beatles on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, deciding to start writing songs, and finding himself on stage 50 years later being inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. It's a working-class kid playing baseball, capturing the attention of the world with his hustle and hard work on the field, and rising to the level where he's forever identified as "The Hit King." It's an animator and cartoonist being inspired by a tame mouse in his studio that opened the door to his imagination and paved the way for a media — and theme park — empire still nicknamed "The House of Mouse."

The American Dream is showcased often within the amusement industry, and it's a beautiful thing.

It's Will Koch taking the reins of his grandfather's dream ... and then dreaming even bigger, transforming a small park into a family destination. It's John C. Allen building a legacy of design only to then reignite the coaster wars with The Racer at Kings Island, and then cementing a story into legend by writing his coaster formulas on a napkin and presenting them to the team behind The Beast.

It's Dick Knoebel defying the odds — and the critics — to move the Playland Park Rocket from Texas to Pennsylvania, and give birth to the No. 1 Wooden Coaster in the world ... The Phoenix. It's that same man defying the odds time and again to keep his park free, recreate the Flying Turns and escort his family business into its fifth generation.

The American Dream is that little voice within that says, "It can be done, it will be done," and breathing in the joy of making that a reality.

Happy 250th America! ... and a happy 100th to Knoebels!

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



INDUSTRY VOICE: B. Derek Shaw, Amusement Today

What's in a name?

There are at least 64 fairs across the United States inserting the word "state" in their name, some of which are private and have no state funding or oversight.

There are currently two "state fairs" in Pennsylvania: the York State Fair, and 43 miles northwest, the newly named (in June) Carlisle State Fair. Oddly, there is no designated state fair in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, although many consider the Pennsylvania Farm Show in early January as the designee. It has what most state fairs have, except for a ride midway (the event only features two rides, both of which fundraise for a local scholarship). The two "state fairs" operating within the Keystone State are independent operations.

A similar confusion exists in Illinois, as it has two fairs that use state in their title: the Illinois State Fair, Springfield, and DuQuoin State Fair, DuQuoin. Another few are found out west with the California State Fair (Cal Expo) in Sacramento and California Mid-State Fair in Paso Robles. Not to be outdone,



Shaw

Washington features both the Evergreen State Fair in Monroe, Washington, and the Washington State Fair in Puyallup. Then there are the Carolinas, each with two: North Carolina State Fair, Raleigh; and the North Carolina Mountain State Fair, Fletcher; South Carolina State Fair, Columbia; and the Upper South Carolina State Fair, Easley. Continuing with the confusion, there's the Oklahoma State Fair, Oklahoma City; and the Tulsa State Fair, Tulsa.

How about this double-play: North Idaho State Fair, Coeur d'Alene; and Eastern Idaho State Fair, Blackfoot. Georgia has a quadruple group of head-turner entries: Georgia State Fair, Hampton; North Georgia State Fair, Marietta; Georgia Carolina State Fair, Augusta; and the Georgia National Fair, Perry.

While there's nothing wrong with multiple state fair designations, this does add an additional level of complexity and confusion, muddying the waters for marketing, public relations and the fairgoer.



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

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2 MINUTE DRILL



AT: Tim Baldwin

Ian Tordi-DeVine, RWS Global

Ian Tordi-DeVine truly embodies the **RWS Global** mantra of Raise Your Experience, consistently putting guests, clients, performers and his teammates at the center of everything he does. Since joining RWS in 2014 as a singer/dancer, he has grown alongside the company, contributing as a performer, background vocalist, production team member and now in Business Client Services. Ian is known for his positivity, reliability and genuine care for others, always approaching challenges with a collaborative, solutions-focused mindset. His ability to build relationships and elevate every experience makes him a trusted colleague and a wonderful representation of the RWS culture.

Title: Manager, Business and Client Strategy

Number of years in the amusement industry: 17 years. I began performing at Kings Island in my teens and eventually transitioned into production. Now I help shape the bigger picture, still creating unforgettable experiences, but from an overarching, strategic lens.

Best thing about the industry: The best part is the emotional connection. We're not just in the business of attractions and entertainment, we're creating moments of surprise, nostalgia and happiness for guests that come to our attractions and for each other.

Favorite amusement ride: The Music Express at Hersheypark! It's the closest thing to a concert and a core workout at the same time.

If I weren't working in the amusement industry, I would be ... Probably a lawyer, because I already spend my time convincing people to buy my stories, managing personalities and keeping things on track.

Biggest challenge facing our industry: Technology and innovation are moving incredibly fast. The challenge is figuring out how to use them in a way that enhances experiences without losing the human and emotional connection that makes this industry special.

The thing I like most about amusement season: The energy! Seeing everything come back to life year after year is exhilarating.

My sushi go-to is ... Shrimp Tempura!

In a single word, Taylor Swift is ... Fearless.

My first Broadway show: "Next to Normal" in 2009.



Ian Tordi-DeVine pours his passion into his work, whether working with performers or behind a desk. COURTESY RWS Global

The best one-hour drive from my home: Tarrytown, New York! Sleepy Hollow during the fall is one of our family's favorite traditions.

My mechanical skills with my car are ... nonexistent, simply because I haven't owned a car since I was 17 years old. NYC life!

A character in a movie I'd love to play: As a kid, Troy Bolton in *High School Musical*. As an adult ... still Troy Bolton in *High School Musical*.

On a scale of 1 to 10, the organization of my desk is ... 11! Everything has its place, and if it's moved, I will know.

The teacher I remember the most: Jeff Clark. He was my show choir director and helped shape me into the artist I am today.

The most expensive piece of clothing I have ever purchased: I should say my wedding suit, but it was probably a winter coat.

Pick one: salad bar or sundae bar? Sundae Bar. Sprinkles, whipped cream and hot fudge!

The person I would love to have at a pool party would be ... Beyoncé! Imagine the pool party being another world tour!

The first streaming service I acquired: It all began with Netflix and now I can say I probably have every single one imaginable.

My mother's funniest quality is ... Her ability to say something and then IMMEDIATELY forget that she said it. I definitely get that from her.

THE INDUSTRY SEEN

Tormenta welcomes Texas royalty



ARLINGTON, Texas — During the recent Six Flags Over Texas media day for the opening of the park's Tormenta Rampaging Run coaster, *Amusement Today* caught up with Texas dignitaries while at the event. Seen here from left to right: Mike Sossamon, retired and longtime maintenance director at the park; Ted Raines of Texas Flags Ltd; City of Arlington Mayor Jim Ross; and Jim Randolph, also from Texas Flags Ltd. Raines and Randolph were part of the investment group led by Dallas, Texas, investor Jack Knox, that acquired the park in 1969 from founder Angus Wynne. The investment firm continues to have partial ownership of the park as it celebrates its 65th anniversary this season. Tormenta is a record-setting giga dive coaster from Switzerland-based B&M. AT/GARY SLADE

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Using Universal IP, families are entertained by the décor (above left) and meet-and-greets. Mr. DNA's Double Helix Spin — from Metallbau Emmeln — is unique to North America (above middle). Universal Kids Resort offers rides for younger ones, including children's "first coaster," such as this one from Zierer (above right). AT/GARY SLADE, TIM BALDWIN

►KIDS

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ing industry insiders — were unsure of what to expect. Certainly, a departure from the movie-centered attractions of the larger parks, the Texas newcomer is 100 percent dedicated to children.

"It's no accident that with every step there is something to do," said Parker. "With kids it can be something simple or something that is elevated that gives them an age-appropriate maximum thrill."

The park's layout is a traditional circular loop, so regardless of which direction a family heads, each area is eventually discovered.

Isle of Curiosity is the starting point. While there are no rides or attractions in this "gateway," kids can engage with IP from Gabby's Dollhouse with dance parties involving character meet-and-greets.

DreamWorks' TrollsFest is to the left. Numerous play structures are spread throughout the park, and TrollsFest boasts two. Whether it is crawling or climbing, kids can burn off energy while parents relax in the shade. Two rides are also in this area. Supplied by Zierer, Rhonda's TrollsFest Express is ideal for a child's first roller coaster. Moderate speeds are just zippy enough to elicit screams, but nothing is daunting about the structure. A balloon observation ride, one of many attractions from Zamperla, offers views from above. Both an outdoor theater and indoor air-conditioned dance space (think kindergarten rave) are also in this land. A fun note: Bro Cones serves up ice cream with colorful wraps featuring Trolls

faces, with the ice cream being the fun, colorful hair.

DreamWorks' Shrek's Swamp has two play areas: Shrek's Swamp Rompin' Stomp and Shrek's Swamp Splash & Smash. Interestingly, tipping buckets are commonly found in water parks, but kids can get a good quick soaking here. If kids (or their parents) don't want their street clothes to get soaked, there are changing locations right next to the watery fun. A Zamperla car ride takes families through two-dimensional scenes on Shrek & Fiona's Happily Ogre After.

DreamWorks' Puss In Boots Del Mar offers a high-capacity swing ride from Zamperla, a puppet show and one of the four major air-conditioned restaurants in the park. As far as theming goes, this land seems to have captured the ambience most effectively.

Jurassic World Adventure Camp doesn't feature anything too "monstrous," however, it could be the park's largest land. A play structure suspended over the walkway may just have the best spectator appeal for kids to wave at parents below. Three rides also offer notable thrills. Pteranodrop (Zamperla) is a pair of rotating drop towers that should produce gasps and giggles for the little ones, while Mr. DNA's Double Helix Spin brings the first Metallbau Emmeln Flying Wheel to North America. Perhaps providing the longest ride in the park, the alternating ascent and descent combined with rotations deliver fun views during its hypnotic ride cycle. Mack Rides supplied the largest of the park's two coasters. Jurassic World:

...And from a kids' perspective

Amusement Today asked 6-year-old Addison Dowdy to share her five favorite things about her day at the theme park. This is what she reported to AT.

My Top 5 favorite things at Universal Kids Resort!

- 1. Puss in Boots Swings** — The Puss in Boots swings were SO much fun! They went way up in the air, and I laughed the whole time. I loved them so much that I rode them TWO times!
- 2. Shrek's Swamp Splash and Smash** — I loved playing at Shrek's splash pad! The giant bucket dumped water all over me and got me super soaked! I made new friends, and we played together for a long time. Then we all got a Shrek-face pretzel. It was soooo yummy! I didn't really like the cheese because it was a little too spicy for me.
- 3. The Big Kid Roller Coasters** — I got to ride the two big kid roller coasters! They went up really high and zoomed back down. My tummy felt all funny, like little butterflies! It was my very first roller coaster at an amusement park, and I was so proud of myself!
- 4. Goofy Goobers Cheeseburger and Fries** — The cheeseburger and fries at Goofy Goobers were my favorite food all day! They were super yummy, and I ate almost all of it!
- 5. Bello Bay Cruise** — Bello Bay was the BEST ride to cool off! I got really wet, and I wasn't expecting the giant drain! It sucked us around like we were getting flushed down a giant toilet, and it made me laugh so hard!

Cretaceous Coaster offers suitable thrills for all members of the family. On this one, the idea is that families are on a search for a missing dinosaur, Bumpy. Kids are engaged in meeting small dinosaurs and their handlers, and a sensory garden is in place for anyone who needs a quiet moment.

Nickelodeon's SpongeBob SquarePants Bikini Bottom sports an array of flat rides as well as a welcoming splash pad. Jellyfish Fields Jamboree (Zamperla) lets kids take control of how high and when their gondola rises. Barnacle Bus is a Zamperla Crazy Bus, and Mrs. Puff's Boating School circular ride is provided by Zierer. Bobbing Barrels is a Zamperla Water Mania that lets kids and families aim water cannons at each other as they spin and rotate.

Upon completing the loop around the park, guests find Illumination's Minions vs. Minions: Bello Bay Club. In this land, kids can find

Bello Bay Golf Car Derby (Zamperla), riding like an old-fashioned Cuddle Up and one of the park's signature attractions, Bello Bay Cruise, an exciting raft ride by Hafema. One of the rare elements to this rapids ride is the spiraling whirlpool that dramatically plunges rafts down into a tunnel, making it the most dramatic of all rides.

Major restaurants are found in the Jurassic World area (Jurassic World Canteen), Puss In Boots land (Comidas y Leche), SpongeBob's realm (Goofy Goober's), and Isle of Curiosity (Universal Kids Resort Café) — all indoors and air-conditioned. Prices are welcomingly reasonable in comparison to many parks in the region, which Parker said was intentional. The food quality is also of a caliber above typical theme park fare.

Those staying on property are steps away from all the fun if little ones get tucked out and need a nap.

Coverage of the Universal Kids Hotel will be in a future issue of *Amusement Today*.

With a myriad of ways for kids to have fun, the goal was set and accomplished.

"I think the concept alone is something that Universal has knocked out of the park," Parker told AT. "It is the first [execution of] the concept to come to life, and I think it is something that will be a fan favorite for years to come."

Still, with the achievement of what designers set out to do, the park's biggest challenge remains Universal's name at the top. For now, the task is to educate upcoming visitors that the park is designed for young children and not to be confused with the offerings in Orlando and Hollywood.

Currently, the park's website has daily operations through the end of September, but the calendar doesn't go beyond that. A one-day general admission ticket sells for \$54.99 online.

The colorful, child-sized world of the new Universal Kids Resort



The thrilling and unpredictable Bella Bay Cruise is a way to get refreshed in the summer sun. AT/GARY SLADE



Several interactions engage kids on their level, such as this encounter in Jurassic World Adventure Camp. AT/TIM BALDWIN



Meeting favorite characters is a memorable moment for any kid. COURTESY UNIVERSAL



Themed areas, such as SpongeBob Squarepants Bikini Bottom, lent themselves to both wet and dry play. AT/GARY SLADE



The park has plentiful play zones, such as this one in the Jurassic World area that stretches over a walkway. AT/TIM BALDWIN



Zamperla supplied the largest complement of rides, included these that took riders up in the air. AT/GARY SLADE



Commonly seen in water parks, Shrek's Swamp Splash and Smash features a tipping bucket in an amusement park. Changing rooms are available to don suitable apparel. AT/TIM BALDWIN



Cretaceous Coaster (Mack Rides) is the largest of the two roller coasters. AT/TIM BALDWIN



The park's mix of rides contained themed versions of traditional flat rides. COURTESY UNIVERSAL



►TORMENTA

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span of Six Flags Over Texas, passengers may appreciate that vista rather than the 95-degree first drop from the towering height. And true to this genre created by B&M, riders are held for a few seconds in the face-down position, causing the adrenaline to surge.

Tormenta: Rampaging Run reinvigorates the Spain section of the park, one of the flags flown over the region in Texas' history.

"The Spain area of the park has long been an important part of our history," Carmichael told *Amusement Today*. "We wanted to add a marquee anchor attraction that honored the area while thrilling our guests with the most innovative coaster in our region. Guests will explore the Rancho de la Tormenta village, starting with our new portal welcoming them to Spain. The area also features the new Tormenta bull statue as a fantastic icon and photo op for our guests. I also love that we have completely refurbished our La Fiesta de las Tazas family teacup ride (**Zamperla**), giving guests of all ages a fun attraction to experience in this immersive themed area."

There's also something to be said about the enormity of the ride's first inversion: a record-breaking Immelmann at 218 feet, the tallest inversion in North America. It is followed by the world's tallest vertical loop at 179 feet. Soaring and floating through these elements accentuate their sheer size, and the maneuvers redefine specta-



The new Spain area (above) is colorful and inviting. Tormenta Rampaging Run takes riders upside down five times (right).
AT/TIM BALDWIN

tor appeal for those inside the park and out. It is this magnitude that allows even the nonrider to walk away having experienced something in the raging bull's presence.

Tormenta is Spanish for "storm," and underneath all the hardware is a legend of a bull that could never be tamed. That bull was named Tormenta. Under a massive new bull sculpture, a sign reads: "The villagers of Rancho de la Tormenta honor a fierce protector. In his strength, we found courage. In his spirit, we found unity." After cresting the lift, the chant for the bull is heard before approaching the precipice.

"Our new area is themed around the bull that the villagers called 'Tormenta,'" said Carmichael. "Known for his fierce strength and incredible speed, he came to be a symbol of the town's resilience and might that grew to become the legend



that protected Rancho de la Tormenta."

The newly themed area warmly invites guests to partake in the excitement of the annual festival celebrating the ranch hands who raised the cattle that brought prosperity to the community. The "Festival Taurino" offers an atmosphere filled with vibrant and colorful banners, a range of entertainment and its signature attraction, Tormenta: Rampaging Run.

The ride is one foot shy of 4,200 feet in length and features three trains that seat 24 passengers in three rows of eight. The coaster's top speed is 87 mph.

The placement of the new coaster is on the site of

the retired bobsled ride, La Vibora. It captivates arriving guests as they approach the front entrance, and the dramatic plunge is positioned to be the last look and reminder of their day as they step outside the gate when exiting.

Although a new restaurant was announced last summer for this season, construction energy was placed on the new attraction. For this season, the Spanish village has food trucks offering the appropriate cuisine. The park has also introduced a new Tormenta lager at a nearby bar.

"We have a number of new culinary locations being added to the area," Carmichael said. "Spain will feature two new food trucks serving up Chicken Torta sandwiches and grilled Mexican street corn, while we are reintroducing our Casa de las Banderas restaurant that serves up both barbacoa and chicken street tacos."

A nearby retail outlet has been completely updated with a fresh look, along with the neighboring teacup ride, which keeps a family attraction in the vicinity. The new coaster is heavily merchandised with an impressive selection of items and apparel.

The refreshed Spain area also repurposes an entrance and fountains from a retired swinging ship, which had reached the end of its life cycle after 45 seasons. It makes for a great gateway to the skyscraping roller coaster.

Not only is Six Flags Over Texas the only theme park in the state to have a coaster over 200 feet tall, but it now has three, making it one of only two parks in the United States to do so.

"Tormenta towers over the park as our tallest roller coaster. The breathtaking 309-foot-tall structure, combined with a 95-degree first drop is unlike any other dive coaster in the industry," Carmichael said to AT. "As everyone knows, everything is BIGGER in Texas! Not only do we feature three roller coasters over 200 feet tall — including Mr. Freeze (**Premier Rides**) and Titan (**Giovanola**) — but our 400-foot-tall Texas Sky Screamer (**Funtime**), 300-foot-tall Oil Derrick Observation Tower (**Intamin**) and 325-foot-tall Superman Tower of Power (**S&S Worldwide**) help create one of the most dynamic skylines of any regional theme park in the industry — and it's right here at Six Flags Over Texas."

Erection of the coaster was handled by **Adena**.

"A diverse and dynamic coaster lineup is important to Six Flags Over Texas, and Tormenta: Rampaging Run is the next evolution in the roller coaster experience we're able to bring to our guests," said **Tony Clark**, marketing, Six Flags. "The dive coaster sets itself apart from all others in its size, aerial maneuvers and the signature hold over the edge before gravity takes over — and there's no bigger version than Tormenta: Rampaging Run. Not only does this new signature attraction provide the 'oohs,' 'ahhs' and screams you'd expect, but it's the centerpiece of a beautifully transformed Spain section of the park. The future of Six Flags Over Texas looks very bright and this is an important piece of the timeline."

Tormenta: Rampaging Run brings the coaster count at Six Flags Over Texas to 14.



A new Tormenta lager has been created for the park (above left). Three trains of 24 offer the park a ride with solid capacity (above right). AT/TIM BALDWIN; COURTESY SIX FLAGS

FACILITIES & ATTRACTIONS

► Knoebels celebrates 100 years — pages 22-23 / Valleyfair opens water park addition — page 30

Disney parks ignite new magic, fresh moments in classic attractions

Fresh pixie dust yields retheming, all-new elements

AT: David Fake
dfake@amusementtoday.com

ORLANDO — Anybody in this business will tell you that building a brand-new attraction is the fun part. The hard part is touching one people already love. This is particularly difficult if you are **Disney Parks**. Uber fans notice when something as simple as a queue plaque moves. They mourn a retired gag. And they will let you know, loudly, when a beloved figure gets swapped for something they did not ask for.

Across 2026, Disney has kept walking into that fire on purpose. Over roughly six months, on both coasts, it reopened a run of reworked beloved attractions across the whole range, from a complete theme change to a single new animatronic head. Taken together, the year became a case study in how far you can push a classic before guests push back.

At the far end of the scale sits Rock 'n' Roller Coaster at **Disney's Hollywood Studios**, which reopened in May with the Aerosmith theme gone and The Muppets in the driver's seat (covered by *Amusement Today* in full in the June 2026 issue). Same launch, same track, almost everything else new, including the attraction's first Audio-Animatronic, a motion-capture-programmed Scooter. It is the boldest kind of refresh there is, a gut-and-replace that keeps the bones and throws out the rest.

A notch down from a full overlay is what happened to Buzz Lightyear's Space Ranger Spin at **Magic Kingdom**, which is back in operation since April after eight months down. The ride system that traces its lineage to If You Had Wings is still doing the work underneath. What changed is nearly everything a guest touches. Producer **Kimberly Allison** said the team pulled out the old physical targets and replaced them with media-based ones, which is the change that unlocks the rest. "There are opportunities to add surprises and secrets now that they're media-based," she said. Blasters are handheld now, with the laser always on so you can see where you are aiming.

Software engineering manager **Evan Klein** described a move away from the embedded, self-contained ride systems that defined the last few decades toward a distributed setup, with each vehicle running its own instance of Unreal Engine. That is what makes the targets dynamic and the gameplay different ride to ride. It also changed how the team learns. Where scores once lived locally on each vehicle and got sampled by hand, Klein's group now watches the whole attraction at scale and pairs that data with guest surveys. He described a live-operations approach, "that sort of cadence of looking at the data and seeing what it suggests," that lets them tweak the ride after opening without tearing it apart. The refresh also brought a new animatronic, a Star Command support bot named Buddy, built



Buzz Lightyear's Space Ranger Spin reopened with brighter paint, added lighting and media-based targets. AT/DAVID FAKE

with Pixar. Sharp-eyed guests will find the model number IY-HW3 near her treads, a wink at the show building's If You Had Wings past. And the small robot "space mines" Zurg deploys in the video projection hyperspace tunnel now register hits in real time for the first time.

Big Thunder Mountain Railroad is a different animal, and a good illustration of the surgical end of the spectrum. When it reopened in May after a full track replacement, the coaster guests rode was mostly the coaster they remembered, but not without any changes. Same layout, same drops, same wildest-ride-in-the-wilderness energy. What executive producer **Wyatt Winter** and his team did was deepen the story rather than rewrite it. "How can we plus it?" Winter said, framing the whole job. Two reimagined show scenes went into the interior lift hills, a cave full of bats and a Rainbow Caverns sequence that turns an ominous red as the mountain pushes back against the miners. And for the first time, the gold rush shows you the gold, with a

secret vault and a mother lode of nuggets glinting just out of reach. Some of the best touches are restorations, not additions. The smokestacks on the queue building are smoking again. And for the detail hunters, the patent numbers on the queue plaques are real, while the cacti along the track came from molds used on original Disneyland attractions.

The height requirement also dropped from 40 inches to 38, opening the ride to a new group of guests. That was not even the goal. **Alec Ras**, a director at Walt Disney World's Facility Asset Management group (FAM), said reliability drove the design and the height change fell out of it. Advancements in track manufacturing produced a smoother, more consistent ride, and the metrics that came out of testing opened a window to revisit the requirement. "We did not change the ride, the speed or the energy that it has," Ras said. FAM, the team that handles this kind of behind-the-scenes reinvestment across the resort, has started stepping into the spotlight in recent years. Ras framed the mission

plainly: keep everything feeling the way it did on day one.

At **EPCOT**, Frozen Ever After reopened in February on the ride's tenth anniversary with new heads on the Anna, Elsa and Kristoff animatronics. Since 2016, those figures had worn faces created by rear projection, a trick that impressed at the time but never fully sold, and plenty of guests found them a little off for a decade. The new versions use articulated physical faces with silicone skin, the same family of technology Disney has rolled out in Hong Kong, Tokyo and on Tiana's Bayou Adventure. **Ken Ricci**, executive creative development lead at **Walt Disney Imagineering**, said "the figures now blink, move their eyebrows and read more like the characters in the movie, but the story and the ride are untouched." It was a quiet fix to an old complaint, and it worked.

Pirates of the Caribbean at **Disneyland** took the opposite bet, and it turned into the loudest fight of the year. When the Anaheim original

► See **DISNEY**, page 12






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►DISNEY

Continued from page 11

reopened in June after nearly two months down, Walt Disney Imagineering had replaced the static skeleton perched atop the treasure in the grotto with an advanced new figure that transforms in real time from a living pirate into a skeleton, using a moving projection mapped onto a moving head. The technology is genuinely cutting-edge, and Disney described it as opening a new level of engagement with guests. The guests disagreed. The guests disagreed, loudly. Within days, photos and video of the transforming pirate were everywhere, and the reaction ran cold. The effect struck many as uncanny, out of step with a ride whose charm is its creaky timelessness.

Guest affection is the last gate every one of these projects has to clear, and every so often Disney decides the gate is worth forcing.

That is the common



The transforming Audio-Animatronic Disney installed in the Pirates Grotto at Disneyland, is shown mid-change from living pirate to skeleton. COURTESY DISNEY

thread. Mechanisms get smarter, tools get better, and figures get more lifelike every cycle. What does not change is the test at the end. Ras summed up the whole philosophy as keeping a ride feeling the way it did on day one. Frozen cleared that bar by fixing something guests had wanted fixed for years. With Pirates, Disney bet it knew better than its critics

and held the line to prove it.

Bottom Line: From The Muppets to Big Thunder Mountain Railroad, and every project in between, the success of reimagining these attractions lives or dies on the same two questions the Disney Parks have been asking since the very first rope drop: "Does it represent our brand?" and "Is it what our guests want?"

Level99 debuts at Florida's Disney Springs

LAKE BUENA VISTA, Fla. — With the opening of its fourth location at **Disney Springs** in Lake Buena Vista, Florida, **Level99** is continuing to expand its footprint. Described as a playground for adults, Level99 is a tactile, highly themed and immersive experience that challenges guests — known as players — to compete, collaborate and explore.

"To understand who we are, you have to understand our philosophy," said **Matthew DuPlessie**, founder, president and CEO. "The Level99 experience is real, physical and highly social. We want people to get off the couch and put their phones down. When they come to Level99, they move, think and face challenges — all while having fun."



Matthew DuPlessie

The 46,800-square-foot venue features 63 unique games, including Player-vs-Player Duels and Challenge Rooms. Level99 games are active, social and designed for replay. Each game lasts one to four minutes and is built for groups of two to six people.

"We create all of our Level99 games in-house," DuPlessie said. "Each activity is original because we invented it. We blend mental and physical challenges with digital mapping, theming, sound and intentional design."

Level99's team has created a destination where guests can choose their own path, order and experience. DuPlessie describes it as an "explorer's paradise." Throughout the venue, multiple town square-style themed areas surround the Challenge Room entrances. Nearby Player-vs-Player Duel Games keep guests engaged while they wait to enter a room. Guests can also read hints about the challenge ahead and search for glyphs within the large-scale murals and artwork that are part of the venue-wide Art Hunt interactive scavenger hunt. The Disney Springs location features more than 40 pieces of original artwork, including the largest installations at any Level99 location to date.

DuPlessie said the new location includes several guest favorites, including the popular Axe Run, but no two Level99 venues are the same. "We are constantly launching new features and rooms and upgrading game features for our players. Our design and build team are always working on the next game, feature or mechanic, so our players always have something new to try."

Level99 also offers a craft, farm-to-table-style menu, creating an unexpected and elevated food and beverage experience. "Again, we were very intentional with our approach," DuPlessie said. "Our ingredients are made from scratch daily. Everything from our dough to our sauces to the grenadine in a Shirley Temple — all of it is made exclusively by our dedicated team."

DuPlessie acknowledges that Level99 does not fit neatly into an existing attractions industry category. Instead, he sees the concept as part of an evolution and a new chapter for the industry. "We challenged ourselves to invent a new place and modes of play that people can share and experience together," he said. "Guests are responding positively. That's what gets us really excited."

Within three weeks of opening, the Disney Springs location extended its operating hours to meet demand. The company has announced upcoming locations in Connecticut, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and North Carolina.

—Susan Storey

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Holiday World announces Cannonball!, making a splash in 2027

Mack water coaster coming to park's 4th of July area

AT: Jack Lathrop
Special to Amusement Today

SANTA CLAUS, Ind. — **Holiday World and Splashin' Safari** have announced **Cannonball!**, a **Mack Rides** Water Coaster set to open in 2027. Located on the former site of **Raging Rapids**, the ride aims to fill a hole in the park, both figuratively and literally. Representing the largest investment in park history, the attraction was designed to build on what **Good Gravy!** started in 2024 by introducing more family thrill attractions to the park, bridging the gap between existing attractions.

"We wanted it to pack some fun and thrills and not be static," said **Leah Koch-Blumhardt**, 4th-generation owner and director of communications. "We were also pretty sure water needed to be an element. We just know how much our guests enjoy having water rides in the dry park. Ultimately, we decided that a water roller coaster was going to be the best fit."

Raging Rapids gave the park little warning before reaching the end of its life, prompting the team to hunt for a replacement. A raft ride was on the table early on, Koch-Blumhardt said, but the park moved quickly toward something different, wary of losing the cross-generational pull Raging Rapids had built over the years.

Cannonball! lands in the sweet spot between **Good Gravy!** and the **Raven**, Holiday World's wooden coaster: 1,000 feet of track and five drops, enough for real thrills without tipping into extreme territory. "We just wanted to make sure that it was still appealing to everybody," Koch-Blumhardt said. The ride runs on Mack Rides' newest water coaster platform, the first of its kind to come to the U.S. "Almost everyone has memories of spending time at a community pool and competing with friends to create the biggest splash," said **Maximilian Roeser**, head of marketing for Mack Rides. "We were able to take that playful spirit and turn it into an immersive ride experience on a completely new scale."



Staying true to the name **Water Coaster**, **Cannonball!** will feature several hills and dips (above). The ride will be the largest investment in Holiday World history, and the largest water coaster in the Midwest. COURTESY HOLIDAY WORLD



That community pool became the whole story. The park's creative team locked themselves in a room and hammered out 30 or 40 rough concepts built around a single question: what makes people feel patriotic? Five finalists went to the executive and creative teams, then to sales when the results came back mixed. Two of those concepts, a pool party and a neighborhood barbecue, were fused into the community-pool cannonball contest that became the ride's premise. The team debated a lake setting instead, given Koch-Blumhardt's own background around Santa Claus' Christmas Lake, but landed on the pool for its universality and because it let the ride skip the rock-work look most water coasters lean on. The finished set includes a community center backdrop, a cast of inflatable pool toys, and a few *Parks and Recreation* nods along the way.

The reveal itself got just as much attention as the ride. Working with a historically short announcement window compared to past projects, the park set out for a different vibe than **Good Gravy!** but looked to achieve the same payoff: guests seeing all the pieces scattered across social media before the reveal, then watching

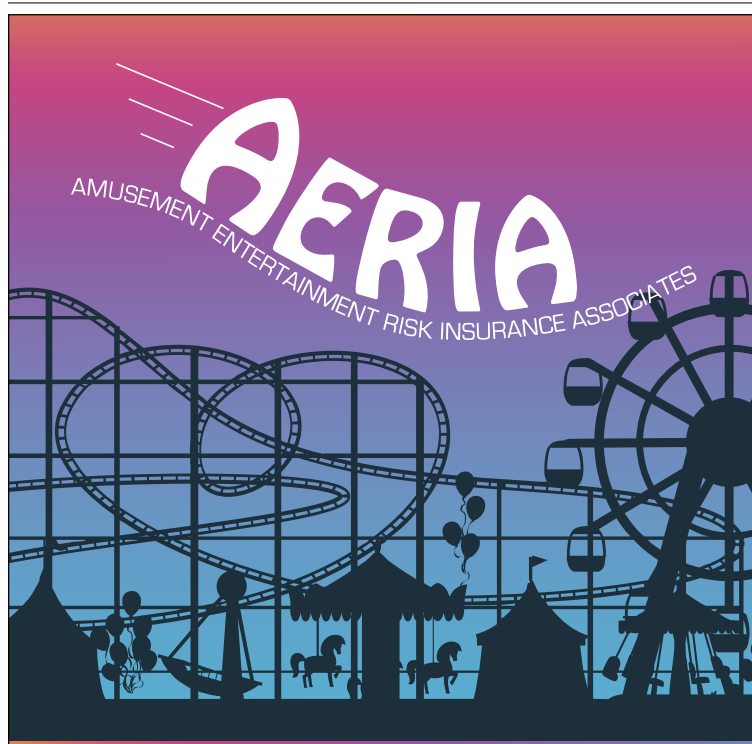
them click into place once the story landed.

That story arrived as an eight-minute, fully scripted short film, written by the creative team as a group, punching up jokes together like a writers' room. The plan called for an unlikeable antagonist, but the actor cast in the role — a former Holiday World team member and friend of Koch-Blumhardt's — was chosen without anyone realizing the connection beforehand, and he played the part so warmly that guests ended up rooting for him rather than against him. The reaction caught the park off guard, prompting a follow-up video to address his fate.

It worked. Koch-Blumhardt pointed to one Facebook comment as her favorite piece of feedback so far: a guest who said they were enjoying the announcement video so much that they forgot it was a ride announcement at all, and got "jump scared" by a water coaster partway through. "That one truly made my

day," she said, "because we did put a lot of work into that announcement video." The positive response has carried well beyond that single comment. *People* magazine covered the announcement and specifically called out the *Parks and Recreation* nods woven into the theming, a detail Koch-Blumhardt said she loved seeing picked up by mainstream press. Fans of the show pitched in, too, jumping into comment sections to explain the "Ron the Swan" reference to guests who didn't immediately recognize it, turning a little confusion into a small moment of community goodwill. Across the board, Koch-Blumhardt said, the reaction has been the kind of engaged, in-on-the-joke response the campaign was built to earn.

Holiday World looks to continue its 80th-anniversary season with special events like **Summer Wined Down**, **Friday Night Live**, and **Happy Halloween** weekends. **Cannonball!** is set to open in May when the park reopens for its 2027 season.



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The **Launched Water Coaster** “Donnervind” at Freizeitpark Plohn is a true world’s first by combining the power of coaster launches with the fluid dynamics of water. Driven by precise LIM technology, boats accelerate through two launch sections across a fast, near-ground layout, creating a relentless flow of speed and motion.

A standout highlight: the iconic high-five element, bringing riders face-to-face in a high-energy moment of interaction. Low to the water. High on adrenaline. Donnervind sets a new benchmark: where technology meets pure ride energy.

Six Flags Great Adventure unveils picturesque Shoreline Pier area



There are five rides located in the area: four are from the former Six Flags America property and one relocated from elsewhere in the park. The lineup includes a Reverchon spinning mouse roller coaster (above top middle), Zamperla Rides Wave Swinger, Larson International Flying Scooters (above right), Zamperla Nebulaz (above left) and a Hrubetz & Company Super Roundup (above bottom middle). AT/ERIC FLUET



Entertainment is part of the mix at the Shoreline Pier area. On select dates and times, guests will enjoy towering stilt walkers, acrobats and other roaming acts, along with live musicians bringing the sounds of the shore to life with upbeat, summer-inspired sets. AT/ERIC FLUET

The boardwalk area refurb honors beloved New Jersey shore destinations while delivering new thrills and storytelling along with crowd favorite foods. AT/ERIC FLUET



Part of the park's multiyear boardwalk transformation, Shoreline Pier is loaded with thematic elements. AT/ERIC FLUET



The new Shoreline Pier area is dotted with teasers for 2027's much-anticipated "Project Purple." AT/ERIC FLUET

Even Amusement Today is enjoying the anticipation, adding its name to the graffiti on a portion of "Project Purple" track. AT/ERIC FLUET

Six Flags Great Adventure continues restoration of Runaway Train

JACKSON, N.J. — Six Flags Great Adventure is continuing the restoration of one of the park's most cherished attractions, bringing Runaway Train back to its roots. As part of the ongoing restoration, the historic coaster has been repainted in one of its classic color schemes, honoring the attraction that has created lasting memories for generations of guests since the park opened in 1974.

Originally debuting during Six Flags Great Adventure's inaugural season, Runaway Train quickly became one of the park's defining attractions. More than five decades later, the restoration celebrates the coaster's enduring legacy while preserving an important piece of the park's history for future generations.

"Runaway Train is more than a roller coaster. It's part of the story of Six Flags Great Adventure," said

Ryan Eldredge, director of sales and marketing at Six Flags Great Adventure. "As we continue investing in the future of our park, we're equally committed to preserving the attractions that helped shape it. Restoring the ride's classic appearance is an exciting step in honoring that legacy while ensuring it continues to create memories for generations to come."

The restoration comes during an exciting period of investment across Six Flags Great Adventure. Alongside the debut of Shoreline Pier at The Boardwalk and construction of the park's record-breaking 2027 roller coaster, the continued restoration of Runaway Train demonstrates the park's commitment to preserving the attractions that have helped define its legacy while continuing to build its future.

●sixflags.com/greatadventure



One of Six Flags Great Adventure's original attractions, Runaway Train has been repainted with one of its classic color schemes. The restoration is symbolic of the park's efforts to preserve the attractions that helped shape it. COURTESY SIX FLAGS GREAT ADVENTURE



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Maurer adds to its unique Spike line

MUNICH, Germany — **Maurer Rides** is extending its Spike family with two new products: Spike Train and Spike Tandem. Both bring the interactive, software-defined Spike ride feel to the hourly capacity that large parks expect from a headline attraction. That makes Spike an option for projects where throughput used to be the deciding factor — with no compromise on dynamics, interaction or staging.

First out of the gate, the Spike Train takes the familiar motorcycle riding position and rethinks it. Riders sit as if on a motorcycle — but this time in vehicles that can be coupled into a train. The result is the hourly capacity of a classic large coaster, combined with the dynamics and interactivity Spike stands for.

With software-defined dynamics, the ride profile is programmable rather than fixed; through interactive control, guests actively shape what happens.

Spike Tandem is the immersion coaster of the Spike family. The tandem arrangement brings more riders per train onto the track, and with it the hourly capacity that a headline attraction needs. Spike Tandem combines the immersion of a dark ride with the accelerations and speeds of a roller coaster.

This is made possible by the principle of vehicle intelligence: the drive and the ride logic sit in the vehicle, not in the track. The entire ride profile — speeds, stops, backward sections, effects — is fully programmable via software-defined dynamics and changeable by update. Friction-wheel drives or brake fins are not required, because every vehicle brings its own drive and braking force.

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Fun Spot America Atlanta's closure could mean the end of ArieForce One, a stomach-flipping, 64-mph roller coaster currently ranked as one of the top 10 steel coasters in the world by the Golden Ticket Awards. AT/DAVID FAKE

Fun Spot America has announced closure of its Atlanta location

FAYETTEVILLE, Ga. — In late June, **Fun Spot America** announced that its Atlanta location will permanently close following its final day of operation on August 2, 2026.

Since opening, the park has welcomed millions of guests and created lasting memories for families throughout the region.

"This was an extremely difficult decision," said **John Arie Jr.**, chief executive officer of Fun Spot America. "Our Atlanta team has poured their hearts into serving our guests and creating a place where families could have fun together. We are deeply grateful for their dedication and for the support we have received from the Fayetteville community."

The company will work closely with team members throughout the transition and is committed to treating employees with respect and providing support resources during this period.

Normal daily park operations will continue from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. through August 2, 2026. Season passes and gift cards will remain valid at the Atlanta park through that date and will continue to be honored at Fun Spot America's Orlando and Kissimmee, Florida locations. Information regarding group events, field trips and other outstanding reservations will be shared with affected guests in the coming weeks.

Fun Spot America will continue operating its Orlando and Kissimmee, Florida locations.

"We are proud of the memories created in Atlanta and grateful to everyone who has been part of this chapter of our story," Arie said.

The amusement park is known for its ArieForce One roller coaster (**Rocky Mountain Construction**), which claims the title of being the largest zero-G stall in the country.

Officials have not yet confirmed what will happen to the Fayetteville property or the rides after the park permanently shuts down. The company has also not disclosed specific reasons behind the sudden decision to close the park. The Atlanta-area location was previously known as **Fun Junction USA**, and was acquired by Fun Spot America in 2017.

•fun-spot.com



The Fury 325 roller coaster at **Carowinds**, located on the border of North Carolina and South Carolina state line, closed on July 7, 2026, when routine maintenance inspection by Carowinds workers found an issue with the ride foundation.

According to a story posted online by the *Charlotte Observer* newspaper, the **North Carolina Department of Labor**, which has jurisdiction over the Charlotte theme park, stated that its **Elevator and Amusement Device Bureau** is overseeing the evaluation. That bureau stated the ride will not reopen until its own re-inspection shows that the ride can operate safely.

A statement was released by Carowinds about the closure, but did not disclose the problem with the foundation. The ride reopened in late July.

One of the largest tourism developments in Lake of the Ozarks history is moving forward this summer, according to a story from KOMU-TV.

The **Oasis at Lakeport**, at Osage Beach, Missouri, is a reportedly \$500 million project that is to offer a 401-room Marriott resort, an amusement park, an indoor water park and more. Originally announced in the fall of 2022, it was anticipated to open in the summer of 2024.

"But before construction could begin, developers spent two years buying out more than 2,400 individual timeshare interests and bringing the property under one ownership structure," stated the news story.

The article went on to state that: "The Oasis at Lakeport planned in 2023 to be managed by St. Louis-based **SkyView Partners, Tegethoff Development** and **Fred Ross**, owner of **Big Thunder Marine**. **Jeff Tegethoff** filed for bankruptcy due to financial and legal issues involving his companies, which increased the probability of delays, refinancing needs and ownership restructuring. Osage Beach Mayor **Richard Ross** does not feel this will affect the Oasis at Lakeport's development."

SeaWorld Orlando, Florida, has revealed the first haunted house that will be part of the 2026 Howl-O-Scream lineup. The after-hours event returns to the theme park for its sixth year on September 11 and will run through October 31.

Howl-O-Scream will feature a new haunted house called Everything Must Stay, SeaWorld has announced. The Everything Must Stay house will be set in a suburban home that has remained unsold for six years. Terrified buyers flee "from things they can't explain" at the open houses, SeaWorld described in a news release.

The 2026 Howl-O-Scream will feature five houses (four with new storylines), six scare zones and five themed bars this year.

Twenty-eight beluga whales are set to be relocated from a shuttered Canadian theme park to aquariums across the United States after federal officials approved an emergency import as part of an international rescue effort. **Marineland**, Niagara Falls, Ontario, closed to the public in 2024, but has remained in possession of the whales. An online story from CBS News stated that about a year after closing, the park said it would have no choice but to euthanize the animals if a relocation plan or additional funding was not secured.

The whales will be transported from Marineland to accredited aquariums including **SeaWorld San Antonio**, Texas, and **SeaWorld San Diego**, California, the **Georgia Aquarium**, Atlanta, Georgia, and the **Shedd Aquarium** in Chicago, Illinois, according to a joint statement earlier this month from the aquariums.

Two additional whales will go to **Oceanografic Valencia**, an aquarium in Spain, pending the approval of necessary permits from the Spanish government.

The **National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration** said it issued the relocation in July.

The **New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection** (DEP) has announced the launch of its Cut the Cutlery outreach campaign to reduce single-use utensils, condiment packets and plastic straws.

The Cut the Cutlery campaign is part of the DEP's Get Past Plastic initiative, which aims to reduce plastic consumption and waste throughout the state.

The campaign supports N.J.S.A. 13-1E-99.134a, in effect August 1, 2026, which limits the distribution of single-use utensils and condiments at food service businesses, as well as N.J.S.A. 13-1E-99.126 et seq., in effect since May 2022, which limits the distribution of single-use plastic straws.



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Knoebels Amusement Resort celebrates 100 years of operation

AT: Susan Storey
Special to Amusement Today

ELYSBURG, Pa. — On July 4, **Knoebels Amusement Resort** celebrated its 100th anniversary as members of the Knoebel family — spanning the third, fourth and fifth generations — welcomed hundreds of guests, partners and team members to mark the milestone for one of the country's most beloved amusement destinations.

During the ceremony, family members from multiple generations shared personal stories about the park. Their remarks emphasized the family's commitment to one another and to guests. "A visit to Knoebels is more than a day at an amusement park," said **Buddy Knoebel**. "It is a cherished tradition that spans generations."

Brian Knoebel, the park's current president and a fourth-generation family member, reflected on his relatives who built Knoebels. "I stand here proud to represent the fourth generation of this park," he said. "I look back with humility at the generations before us who built Knoebels into what it is today."

"Every journey has a beginning, and I honor the generations before me, especially my parents, **Dick and Barbara**," he continued. "They taught us responsibility and humil-



An original horse, dubbed "Mel," from the park's first carousel — a steam-powered attraction — had come home and was on display outside the park's Grand Carousel to help celebrate the park's 100th anniversary (above left). As part of the celebrations, a statue of the park's founders — Henry and Hattie Knoebel — was unveiled near the Frontier Train. AT/SUSAN STOREY, JOHN W.C. ROBINSON



ity and reminded us that after our shift ended there was still more work to be done. For 100 years, you have entrusted us with your time, traditions and memories. Thank you for being part of our continued journey and reminding us that creating happiness for others is work worth doing."

"Each day when I come to this park, I see people," Knoebel said. "I see generations of family members who, together with our dedicated team members, give countless hours to build something meaningful."

He also thanked the park's hundreds of team members: "All of this happens because of you. For that, my family and I are deeply grateful."

As part of the ceremony, **Jim Futrell**, historian for the **National Amusement Park Historical Association**, highlighted the park's humble beginning and lasting legacy.

"The amusement park industry in the United States is nearly 200 years old," Futrell said. "Only 1% of amusement parks in this country have survived to see their 100th anniversary."

Futrell also highlighted Knoebels' rarity as a family business. "Only 3% of family-owned businesses survive and transition to the fourth generation of ownership. Today, we celebrate five generations of leadership from one family."

"The park's original attraction, the Crystal Pool, continues to operate as one of the country's oldest operating swimming pools," Futrell added. "Over the years, the reputation of this unique place in the woods grew along with its offerings. Throughout it all, the

family has remained committed to the values that **Henry and Hattie Knoebel** held dear: free parking, free admission, free picnicking, free entertainment."

Following Futrell's presentation, **Todd Andrus**, **IAAPA's** vice president of North America, spoke, honoring the Knoebel family for its lasting impact on guests and the global attractions industry. "Through changing generations, economic cycles and evolving guest expectations, the Knoebels have

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Knoebels created a Wall of Memories to invite guests to leave their messages about their favorite park experiences (above left). Appropriately served in the Birthday Pavilion, Knoebels had a five-tier birthday cake, representing the five generations of family members who still own and lead the park (above middle). To kick off the 100th year festivities on July 4, a moving ceremony featuring members of the third, fourth and fifth generations of the family was held and also industry guests as well as representatives from the local, state and federal government. State Representatives presented a resolution designating July 4, 2026, as "Knoebels Amusement Resort Day" in Pennsylvania, celebrating 100 years of operation in the Commonwealth (above right). AT/SUSAN STOREY, DAVID FAKE, JOHN W.C. ROBINSON

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remained true to the values that have defined their success: family, hospitality, innovation, and authenticity," he said. "Knoebels has been a member of IAAPA for 73 consecutive years. Thank you for helping strengthen our industry across North America and around the world."

Knoebel then directed guests' attention to the park's Grand Carousel. "For today only, we have a surprise," he said. "Please say hello to Mel, an original horse from our first ride. He was here when our story was just beginning."

Mel, a hand-carved wooden horse, was part of the park's original carousel, which was tragically washed away by floodwater in 1955. Mel, affectionately named after **Mel Heavener** of **Bushkill Park**, was found and restored in time for the park's 50th anniversary.

"To most people, this is just another carousel horse," Knoebel explained. "For our family, Mel is a connection to where our story began. When I look at him, I see the joy on my father's face when he was returned. I see the power of a child's first ride and the lasting impact that memory has on their life. We brought Mel out today to stand proudly at the carousel entrance. He's part of our living history, and hopefully part of a new



A fifth generation family business, third generation Park President Dick Knoebel was often found working in the park — including in one of the park's many kitchens (above left). Knoebels was recognized as a Golden Ticket Award Legend for Best Food in 2025. The park prides itself on classic attractions and never giving up. The opening of the world's only wooden Flying Turns coaster in 2013 was testament to that, after years of dedicated work to bring the classic attraction into the modern era. COURTESY KNOEBELS

memory for all of you."

While no longer part of a carousel, Mel is permanently displayed in the park's Carousel Museum.

The Knoebels team also highlighted several centennial additions. **Rick Knoebel**, a fourth-generation family leader, unveiled a new statue of Hattie and Henry Knoebel, whose hospitality and commitment to family values helped shape the park. Guests were invited to visit The Rink, which originally opened in 1933. Fully renovated, The Rink is now an extension of the park's history museum and features historic park ride pieces and photos along with a new "Wall of Memories" for guests to leave their favorite Knoebels moments.

Long recognized for its food by *Amusement Today's* Golden Ticket Awards, Knoebels also added a birth-



Knoebels is home to multiple classic attractions including its Grand Carousel (above left) — which was recognized in 2019 as a Golden Ticket Award Legend for Best Carousel — as well as the reigning top wooden coaster in the world — Phoenix (above right). COURTESY RICHARD MUNCH



day cake milkshake and anniversary cookie, along with Dr. Pepper-flavored Dippin' Dots, hot honey fries, gyro waffle fries and Oreo-flavored popcorn to its diverse and delicious menu. A limited line of merchandise includes collectible ticket books, apparel, and a 100th anniversary

Lionel train car.

"Knoebels is a place where time slows down, and tradition remains," **Ethan Knoebel**, a member of the family's fifth generation, said. "Our family's park has seen children become parents, parents become grandparents, and each generation work to

leave the park better than they found it. I'm proud to carry on our family's tradition and remain part of our guests' traditions."

Fittingly, the ceremony closed with a recording from Knoebels President Emeritus Dick Knoebel: "Here's to our next 100 years."

●knoebels.com



During the park's 100-year celebration, a fun parade was held that included drivable floats of many of the park's classic attractions. Current Park President Brian Knoebel as well as his wife Dawna and daughter Halley, drove one of the vintage antique autos for the occasion (above left). Another member of the park's fourth generation, Rick Knoebel, had fun driving a vintage bumper car through the parade (above middle). It continues yet another family tradition at the park, as Brian and Rick's father — Dick Knoebel — had been known to drive an antique auto for special occasions through the park (above right). AT/DAVID FAKE; COURTESY KNOEBELS

Karls Erlebnis-Dorf debuts new Oberhausen entertainment location

Strawberry-themed chain of kids' parks continues to expand

AT: Tim Baldwin
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OBERHAUSEN, Germany — “Strawberries” would be the answer if a German resident was asked what comes to mind when they hear **Karls Erlebnis-Dorf** (Karls Adventure Village). The chain of children’s parks began in 2008, with a first location in Rövershagen. Since then, the locations have expanded dramatically, with the newest one in Oberhausen, specifically called **Karls Erlebnis-Dorf Oberhausen**, opening July 22.

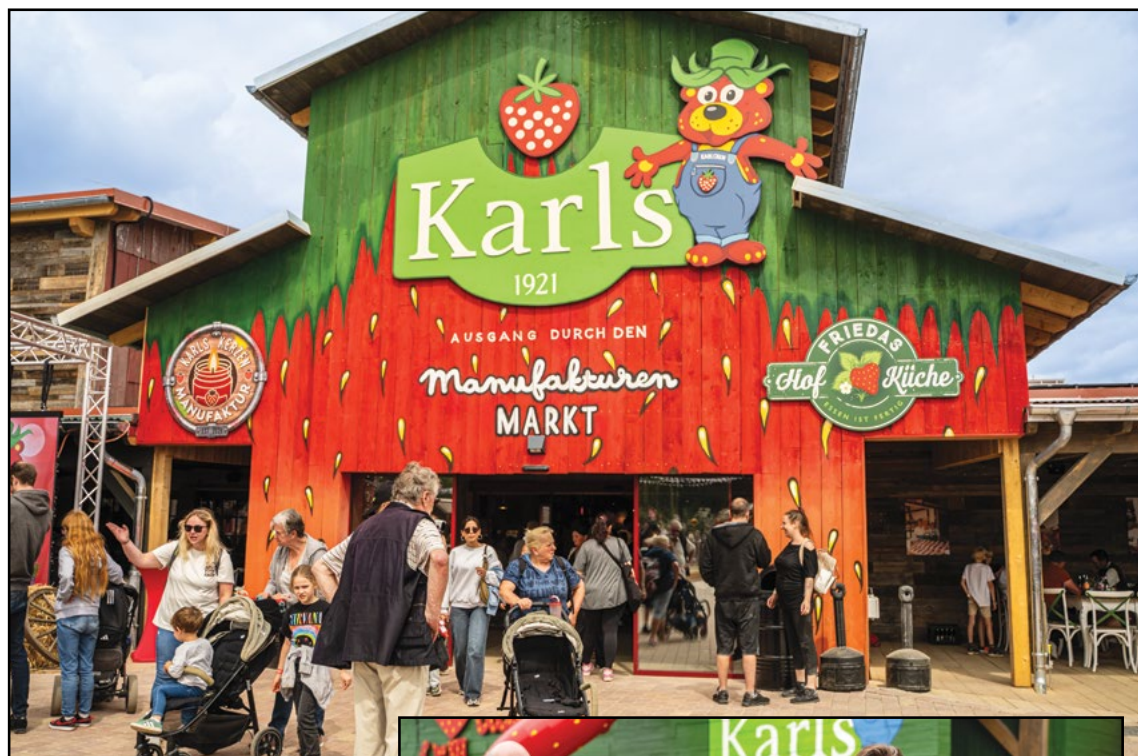
The brainchild of **Robert Dahl**, grandson of **Karl Dahl**, the sites have attractions geared toward young children, but the flavors entice all ages in the family. The family business of selling produce began with purchasing a fruit and vegetable farm in 1921. Over time, the family began providing strawberries to a local jam factory. Imports in the late 1980s from outside Germany devastated the family business, which caused

them to return to selling directly to customers. What was once one of the family’s strawberry farms became a visitor attraction in the 1990s. Within a couple of decades, the facility became the first adventure park.

What sets this latest park apart from its brethren is that it repurposes a site that was a previous park — actually, multiple parks. It is located adjacent to **Centro** shopping center.

“I have known this location since 2002. In those days, **Oscar Bruch Jr.** operated the location as **Centro Park**, and I was working for him in the park as deputy operations manager,” said **Christian Ahuis**, marketing. “When he canceled the contract, the owners of Centro shopping center asked me to find a new operator for the location, and I brought in **Merlin Entertainments**, who brought **Legoland Discovery Center** and wanted to build a new park next door.”

Merlin operated the park for the 2011 season, but following that year, Centro no longer operated. Merlin transformed the area into **Sea Life Abenteuer Park**, adjacent to



Officials opened the newest **Karls Adventure Park** on July 22 (right). It repurposes the site originally occupied by **Centro Park**. In addition to two rides, the **Manufakturen-Markt** (above) sells numerous things to please visitors’ tastebuds, as well as offer demonstrations. COURTESY KARLS



Whether it is meeting characters or taking a ride aboard a curry sausage, kids have numerous ways to use their imaginations when visiting the Oberhausen location. COURTESY KARLS

the **Sea Life Center**. This transition didn’t prove successful since very few rides remained.

“After a few years, Merlin wanted to give away the plot next to Legoland Discovery Center. The new owners of Centro, **Unibail Rodamco Westfield**, asked me again to find a new operator. And so, I asked Robert Dahl regarding Karls. The rest is history,” Ahuis told *Amusement Today*.

Like its fellow parks, entrance into the adventure village is free, as is parking. Guests can enjoy the attractions they wish and pay per ride, or purchase a daily wristband for a reasonable price.

“Our large Karls Manufakturen-Markt (market hall) is where we host vari-

ous show workshops, such as our strawberry jam factory, a bakery, a candy factory or a candle factory,” Ahuis said.

First-time visitors are sure to be impressed with the attention to detail for parks of this size. The strawberry theming is whimsical as well as colorful. Imagination is cleverly woven among the various attractions.

“In the Manufakturen-Markt, we have two rides from **SBF-Visa**,” said Ahuis. “A free-fall tower is themed to a kitchen blender, and **Erdbeertraum** is a mini Tagada.”

The market also includes a playground. The indoor areas offer much to do even on a rainy day.

Outside, there is much

more to offer.

“When our fans exit the market hall and enter the outdoor area, they immediately see why we call ourselves an adventure village,” Ahuis told AT. “The buildings look like a village built in the mid-20th century. The buildings and barns are locations for the many attractions and rides as well as our wide variety of food outlets and restaurants.”

Strawberry Doner, a **Gerstlauer Sky-Fly** is themed to a kebab skewer. “We have three Sky-Fly attractions throughout our nine locations, but only two are designed like this,” said Ahuis. “Each gondola has wings designed for different

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How Star Lanes Polaris Bowled Its Way to FEC of the Year



Seated in the suburbs surrounded by a Dave & Buster's, Top Golf, Puttshack, and Activate, **Star Lanes Polaris** is a 35,000 sq ft bowling and family entertainment centre in Columbus, OH. How did a single-location, family-owned operation compete against well-funded chains and was even named the AAMA 2026 FEC of the Year?

The secret?

Co-owner Doug Mechling and his family never stopped upgrading since opening doors in 2013: Refreshed game room mixes, continuous hardware replacements, software upgrades, and bold capital investments like their recent Neoverse video wall. Their philosophy is that guests deserve a great product, no matter how long you've been in the game.

But the real driver behind the secret is this: **Thirteen years, one tech stack.** More than a decade of intentional reinvestment and technology partnerships that grow with the venue.

From day one, Star Lanes Polaris ran on the **Embed** cashless card system and **QubicaAMF's** bowling technology—both on the recommendation of fellow operators. More than a decade later, Mechling has never switched.

"Embed was our original card reader system when we opened in 2013 and we are just as excited then as we are now because of their amazing technology. If you think in 2013, the technology that existed then and the platform has changed. Four or five years ago, we had a total system revamp. Now we are on the RFID card readers and STATS. We've grown alongside Embed's tech advances over the years. A great partnership indeed!"

— Doug Mechling, Co-Owner, Star Lanes Polaris



The Embed and QubicaAMF integration with **Square POS** has transformed what were once disconnected systems into a unified operational system—powering a loyalty and rewards programme that works across every revenue stream, from the lanes to the arcade floor to food and beverage.

When Mechling pushed for the integration, the tech partners evaluated the shared customer base, and put it on the roadmap. All three listened and made it happen.

"If you buy on price, you'll pay twice."

When choosing the right tech partners, Mechling recommends reliability as the real competitive edge. Downtime costs revenue and guest loyalty. It could be a red swiper on a Saturday night, a dark pin deck, a POS that buckles under peak demand... The cheapest system rarely accounts for the true costs: poor support, limited integrations, and time lost working around technologies that don't fit together.

His non-negotiables for a tech partner? Fast response when things go wrong, an innovative mindset with a listening ear, and the same treatment whether you're a national chain or a family-run centre.

Star Lanes Polaris proves that with the right partners, you can run a business like the big players.

Experience the ecosystem behind this
WINNER'S SUCCESS.



► KARLS

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kebab ingredients, like red onions, tomatoes and so on. After getting off, we have a restaurant next door."

Nearby is Strawberry Caterpillar Train, an SBF-Visa Big Apple coaster, which features a giant strawberry rather than an apple. Of note, the track is wider and longer than all previous versions.

Treggerbahn, a tractor ride, and LPG Beetroot, a train ride, are supplied by Metalltechnik Kirschner. For the first time, Karls is using a conveyor system in the station to increase capacity for the tractor ride.

Curiously, a Pipi-Kaka Land (yes, toilet-themed) was so popular in the previous location that it had to be recreated at Oberhausen. A slide provided by Metallbau Emmeln simulates a roll of toilet paper dropped and rolling down the hall. Toilet brushes, plungers and other untraditional themed elements are found in the play area. Chocolate and vanilla ice cream are even



The Big Apple coaster (above left) at Karls naturally has a strawberry instead. The Gerstlauer Sky-Fly (above right) is themed to a kebab. A slide from Metallbau Emmeln simulates a dropped roll of toilet paper (below left). The drop tower (SBF-Visa) is placed indoors, making it free of any adverse weather conditions. COURTESY KARLS

served in toilet bowls.

Metallbau Emmeln also supplied a trek ride where children ride sausages. Currywurst is popular in the area.

Climbing structures, fountains, a Corn Barn (think ball pit but filled with corn), Scaredy-cat Barn (a haunted walk-through), Treasure Cave and a petting zoo offer numerous activities beyond the rides.

Repurposing a location came with a few perks.

"This gave us the advan-

tage of having certain existing features already in place, saving us the trouble of creating them from scratch," said Ahuis. "However, since the original Centro.Park opened in 1996, some infrastructure was outdated and required either renovation or complete replacement. One benefit was that we were able to preserve many of the former park's mature trees."

The park is open 365 days a year. The average length of stay is about four hours.



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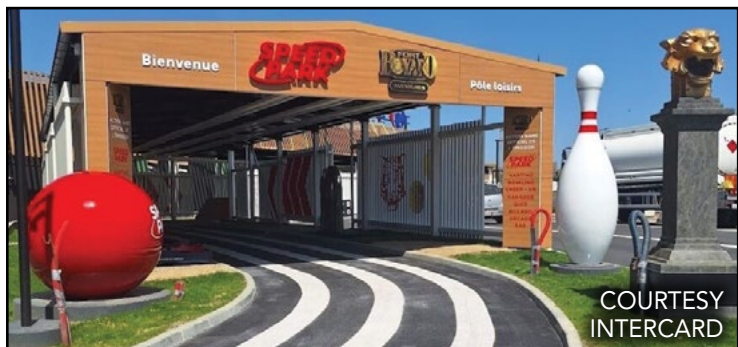

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Intercard continues its international expansion with France's Speedpark

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ST. LOUIS, Mo. — **Intercard's** recent installation of its cashless technology in a new **Speedpark Family Entertainment Center** in Rennes, France, marks its 23rd installation for the French amusement company.

Speedpark is a racing-themed FEC. The venue in Rennes, France, encompasses 54,000 square feet, with nine different attractions, including an indoor go-kart track, 20 bowling lanes, laser tag and arcade games.

Alberto Borrero, Intercard's vice president of international sales, said Intercard started with Speedpark in 2021 at a single site in Madrid as a trial for Intercard's cashless platform.

"It wasn't a network-wide decision from day one," Borrero said. "They tested it on one location first. The result sold itself. Once they saw how it performed in Madrid, they moved to standardize on Intercard across every existing location rather than running multiple vendors site to site."

Borrero went on to say that the single-platform approach is a big part of the appeal for an operator like Speedpark, which mixes go-karts, bowling, laser tag and arcade under one roof.

"They needed one system that could handle payment and access across very different attraction types, with unified reporting instead of stitching together separate systems for each," he said.

Borrero said he feels one reason Intercard's cashless system has fit so well with Speedpark is its ease of operation.

"Staff at a new location can be up and running on the system quickly, which is critical when you're opening as fast as Speedpark is," he said.

Security and uptime are core to the fit as well.

Also, the platform is cloud-based, so Speedpark gets one consolidated view across every location, with the same data and reporting standard whether it's Madrid, Paris or the new Rennes site.

Intercard's system is interfaced with their Go Kart system.

"We adapted the system to handle attractions software like karting plus bowling, plus arcade, under one cashless account, and/or multi-site rollout tooling that let them scale to 23 locations without reinventing setup each time," Borrero said.

Borrero said Intercard has been busy this year expanding its international accounts. They have been working on new installs across Latin America, the Middle East (Al Othaim in Saudi Arabia, new sites in Pakistan, Lulu in India, Bahrain and Kuwait) and Europe (Spain, Romania, Italy and Sweden).

"We also have had growth in the market in Mexico, including work with newer urban entertainment parks. Dave and Busters in Mexico City is opening soon with Intercard," he said.

Intercard is also having an ongoing rollout of its iTeller kiosk, wristband/RFID and mobile tech lines to FEC operators expanding their footprint, similar to what they have been doing with Speedpark.

"The all-new IQ Reader is being used in Turkey and Sweden," Borrero said.

And, if that isn't enough, Speedpark is planning two more French locations, plus a second in Spain.

"So that relationship keeps expanding," Borrero said.

• intercardinc.com



FAMILY ENTERTAINMENT CENTRAL

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The Evel Knievel Experience: An Interactive Museum of America's Original Daredevil is now officially open in downtown Las Vegas' Arts District. Offering unmatched insights into the life, legacy and cultural impact of one of the most iconic performers in American history, the destination invites guests to step into the world of **Evel Knievel**. Visitors can now explore a myriad high-adrenaline experiences and rare artifacts from his life and immersive exhibits capturing the ambition, spectacle and risk behind his legendary career.

First introduced as the **Evel Knievel Museum** in Topeka, Kansas, in 2017, the award-winning, internationally recognized collection has found a new home in Las Vegas.

"The collection is extraordinary on its own, but what makes this experience different is the opportunity to step directly inside Evel Knievel's story," said **Mike Patterson**, co-founder and CEO, The Evel Knievel Experience. "It's for those who want to feel the scale, risk and adrenaline of his ambitious career. Whether guests are trying a 4D virtual jump, testing their own stunt-planning skills or standing face-to-face with the motorcycles that made history, there's something around every corner that makes visitors stop and say 'Wow.'"

Launch Family Entertainment continued to build momentum throughout the first half of 2026 through strategic development and innovation.

A key milestone during the first half of the year was the introduction of Launch's smaller-format park model. Designed to provide franchisees with greater flexibility when evaluating real estate opportunities, the new format allows the brand to enter a broader range of markets while maintaining the attractions, hospitality offerings and guest experience that define the Launch concept.

"During the first half of 2026, we continued to execute our growth strategy by entering competitive markets with experienced operators who share our commitment to operational excellence and exceptional guest experiences," said **Craig Erlich**, CEO of Launch Entertainment. "The momentum we've built reflects the strength of our business model, the dedication of our operators and the increasing demand for high-quality entertainment destinations.

Launch also continued to expand its national footprint during the first half of 2026 by opening two new parks, signing three development agreements, and securing two new leases. Together, these milestones reinforce the brand's strategic growth trajectory and position Launch for continued expansion in key markets nationwide.

Massanutten Resort, located in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley, launched Mountain Mayhem, Virginia's first alpine coaster. The new attraction joins an already impressive lineup of activities at the resort's **Family Adventure Park**, which delivers year-round excitement and mountain views to guests of all ages.

"We're excited to welcome members of our local community, as well as resort guests, to experience the all-new Mountain Mayhem, which truly is a cutting-edge addition to the roster of attractions available at the Family Adventure Park," said **Kameron Tucker**, mountain sports director at Massanutten Resort. "This ride has been under development for quite some time, and we are proud to offer yet another way for those who visit us at Massanutten to enjoy a fun, memorable experience."

Spanning a total length of 3,380 feet, Mountain Mayhem is the North American debut of **MND Group's** Funcoaster model, delivering a downhill ride across 2,156 feet of track with two full 360-degree spirals. Each run lasts approximately six minutes and offers a fully customizable experience.

Laser tag players raised more than \$2,500 during a **Tag 4 A Cause** fundraiser to benefit the **Alzheimer's Association, Central New York Chapter**. This has become the largest Tag 4 A Cause ever held according to coordinator **Laurie Jean Britton**, who hosted the fundraiser during the player-organized Laserforce Internationals tournament at **The Fun Warehouse** in Syracuse, New York.

"The laser tag community has made a tremendous difference and demonstrated the kind of impact we can all make together as we support important causes like the Alzheimer's Association," said Britton.

Intercard's latest cashless technology has been chosen to manage the state-of-the-art arcade at **Legends Entertainment** in Springfield, Illinois. Legends will cater to kids and families participating in sports tournaments at **Scheels Sports Park** in the **Legacy Pointe** mixed-use development. The 46,000-square-foot facility will provide entertainment for visiting sports teams as well as local residents. Legends Entertainment opened in late July 2026.

The brand-new FEC features 12 modern bowling lanes, an arcade with more than 100 games, three party rooms, three bars, five local dining options and more than 70 TVs. **AVS Distributing** provided the arcade games, which are managed by Intercard iWave readers and two iTellerPlusXL kiosks.

Nerf, Peppa Pig, Transformers and more coming to Smoky Mountains

AT: Pam Sherborne

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PIGEON FORGE, Tenn. — Construction has started for a new immersive, multi-attraction in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee. Called **The Play District: Powered by Hasbro**, the new development was announced by **Safe Harbor Development** in partnership with **Kingsmen Xperience** under licenses by games, IP and top company **Hasbro**.

Darby Campbell, chairman and founder of Safe Harbor Development, said the new Play District is designed to be much more than a collection of attractions; it's an immersive destination where families can step inside some of the world's most recognizable brands and create shared experiences together.

Guests will be able to experience three distinct attraction areas within the development. The Nerf Action Xperience will feature a Nerf ride, along with competitive challenges such as arcade games, laser tag and more. Peppa Pig Playtime is being inspired by Peppa's house on the hill and Planet Playskool will offer an interactive environment for kids and their families, featuring experiences from brands such as Play-Doh, Transformers, PJ Masks,



Mouse Trap and more.

"Each attraction has been thoughtfully developed to encourage active play, imagination, discovery and family connection, giving visitors reasons to stay longer, return often and experience something new each visit," Campbell said. "We're especially excited about creating an attraction that appeals across multiple generations. Parents will recognize brands they grew up with, while children get to experience them in an entirely new way."

Campbell said they are continuing to make strong progress and remain on track for opening next year.

"As with any project of this scale, there are thousands of moving pieces that we're coordinating

alongside our partners at Hasbro and Kingsmen Xperience, but the team has been working diligently to keep the project moving forward," he said. "We're excited to begin welcoming families and sharing more as we get closer to opening."

Beyond the themed play areas, the approximately 50,000-square-foot venue will offer dedicated space for birthday parties, group events, school and camp outings and team-building activities.

In addition to the attractions, The Play District will also feature food and beverage offerings and on-site retail including exclusive products.

Campbell said the response by the community of Pigeon Forge to the announcement of the

new development has been very encouraging. Local residents, tourism partners, business owners and families have been excited to see the additional investment in the area.

"Pigeon Forge and the Smoky Mountains continue to be one of the country's premier family vacation destinations and there's tremendous enthusiasm around bringing a first-of-its-kind entertainment experience to the market," he said. "We believe The Play District will complement the area's existing attractions while providing guests with another compelling reason to visit and extend their stay."

Campbell went on to say: "At Safe Harbor Development, we look for opportunities to create experiences that have lasting value, not only for guests, but for the communities where we invest."

"The Play District represents another significant investment in the future of Pigeon Forge, and we're grateful for the collaboration of our partners, local leaders and the community as the project comes to life," he said. "We're looking forward to sharing additional milestones as construction progresses and getting one step closer to opening our doors."

Eye Dropper tower opens with a force at Las Vegas's Area15

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LAS VEGAS — The towering 200-foot-tall Eye Dropper tower opened at **Area15** in Las Vegas June 20, and it has been full force since. The ride, manufactured by **S&S Worldwide** and construction coordination by **Skyhigh Coasters**, has transformed the traditional drop tower to a cinematic, story-driven experience.

The ride opening arrived as Area15, with its over 40 immersive attractions, sees its visitation increase by double-digit percentages compared to last year. It is the newest addition to the Area15 District's Zone 2 expansion, which is anchored by **Universal Destinations and Experience's Universal Horror Unleashed** and also recently welcomed the flagship location of **Dolls Kill**, the popular festival streetwear retailer.

"We're in the midst of

an extraordinary time of expansion and evolution at Area15," said **Winston Fisher**, CEO, Area15, at the opening. "Eye Dropper is only the latest iconic attraction on our roster, but there's even more on the horizon that we can't wait to share with everyone. It's no exaggeration to say there's always something new and extraordinary to discover at Area15."

The official opening of the new attraction kicked off with Area15's largest block party to date. The party spanned the entire 30-acre district and drew thousands of revelers. Costumed performers and special guests from across Las Vegas, including players from the **Las Vegas Aces** and their mascot **Bucket\$**, the **Vegas Golden Knights'** mascot **Chance**, performers from **Chippendales** and more celebrated the first drop during a VIP reception.

Members of the public in

attendance also enjoyed free rides all day long and a live DJ set by **Tritonal**.

Featuring both Space Shot and Turbo Drop sequences, Eye Dropper can launch or free fall or combine both for a thrilling back-to-back experience delivering speeds up to 36 miles per hour, with forces ranging from 4.0 Gs to moments of weightless airtime at -1.2 Gs. Following each drop, guests descend through a sensory cool-down as the system resets, completing a fully immersive spectacle. The ride seats 12 guests per sequence in a wrap-around design.

The new thrill ride is topped by a custom LED marquee featuring an all-seeing "digital eye" visible from across Las Vegas, which shifts from calm awareness to chaotic intensity with each ride cycle.

Within the thrill ride's queue, pulsing red lights, immersive sounds and

surreal design elements create a world that feels alive and aware. As riders prepare for launch, mechanical sounds, rising tones and voice prompts build like a cinematic sequence, blurring the line between observer and participant before erupting into a synchronized explosion of motion, light and sound at peak intensity.

Eye Dropper is open daily from 11:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. Tickets are \$25 for adults and teens 13 and older or \$20 for children 12 and under, seniors, locals and military. Access to Eye Dropper is also included with all of AREA15's bundled Experience Passes.

●area15.com

Area15's new Eye Dropper tower is manufactured by S&S Worldwide. It is 200 feet tall, features speeds of more than 36 mph and is topped by a large LED eye. COURTESY AREA15



Valleyfair opens water park addition to celebrate 50th season

AT: Jeffrey Seifert
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SHAKOPEE, Minn. — This past spring, in celebration of the park's 50th season, Valleyfair's water park opened its biggest development in more than a decade. The expansion not only features new slides and attractions, but it also brings a new name to the water park — Superior Shores, which made its debut on May 23. The seven-acre area added 13 new attractions, bringing the total to 24.

Supplied by WhiteWater of Canada, the attractions range from exhilarating slides appealing to thrill seekers to kid-friendly slides designed for families with junior swimmers.

The towering 60-foot-tall, multi-slide tower, Lighthouse Landing, features three tube slides and a head-first dual-mat racing slide. On Coho Curl, guests aboard two-person rafts will experience long curving turns and heart-pounding drops as they navigate through dark enclosed tubes and bright open turns. Wild Walleye will have thrill seekers experiencing positive Gs as they negotiate the tight coiling turns of the WhiteWater constrictor slide.

Surgin' Sturgeon is completely enclosed, and shortly after dispatch, riders in one- or two-person rafts are surrounded by complete darkness. As riders progress, the dark slide is suddenly punctuated with flashes of color as multicolor translucent rings embedded in the black slide provide almost hypnotic lighting effects.



Lighthouse Landing, standing 60 feet tall, features three tube slides and a head-first dual-mat racing slide (above). Minnow Bay (right) has eight new slides specifically designed for small children. COURTESY VALLEYFAIR

The slide alternates between total darkness and multi-color rings before riders plunge into the final splash-down pool.

Families with small children will appreciate the addition of Minnow Bay, a lagoon-style play area with eight smaller slides, interactive waterspouts and plenty of shallow water to play in and explore.

The newly redesigned entrance features a refreshed arrival space to create a distinct visual identity separate from the main park and create a better first impression. The new design also improves guest flow into the water park.

Once inside, guests will find a new bar, an updated restaurant, a brand-new retail shop and eight additional rental cabanas. Specialized food and other



promotions are also a part of the celebration, including buy-one-get-one deals on soft-serve ice cream cones, and custom 50th-season hoodies and shirts will also be available at retail hubs across the park. At Schooner's Bar, guests can enjoy Valleyfair's signature cocktails, frozen beverages and local brews while listening to live music on the patio stage. The bar's 50th anniversary signature item is the Headwaters Hurricane — a mix of light and dark rum, lime juice and red passion fruit, served in a souvenir fishbowl and garnished with a fishing pole and gummy fish.

Although some older

slides were removed, the classics like the Breakers Bay wave pool and Ripple Rapids lazy river remain, along with the newer slides added in a 2015 expansion.

Valleyfair was conceived by two local businessmen, Walt Wittmer and David Sherman. It opened in 1976 with a turn-of-the-century theme. Although the park was successful, the pair lacked additional funds for expansion and sold the park two years later to Cedar Point in Sandusky, Ohio. Under Cedar Point's ownership, the park expanded yearly. In 1983, the company formed the Cedar Fair Limited Partnership.

It went public on April 29, 1987, on the New York Stock Exchange, structured as a master limited partnership trading under the ticker symbol FUN.

The first waterslides opened in 1983 in a part of the park known as Liquid Lightning. As more slides were added, the name was changed to Whitewater Country Waterpark. In 2008, the name was changed to Soak City, a name used by other water parks in the Cedar Fair chain.

"This expansion starts an exciting new chapter for Valleyfair," said Stephen Summers, park president of Valleyfair. "All season long we will celebrate 50 years of providing summer traditions and fun-filled memories for families. The expansion of Superior Shores Waterpark includes thrill slides and areas designed for young swimmers, providing the perfect summer destination for families."

Shortly before the season began, Six Flags Entertainment Corporation sold Valleyfair, along with six other parks, to EPR Properties, which then selected Enchanted Parks to operate them under a long-term lease arrangement.

"We are proud to welcome Valleyfair to the Enchanted Parks family and to continue to invest in the park, its team and the community," Enchanted Parks CEO James Harhi said in a press release. "The Superior Shores Waterpark expansion means a great deal to all of us, and we can't wait for our guests to come out and experience all it has to offer."

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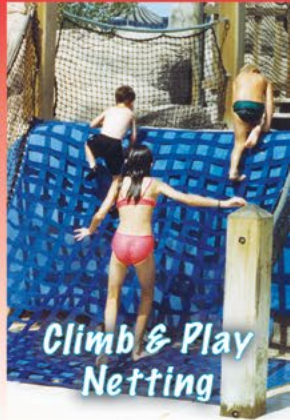
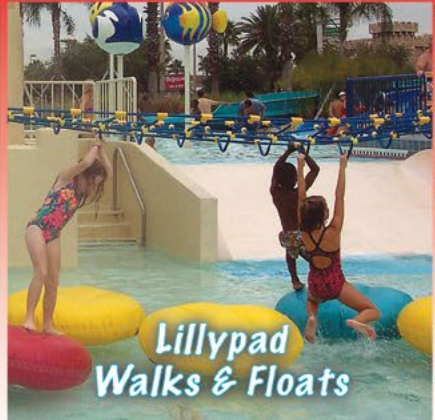


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During a ceremony held at the water park, Hanane Spiers, Official Guinness World Records Adjudicator for the MENA region and Türkiye, recognized the water park's latest milestone achievement. COURTESY YAS WATERWORLD

Yas Waterworld recognized for having most waterslides

ABU DHABI, United Arab Emirates — **Yas Waterworld** on Yas Island in Abu Dhabi has officially cemented its status as a premier global aquatic destination after being awarded the prestigious **Guinness World Records** title for the most waterslides in a water park. The award-winning park earned the honor following a major expansion in 2025, bringing its total collection to a record-breaking 55 waterslides.

The certificate presentation took place on June 30, 2026, during a celebratory ceremony held at the water park. **Dr. Mohamed Abdalla Al Zaabi**, group CEO of **Miral**, and **Rayan Al Haddar**, general manager of Yas Waterworld Abu Dhabi, accepted the official designation from **Hanane Spiers**, Official Guinness World Records Adjudicator for the MENA region and Türkiye.

"We are incredibly proud to receive the Guinness World Records title for the most waterslides in a water park, marking another major milestone for Yas Waterworld Yas Island, Abu Dhabi," said Haddar. "The addition of our newest attractions, including the UAE's tallest waterslide, reflects our ongoing commitment to delivering innovative and world-class experiences for our guests. With a record-breaking collection of 55 waterslides, Yas Waterworld continues to strengthen its position as a leading global water park, offering unforgettable experiences for families, friends and thrillseekers alike."

This historic achievement follows the park's recent expansion, which introduced 11 all-new rides, slides and attractions. The new additions seamlessly integrate into the park's existing Lost City theming — an extension of its popular signature narrative, *The Legend of the Lost Pearl*, that draws inspiration from the UAE's pearl diving heritage.

Today, Yas Waterworld Abu Dhabi boasts more than 70 rides, slides and attractions in total, with its world record-setting portfolio of 55 waterslides serving as the crown jewel of the guest experience.

The latest expansion introduces a variety of cutting-edge, world-class experiences that blend high-speed adrenaline with rich, Emirati-inspired storytelling. Among the 11 slides supplied by **WhiteWater** of Canada is Matamir's Drop, the tallest body slide in the UAE. It starts with a drop capsule 40 meters (1,311 feet) above the ground and runs for a total of 233 meters (764 feet). Other new attractions include high-speed tube racers, dueling mat racers and a spacious new family pool area.

Yas Waterworld is an award-winning, Emirati-themed water park that brings immersive storytelling to life through world-class rides and attractions. Home to unique water adventures, high-speed slides and family-friendly experiences, the park is a leading global entertainment destination on Yas Island, Abu Dhabi.

This latest achievement marks an exciting new chapter for the attraction, solidifying Yas Island's reputation as a global entertainment hub and setting a bold new international benchmark for water-based entertainment.

—Jeffrey Seifert



NEWS SPLASH

AT: Jeffrey L. Seifert

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Aqualand, a massive open-water inflatable obstacle course in Staffordshire, England, has introduced X Tower, a massive floating slide that takes inflatables to a whole new level. Standing 12 meters (39 feet) tall, X Tower features three pairs of different slides. Two slides feature a 1.5-meter upward kicker at the end, launching thrill seekers into the air before landing in the water. For maximum airtime, another pair increases the thrill factor with a two-meter upward kicker. The third pair of slides sends riders headfirst onto a 15-meter sliding mat before a final dunk into the water at the finish.

The X Tower is the latest creation from **Boaz Concept** of Willems, France. Founded in 1999, Boaz specializes in the rental and sale of nautical equipment, water games and outdoor recreational equipment.

Along with X Tower, Aqualand has also added the **Wibit Wave**. Standing approximately 17 feet tall with a 49-foot slide length, it features a unique double-wave design and a high-speed splash landing. Wibit Wave won the 2025 IAAPA Brass Ring Award for Best New Product.

Aqualand boasts eight obstacle courses covering various skill levels and ages, including an over-water **Aqua Chimp** floating jungle ropes course. The park is located in a former quarry, and over the years has grown to become one of the largest outdoor water sports centers in the United Kingdom.

In May, the Onkaparinga Council in Southern Australia approved plans for the **Break Surf + Stay**, an AU\$100 (US\$70) million surf park resort. The 7.5-hectare (18.5-acre) complex in the city of Aldinga will include a world-class wave lagoon for surfers, 35 villas, a luxury day spa and a licensed restaurant.

Surrounding the lagoon will be beach-side hospitality, a wellness studio, skateable landscaping and more. This is all within walking distance of the breathtaking scenery, coastal walks and cycling trails that Aldinga is famous for.

The surf lagoon will be powered by the latest **Endless Surf** technology, serving up a consistent, near-perfect surfing experience. The development will feature a central 12,000-square-meter (129,000-square-foot) wave lagoon accommodating up to 64 surfers at a time, powered by cutting-edge pneumatic technology from Endless Surf capable of producing waves up to 2.1 meters (6.8 feet) high.

Kemah Boardwalk in Texas has re-

vealed that its new water park will be called **Boardwalk Bay** and that it will feature a pirate and shipwreck theme. The water park, scheduled to open in 2027, will feature eight waterslides. It will be located across from the Boardwalk Inn where the **Flying Dutchman** and **Joe's Crab Shack** restaurants used to be located.

The **Wilderness Resort** in Wisconsin Dells announced its Wild WaterDome Waterpark will undergo a massive renovation starting Aug. 24.

The 70,000-square-foot facility, which is home to the largest indoor wave pool in the United States, is getting a full replacement of its signature, see-through ETFE roof. The water park is scheduled to be closed from August 24, 2026, to mid-October 2026 to complete the work.

The resort is repaving the floor of The Great Wave wave pool.

In addition, one of the two Dueling Mammoths raft rides will be removed to make room for a new volcano-themed waterslide called Volcano Vortex. The current Mini Mammoth's Cove zero-depth kid's zone will be revamped for little kids with an exciting mix of slides and tropical-themed interactive play areas that encourage discovery and exploration, all while providing clear sight lines for parents. Fitting with the updated tropical theme, it will be renamed Coral Cove. The remaining Mammoth, which was one of the industry's original family raft rides, is being renamed Paradise Falls.

Londoners can now swim in a natural-water Olympic-sized lido at Canary Wharf. For those unfamiliar, a lido is a floating pool-like structure placed over an existing natural water source — in this case, the natural water docks near the River Thames. Despite its close proximity to the river, the water here is fed by an underground aquifer and filtered through sandy, silty soil and is completely sealed off from the Thames. The water feeds into a 50-meter, 1.3-meter-deep, six-lane floating natural water pool staffed with lifeguards and operated by **Sea Lanes Canary Wharf**.

The water is continuously monitored and tested to ensure it is clean and safe for the public. The area features the Eden Dock project, integrating floating gardens, aquatic islands and marine habitats to revitalize the waterway.

The attraction includes a clubhouse and multiple sauna pods with year-round wellness events such as talks and members' socials and a place to grab food and drink.

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BUSINESS & NEWSMAKERS

► **Chance Rides celebrates 65 years — page 38 / IAAPA Hall of Famer Richard "Dick" Knoebel passes — page 40**

Building new rides and attractions is a family tradition for ADM

AT: Ron Gustafson
Special to Amusement Today

SCHALLER, Iowa — What started as a hobby for the late **Jerry Woodke** has blossomed into a full-fledged family affair which, today, provides a variety of rides and attractions for the amusement industry.

Located in this small rural town of mid-America, **Amusement Devices and Manufacturing LLC (ADM)** now has a third generation of the Woodke family carrying on the tradition that dates back to the 1980s.

"Dad started with the Tubs Of Fun and a slide, which we still build today," company President **Brian Woodke** reflected while discussing his late father. "His hobby of building rides just kept getting bigger and bigger, and he always had the attitude of 'just do it.' He always did his own manufacturing, which we still do today."

Jerry Woodke founded the company in the late '80s under the name of **Amusements Unlimited**.



ADM has donated a Doomsday glider — themed as Big Kahuna — to Arnolds Park Amusement Park in Arnolds Park, Iowa, for the 2026 summer season (above). The ADM sales team gathered for a group photo (right) during IAAPA Expo 2025. From the left are Brian Woodke and wife, Marcia; Maddie Chambers, Brad Woodke and Chandler Woodke. The team was joined by Tim Natan and daughter, Lily, (far right), from South Florida Events, Coconut Creek, Florida. COURTESY ARNOLDS PARK AMUSEMENT PARK, ADM



After his passing in 2013, Brian took over the business and updated it and adopted the current name.

"My daughter, **Ashley (Schulpe)**, and sons **Chandler, Regan** and **Brian Thomas** — we call him B.T. — all work here," Woodke said of the solid family core at the heart of ADM today. "Ashley is the office manag-

er, Regan production manager, B.T. graphics and design, and Chandler manages electrical and paint."

Small company, big catalog

The company has sold hundreds of rides over the years, and despite being a small business with less than a dozen full-time employees, ADM continues to pump out its popular product line.

"Slides are still extremely strong for us — we're shipping one to Nova Scotia today," the company official noted.

More than two dozen products are listed in ADM's portfolio, including a variety of swings, interactive rides, walk-through attractions as well as game and food concessions.

The newest attraction to the ride lineup is Doomsday, which made its debut at the **International Independent**

Showmen's Foundation (IISF) trade show last February in Riverview, Florida. Using the company's Fire Storm swing design, the ride incorporates eight two-passenger platforms instead of seats. Doomsday rises and tilts while it rotates, offering a glider-like experience.

As for orders coming into the business, Woodke said production remains brisk with close to 50 projects lined up.

"We are busy year-round with the busiest schedule May to October," he explained. "We're staying on target with production and will bring in some seasonal help when we are really busy."

How it's done

Numerous buildings totaling 25,000 square feet of manufacturing area make up the ADM complex, with another structure going in this year. Woodke

pointed out that separate buildings are used for fabrication, welding, painting and assembly.

"Once a ride is completed, we set it up indoors and test it," he explained. "Load test paperwork and the ASTM checklist are gone through. We run each ride several hours to make sure everything is adjusted properly so it's ready to go."

"We design everything here — my sons and myself — and everybody has input. We try to base everything to set up or tear down in about 45 minutes. We have two new rides in development now."

Keeping it simple has also been a recipe for success at the company. The variety of swing rides use similar components on their drive systems and the company stocks all of its parts for

► **See ADM, page 36**



ADM showcased its new Doomsday glider ride at the IISF trade show in Riverview, Florida, last February. AT/RON GUSTAFSON

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►ADM

Continued from page 35

immediate shipment.

ADM started producing clamshell game trailers last year and, according to Woodke, there has been a good market for the product.

"We try to keep our game trailers simple, just like our rides," he asserted. "The industry in general needs that. It's the simplicity of what we build — easy to set up, inspect and maintain. It all falls into place, and everything we build can be moved with a one-ton pickup. And we're there when you need us for service. We had a customer just tell us, 'thank you for answering the phone,' as that isn't the case at some companies."

Woodke said the ease of moving ADM equipment has also been a strong selling point with carnival operators.

ADM also responded when it realized there was a demand within the industry to have their manuals printed in both English and Spanish. Woodke said some of the larger mobile industry operators made him aware of the need for bilingual documents.

Broad market



The Liberty Wheel is on loan from ADM to Arnold's Amusement Park for the summer season (above left). new to the lakeside facility this summer. With finishing touches put on at the ADM facility, a mini pirate ship (above middle) is readying to set sail to a farm in Kansas. In addition, a Reckless attraction will soon be heading to Dewberry Farm in Texas from the ADM factory. COURTESY ARNOLD'S AMUSEMENT PARK, ADM



The company has found sales in just about every segment of the amusement industry.

"We do a lot of business with amusement parks, FECs and agritourism," Woodke said. "SkyLand Ranch in Pigeon Forge (Tennessee) has purchased a six-ride package."

He said the rental and carnival industries have also embraced ADM products for several reasons.

"I've talked to clients who have ordered rides out of Italy, and they are waiting up to five years for delivery," he noted. "With us, they are looking at a

wait time of six months to a year. We're currently doing projects with **Helm and Sons Amusements** (Colton, California), and **Tufano Amusements** (Cheshire, Connecticut). They buy our core rides, being the pirate, Ballistic (swings) and fun-houses as simple fill-ins."

Other recent clients include **Butler Amusements**, Fairfield, California; **Gopher State Expositions**, St. Cloud, Minnesota; and **Fiesta Shows**, Seabrook, New Hampshire.

"They want American equipment, parts available in America and someone they can talk to on the phone," he emphasized.

"As for the business climate, from those I've talked to on the road, things are going well so far this year."

Philanthropist

ADM is also a generous contributor within the amusement industry. The company donated one of its Wizzer rides to IISF for a raffle in support of the foundation during the February trade show. Close to \$14,000 was raised by the initiative, with the winner being **Michael Barbacovi of Spectrum Entertainment**, Bessemer, Michigan.

Woodke said he is providing a Domsday glider, kiddie wheel and funhouse to **Arnolds Park Amusement Park** in Arnolds Park, Iowa, for the summer season.

"The park is a nonprofit, so many people make big donations to them," he said of the historic property located on Lake Okoboji. "You've got to do your part in society, and this is our part in helping the park, which is only 90 miles from us. They bring a lot of school kids in, and they see

what's new when they visit. We'll get the rides back after the season."

"Brian and his team at ADM have been fantastic friends of Historic Arnolds Park. Each of the last few seasons, ADM has loaned us a selection of rides to fill gaps in our park," **Jon Pausley, CEO of Historic Arnolds Park Inc.**, told *Amusement Today*. "They have been a tremendous asset to the guest experience and the joy of our amusement park."

The team is generous with their time and expertise, and we are a better park providing better experiences to our guests because of our partnership with ADM."

Thankful

"I'm a very lucky man to have family involved in the business, that's for sure," Woodke said. "I thank my lucky stars every day, and I'm extremely happy with the business."

As for his personal philosophy, "I believe you do the best you can and go on to the next day."

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Chandler Woodke (center) explains a component on one of ADM's rides to prospective buyers during IAAPA Expo 2025. COURTESY ADM

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Chance Rides celebrates 65 years of attractions, innovations

Company's ride catalogue filled with true industry staples

AT: Tim Baldwin
tbaldwin@amusementtoday.com

WICHITA, Kan. — C.P. Huntington, Trabant, Rotor, Zipper — these rides immediately conjure images decades long in the amusement industry. Over the past 65 years, such staples were just the beginning for **Chance Rides**.

Harold Chance founded the company in 1961 as **Chance Manufacturing Co. Inc.** Catering to both the carnival market as well as amusement parks and the fledgling concept of theme parks, the manufacturer became a go-to for providing rides that appealed to families.

The legendary C.P. Huntington paved the way for amusement park owners to offer a needed train ride that would reach a wide demographic. In more than six decades, the popular model had more than 400 units sold. As an example of how the amusement industry evolves, what was originally an attraction powered by gas, diesel or propane is now environmentally friendly with all-electric power.

"One of the rides that truly put Chance Rides on the map was the Zipper," said **Jay Aguilar**, global VP of marketing. "Its unique design, thrilling ride experience and reliability made it a favorite with carnival operators and fairgoers alike. The Zipper quickly became an iconic attraction and helped establish Chance as an innovative manufacturer capable of



Colorful carousels (above) are a specialty for Chance. The C.P. Huntington train (below) has sold more than 400 units over the decades. COURTESY CHANCE RIDES; AT/TIM BALDWIN

building rides that stood out in a competitive industry. While the C.P. Huntington Train has become our signature product over the decades, the success of the Zipper played a pivotal role in building the company's early reputation."

In 1970, Chance acquired **Allan Herschell Company** and entered the carousel business. By 2013, Chance had produced more than 300 carousels. In 1977, the purchase of **Minibus** not only put Chance in the business of transport but also paved the way for trams and streetcar replicas.

Today, still at the original site Harold Chance founded, Chance Rides' 250,000-square-foot facility offers a broad portfolio. Classic flat rides, transportation rides, people movers, observation rides and roller coasters make Chance a one-stop shop for many properties.

"Over the past 65 years, we've grown from manufacturing a handful of rides into offering one of the industry's most diverse product portfolio," Aguilar told *Amusement Today*. "That diversity allows us to serve customers ranging from theme parks and zoos to municipalities, resorts, museums and attractions around the world."



Innovation became standard with new technology and new developments in engineering. In addition to the upgrades to the C.P. Huntington, the Trabant evolved into the WipeOut, and today's eTram embraces the global perspective of sustainability.

Over time, partnerships and ownership adjusted the direction of the company. Harold Chance retired, letting

his son **Dick Chance** take over the reins. Dick's son, **Mike Chance** joined in 1998 and led the company into building roller coasters. In 2001, Mike acquired the assets of **D.H. Morgan Manufacturing**. Partnering with **Bussink Technology** in 2004, Chance produced observation wheels from that company as an exclusive North American licensee. In 2017, **John Chance** led the efforts to convert the C.P. Huntington trains from internal combustion to fully electric, which further drove sales. That same year, **Aaron Landrum** joined as president and COO, who stepped into the role as

CEO in 2023 following Dick's retirement. The company was purchased by the private firm **Permanent Equity**.

Chance's influence on the attractions industry also goes beyond ride sales. In 1971, Harold organized the first amusement ride safety seminar that eventually grew into the organization known today as **AIMS International** (or Amusement Industry Manufacturers & Suppliers International).

"Every installation represents a partnership with our customers," said Aguilar. "Each project is an opportunity to combine craftsmanship, innovation and creativity to deliver an attraction families will enjoy for generations. Among the installations we're especially proud of are the custom 50-foot carousels we created for projects in Singapore and Beijing. These highly customized attractions challenged our team to push the boundaries of design and craftsmanship while showcasing the quality and attention to detail that define Chance Rides."

An amusement supplier with such a long career undoubtedly boasts fans of rides past — whether they be flat ride classics or the quirky Toboggan spiraling roller coaster or eye-popping Sky Diver on a carnival midway — but with a long line of trains, carousels, wheels and trams, Chance reaches beyond the typical amusement park or carnival.

With the new strength owing to new ownership, Chance continues to innovate and push its own creative boundaries, such as the surreal carousel recently installed at **Area15** in Vegas.

"Customer service has been at the heart of Chance Rides for the past 65 years," Aguilar told AT. "Our commitment begins with building relationships that extend far beyond the sale. From engineering and manufacturing to installation, training, parts and ongoing support, we're there every step of the way to help our customers succeed. Many of our customers have trusted Chance for decades and those long-standing partnerships are one of our greatest accomplishments."



Chance captured the attention of amusement parks and carnival operators with classics such as Trabant (above left) and Zipper (above right). AT/GARY SLADE, TIM BALDWIN

Focus *on the* HORIZON

Guest focus, giving back and moments with giraffes inspire

WILLIAMSBURG, Va. — When Cassady Watson discusses her career so far, she says a mix of luck, forward momentum and trust in herself all came together. As a student at the University of Tampa, she says a very practical motivation helped point her toward the attractions industry. "I did not want to go back to Ohio that summer," she said. "I loved being in Florida, so after my second semester, I started looking for a job, and it led me to Busch Gardens Tampa."

"The park took a chance on me," she continued. "After I started, my manager admitted that during my interview she worried I might be too quiet for the team and worried how I would fit in. We all laugh now because being quiet is not a trait that describes me at all!"

Watson embraced her role quickly. She learned how her department worked with nearly every other area in the park, and before long, she believed she had found her path.

"At the end of 2019, I finished my internship with the Tampa park and accepted a role with Busch Gardens Williamsburg that would start in May 2020, once I graduated. I was excited to move to Virginia and start my full-time career."

Then the pandemic stalled her plans. "It was scary," she said. "There was so much uncertainty, and it felt like everything I had planned was coming to a stop. I graduated a year early and was ready to start my life, and then everything was put on pause."

Watson moved back to Ohio, trusting everything would work out. In 2021, she returned to Tampa as a public relations specialist before transitioning to her current role as public relations manager at Busch Gardens Williamsburg.

Today, Watson oversees all aspects of the park's public relations efforts. When asked what she loves most about the attractions industry, she says park

guests and the interactions she has with them inspire her.

"Our parks have incredible animals, rides and experiences," she said. "Each day we create once-in-a-lifetime opportunities for our guests and expose them to moments they won't get anywhere else. I love helping provide amazing memories for our guests not just on a large scale, but also on a personal level by stopping to take a photo or answering a question. Those moments in the park mean a great deal to me."

This message she shares with others as they begin their journey within the industry. "I remind our new hires and interns that we have the ability to experience things many others never will, and we need to embrace those moments, while also remembering why we do what we do."

One of her favorite memories came during her internship, when she helped take members of the media out on the Serengeti Safari. "Seven giraffes came up to the truck," she said. "It was an amazing opportunity to share with media so they could help tell our conservation story and show all that we do at Busch Gardens, while also giving them something really special. The recent opening of Lion and Hyena Ridge has been a full-circle moment for me, bringing me back to that experience of connecting animals and people."

Although Watson's first full-time role did not begin as quickly as she had hoped, she says the pause taught her to stay present. "Some early advice I got was to not be so focused on getting to the next step that I miss appreciating what I am doing," she explained. "When we get into big moments such as a media day, a hard hat tour or an attraction launch, she told me it's important to take a few moments to soak it all in and appreciate the opportunity you've had in creating and supporting it. I keep that advice

Cassady Watson Busch Gardens Williamsburg, Virginia



with me and share it today."

Along with her internship at Busch Gardens, Watson also became involved with the IAAPA Ambassador Program — another experience that helped shape her career. "2018 was a big year for me," she said. "A colleague at the park encouraged me to explore the IAAPA opportunity during IAAPA Expo. That fall, I assisted in the IAAPA Press Office and became hooked. I have returned to the program each year since."

One of her biggest surprises — and takeaways — as an IAAPA Ambassador was discovering the global size and impact of the attractions industry. "The scale of this industry is still not as widely understood as you would expect," Watson said. "I saw so much that first Expo, and today, when I am recruiting for interns for the park, or speaking about the IAAPA Ambassador program, I talk about the amazing breadth and depth of this industry and how there are so many different paths we can take within it."

When asked what advice she has for others, she points to one

key idea: get started. "Get a job," she said. "It doesn't have to be the dream role, or even an office role. Start in a park. There is so much benefit to having park experience and understanding guest services, operations and having the service-first mindset. Waiting for that perfect job is frustrating and can be hard. Starting somewhere is the most important step. Don't wait. That first step may even surprise you and turn into your career."

She also reminds young professionals that company size does not matter. "I have met many students and job seekers set on working for a large industry company," Watson said. "Often, leaner teams let you jump in quickly and find meaningful ways to contribute."

For Watson, those early experiences continue to influence her work and her outlook. "My first internship and the IAAPA Ambassador program changed my life," she said. "Together they helped solidify what I want to do within this industry, and I'm excited about what the future will bring."

—Susan Storey

OBITUARY

Industry legend Richard "Dick" Knoebel passes away at 87

ELYSBURG, Pa. — Knoebels Amusement Resort announced with deep sadness the passing of Richard "Dick" Knoebel, the park's president Emeritus and longtime leader of the family-owned amusement resort. He was 87.

"Dick's legacy lives on in every laugh, every ride and every tradition that makes Knoebels feel like home," the Knoebel family shared in a joint statement. "He loved this park, he loved the guests who made it special, and he loved the team who cared for it each and every day."

Knoebel leaves behind generations of people whose lives were shaped by his steady leadership, determination, and his firm belief that Knoebels should always be a place where families could spend time together.

Born April 28, 1939, to the late Lawrence and Margaret "Peg" (Salter) Knoebel, he grew up in the family business and learned the value of hard work, responsibility and perseverance early on. Those values became the foundation of his life and leadership. With an engineer's mind and a Marine's determination, he believed there was always a way forward. He simply refused to accept "it can't be done" as an answer.

After earning a Bachelor of Science degree in Engineering Geophysics from Lehigh University, he answered the call to serve his country. From 1962 to 1965, he served on active duty in the United States Marine Corps as an aircraft maintenance officer. He continued his military service in the Marine Corps Reserve, ultimately attaining the rank of captain.

On February 10, 1968, he married the love of his life, Barbara (Cook) Knoebel. Together they raised their sons, Rick and Brian, in a home where family and Knoebels were never far apart.

Knoebel served as president of Knoebels from 1988 until transitioning into the role of President Emeritus in 2025, guiding the park through nearly four decades of immense growth while steadfastly preserving the values,



Richard "Dick" Knoebel

traditions and sense of community that define Knoebels.

Born into the family business, Knoebel was passionate about the amusement park from childhood and dedicated his life to its stewardship. Under his leadership, Knoebels earned national and international recognition while remaining true to its hometown roots—free admission and commitment to providing a destination for all ages to make lifetime memories.

Among his many accomplishments, alongside his family and dedicated team, Knoebel oversaw the preservation and creation of countless celebrated rides, including Phoenix, Flying Turns, Haunted Mansion and Black Diamond. His influence extended well beyond Elysburg through decades of service to the amusement industry, including leadership roles with the Pennsylvania Amusement Parks & Attractions and IAAPA. In 2014, he was inducted into the IAAPA Hall of Fame. In 2022, he was named a Golden Ticket Award Legend.

"Dick had a unique talent for inspiring people to think bigger, push boundaries, and pursue ideas that seemed ambitious but ultimately became reality," shared Valerio Ferrari of Zamperla. "Conversations with Dick were never just about rides or projects; they were about imagination, creativity and finding ways to create experiences that would bring joy to generations of guests."

Nothing brought Knoebel more joy than walking the park as the sounds of carousel organs filled the air, checking on projects, talking with team members and watching families enjoy Knoebels. Whether riding the Grand Carousel, camping with family, sharing a meal or spending an afternoon on the golf course, he loved seeing guests make memories together at Knoebels. He valued his team so deeply because he understood those moments were possible because of them.

In his final interview with *Amusement Today*, Knoebel was asked what his personal favorite was. He summed his adoration of Knoebels perfectly with the comment, "I can't pick one over the other because I love them all."

"At the conclusion of each trip he took around the park, I was handed a To-Do List," said Knoebel's youngest son and current president of the park, Brian. "With his last breath, he did everything he could to make Knoebels the greatest destination on earth."

Knoebel was preceded in death by his beloved wife, Barbara, in 2009. He is survived by his sons, Rick (Dawn) and Brian (Dawna); his cherished granddaughters, Haley, Abby, Hannah, and Ashley; his brother, Buddy (Debbie) and his children, Stacey and Trevor; his sister, Leanna (Joe) Muscato and their daughter, Lauren; along with many nieces, nephews, cousins, extended family members and friends.

In his later years, Knoebel and his family were deeply grateful for the companionship and unwavering support provided by his devoted caretaker, Jeannie Reedy, whose kindness and dedication meant so much to him.

"Dick was a true 'Legend' and 'Hall of Famer,' but he was also a 'pioneer.' I will dearly miss my friend," offered *Amusement Today* Publisher Gary Slade. "His knowledge of so many rides, their suppliers and parts, was limitless and will never be matched again."

ON THE MOVE

RWS Global announced that **Matt Conover** has joined the company as divisional president, global production. Conover brings more than 37 years of experience from **The Walt Disney Company** and a proven track record of producing large-scale live entertainment experiences worldwide to his new team.



Conover

"Matt's expertise offers something uniquely valuable — an understanding of how world-class experiences are maintained over decades, across teams, geographies and changing audiences," said **Jake McCoy**, RWS Global's interim CEO.

In this position, Conover will oversee production strategy, planning, company-wide execution, working closely with creative, business, and operational teams to support all projects from development through delivery.

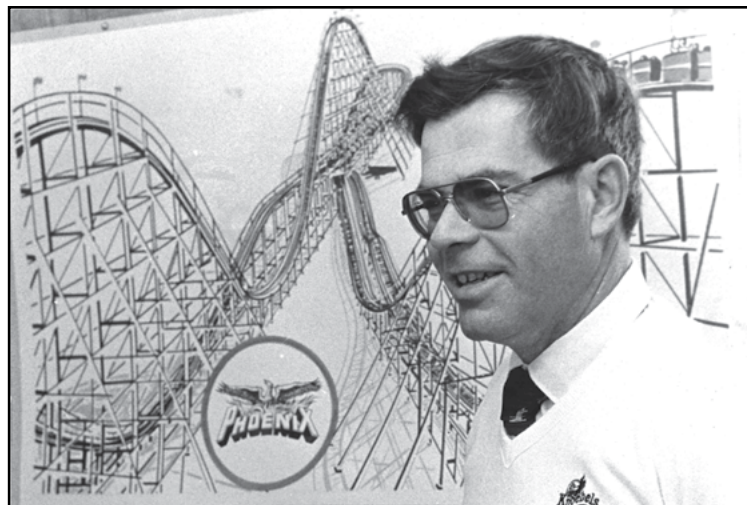
Mary Lee Walsh of Springfield, Massachusetts, has started a full-time venture as executive assistant to the president and chief executive officer of **Eastern States Exposition** (ESE). In this role, she will provide high-level administrative, operational and strategic support to the CEO and executive office. She will be a trusted partner and ensure seamless daily operations, proactive coordination and clean communication across the organization.



Walsh

"Creating community and being a people person are my strengths," said Walsh. "My ability to connect with others, my organized nature and foresight will all serve me well in this role."

Walsh earned her bachelor's degree in social science from Providence College in Providence, R.I. She also spent time studying abroad in London, England, through Richmond American University.



Until her passing in 2009, Dick and Barbara Knoebel (above left) were a loving fixture at Knoebels. In the early 1980s, Dick Knoebel proved the industry experts wrong by successfully relocating the Rocket coaster from Playland Park in Texas to Knoebels in Elysburg, Pennsylvania, and rechristening it Phoenix (above right). The coaster is currently the top ranked wooden coaster in the world. COURTESY KNOEBELS

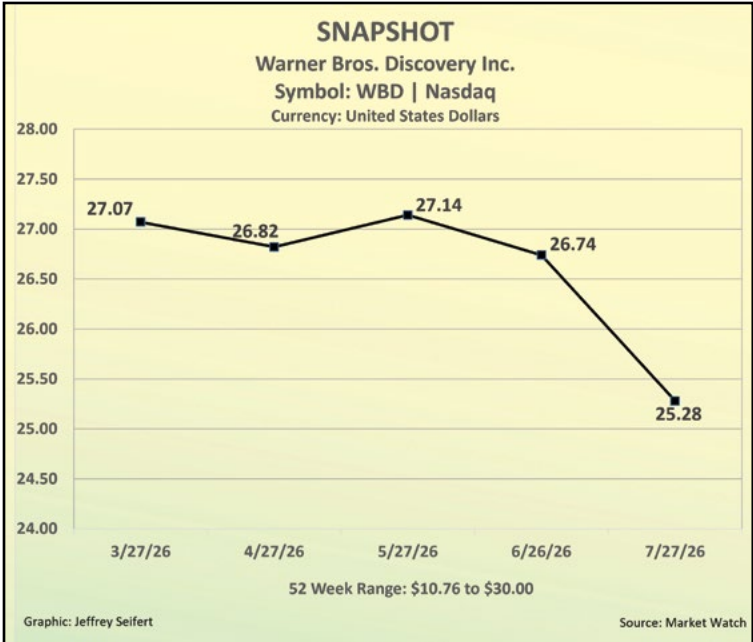
MARKET WATCH

COMPANY	SYMBOL	MARKET	PRICE 7/24/26	HIGH 52-Week	LOW 52-Week
PARKS AND ATTRACTIONS					
The Blackstone Group	BX	NYSE	130.00	190.09	101.73
Carnival Corp.	CCL	NYSE	26.33	34.03	23.45
Comcast Corp./ NBCUniversal Media	CMCSA	NASDAQ	22.30	32.86	21.28
Dave & Busters Entertainment, LLC	PLAY	NASDAQ	9.87	33.30	9.4
EPR Properties	EPR	NYSE	63.53	64.21	48.11
Fuji Kyoko Co., Ltd.	JP:9010	TYO	2,,637	2,738	1,946
Haichang Holdings Ltd.	HK:2255	SEHK	0.340	1.060	0.305
Leofoo Development Co.	TW:2705	TSEC	16.35	18.20	14.90
Lucky Strike Entertainment Corp	LUCK	NYSE	6.88	11.19	5.71
MGM Resorts International	MGM	NYSE	45.54	51.59	29.19
Parks America, Inc.	PRKA	OTCQX	39.00	69.99	33.00
Royal Carribean Cruises, Ltd.	RCL	NYSE	293.54	366.50	232.10
Six Flags Entertainment Co.	FUN	NYSE	17.49	31.99	12.51
Tivoli A/S	DK:TIV	CSE	638.00	658.00	584.00
United Parks & Resorts Inc.	PRKS	NYSE	44.83	56.95	28.77
The Walt Disney Company	DIS	NYSE	94.85	121.40	92.19
Warner Bros Discovery Inc.	WBD	NASDAQ	25.77	30.00	10.76
SUPPLIERS/OTHERS					
Brogent Technologies, Inc.	TW:5263	TSEC	96.50	129.15	82.13
Callaway Golf Co.	CALY	NYSE	18.16	20.28	8.00
Falcon's Beyond	FBYD	NASDAQ	10.49	29.02	3.71
Sansei Technologies, Inc.	TYO:6357	TYO	2,335	2,849	1,698

Daily industry stock information available at amusementtoday.com!

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

—SOURCES: Bigcharts.com



DIESEL PRICES

Region (U.S)	As of 7/20/26	Change from 1 year ago
East Coast	\$5.194	\$1.373
Midwest	\$4.988	\$1.193
Gulf Coast	\$4.942	\$1.466
Mountain	\$4.935	\$1.165
West Coast	\$5.362	\$1.186
California	\$6.471	\$1.508

CURRENCY

On 7/27/26 \$1 USD =	
0.8791	EURO
0.7501	GBP (British Pound)
163.81	JPY (Japanese Yen)
0.8177	CHF (Swiss Franc)
1.4310	AUD (Australian Dollar)
1.4090	CAD (Canadian Dollar)

BUSINESS WATCH

Eatrenalin awarded first Michelin star

RUST, Germany — **Eatrenalin** was awarded a Michelin star by the *Michelin Guide Germany*. Inspectors announced the country’s best restaurants at an award ceremony in Frankfurt. Top chef **Peter Hagen-Wiest**, who is in charge of the culinary direction of the fine dining restaurant, has also held two stars at **Ammolite — House of Light** for 12 consecutive years. Eatrenalin blends culinary excellence, multisensory presentation and innovative technologies to create an experience that is unique worldwide. It is an extraordinary dining experience unlike anything people have ever experienced before — a feast for the senses.

"These awards mean a great deal to us. They confirm the strength of our teams and, at the same time, spur us on to further develop the restaurant with the same innovative spirit and commitment to quality," said Hagen-Wiest.

This unique gourmet experience was the brainchild of **Thomas Mack**, managing partner of **Europa-Park**, and gastronomy expert **Oliver Altherr**.

Land Of Make Believe's Chris Maier honored

HOPE TOWNSHIP, N.J. — When **Christopher Maier** assumed the reins of running the **Land of Make Believe** in the early 1970s, he brought a new vision of family entertainment to the park and with his business leadership in the ensuing years took it to another level. At the start, he immediately operationalized what would become a years-long expansion of the Hope, New Jersey, amusement park’s many facets.

His moral and business distinction was on full display at a recent Warren County Commissioner's meeting with the commissioners presenting Maier with a proclamation recognizing him and the Land of Make Believe for its "high esteem, meritorious record and impact on Warren County."

This was followed by a joint New Jersey Legislative resolution presented by Assemblyman **John DiMaio**, that stated that Christopher Maier and the Land of Make Believe "has established a model to emulate and set a standard of excellence toward which others might strive."

It was noted that Congressman **Tom Kean Jr.** entered into the Congressional Record a statement which recognized "Christopher Maier and the Land of Make Believe as the 'World's Greatest Amusement Park,' one of the most 'Iconic' in America and as being 'Number one in New Jersey.'"

Alterface, Fantawild announce partnership

WAVRE, Belgium — **Alterface** and **Fantawild** have officially entered into a strategic partnership to jointly develop next-generation interactive attractions. The agreement was formalized during **IAAPA Expo Asia** on June 11. The collaboration combines Fantawild’s position as one of China’s leading integrated themed entertainment developers with Alterface’s expertise in interactive technologies and gameplay design.

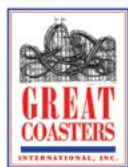
"We see strong potential in this collaboration with Alterface," said **Huo Caixia**, vice president of Fantawild. "Their interactive technologies complement our development capabilities, enabling us to create the next-generation interactive experiences."

Innovation is a central pillar of the partnership. The two companies will jointly explore new ways of engaging guests, with a focus on enhanced gameplay mechanics and the integration of interactive technologies into both new developments and existing attractions.

"Fantawild is a key partner in terms of scale, vision and integration and operation capabilities," said **Stéphane Battaille**, CEO of Alterface Projects SA. "We are pleased to bring our technology to such a leading player in the Chinese themed entertainment market."



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www.GoldenTicketAwards.com



The annual Coastin' On The Course golf tournament — held in conjunction with the Golden Ticket Awards — has raised thousands of dollars for the NRCMA each year. AT/RON GUSTAFSON

Golden Ticket event is perfect time to show support to amusement community

AUSTIN, Texas — The Golden Ticket Awards event begins its weekend activities on Friday, September 11. *Amusement Today* characterizes it as the Networking Event of the Year.

One of the rewarding aspects of the event is that it also supports industry causes. The **National Roller Coaster Museum & Archives** is supported through the charity golf tournament. This year, nearby **Morgan's Wonderland** in San Antonio will receive funds from a night of bowling at host facility **Kalahari Resort** in Round Rock.

"The golf tournament is more than just a fun way to kick off Golden Ticket weekend. Every foursome, sponsorship and raffle ticket helps support the National Roller Coaster Museum & Archives and its mission to preserve the history of our industry for future generations," said **Walt Bowser, Baynum Solutions**.

Bowser, along with Baynum's **Melissa Bamford** coordinate the outing.

"The tournament is a four-person scramble, making it enjoyable for golfers of all skill levels," Bamford said. "One of the highlights each year is seeing competitors from parks, manufacturers and suppliers who normally work together throughout the year get to spend a relaxed morning on the course while helping support the museum. It's become one of the favorite networking events of Golden Ticket weekend."

Individuals are welcome to register.

Participants who are not in a foursome will be paired with others so everyone has an opportunity to play.

The **National Roller Coaster Museum** is located in Plainview, Texas, and is a treasure trove for preserving and storing numerous coaster cars, artifacts, models, signage and blueprints from the amusement industry. Countless hours have been put in to transfer and receive donations from gracious donors and parks from around the world. The golf outing is a support of this facility.

"Organizing a charity event like the golf tournament is a little like herding cats or running a circus," said golfer **Pete Barto**, president **PB Amusement**. "Trading the safety of roller coasters for the unpredictable danger of a stray golf ball can be frightening, but funding the NRCMA makes every stray slice worth it. The lively and entertaining amusement industry personalities that participate in the event always provide great comic relief and are guaranteed to generate a story or memory that I take with me as inspiration for the next year."

The **Tera Vista Golf Club** is just 15 minutes from the host hotel.

On that Friday night, Kalahari's B-Lux Bowling will be the site for some late-night revelry with drinks and bowling. All proceeds benefit Morgan's Wonderland, the first ultra-accessible theme park for people of all abilities. Who has the best score or the lowest? It probably won't matter. The laughs will be enough. Don't miss it.

At host facility **COTALand**, Hot Lap will benefit both charities. If the desire to climb into a race car with a professional driver is there, this is the chance!

"COTALand is very excited to support our industry friends with Hot Lap," said **Matt Hughey**, vice president, park operations. "Guests will experience an exhilarating ride packed with excitement and adrenaline — the kind of unforgettable thrill that only COTALand can deliver."

The Golden Ticket Awards event will take place on September 11 and 12. The event is free for all professionals working in the amusement industry.

Event registration and hotel reservations are open at goldenticketawards.com.



During Friday night at the 2026 Golden Ticket Awards event, Kalahari's B-Lux Bowling will play host to a fundraising event for Morgan's Wonderland full of good times and revelry. AT/TIM BALDWIN



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Dave's success was built on a rare combination of creativity, strategic thinking and genuine care for the people he served. He believed that the best outcomes came from knowledge, preparation and advocacy. By thoroughly understanding his clients' operations and effectively educating underwriters on the unique nature of their risks, Dave helped remove uncertainty from the underwriting process and delivered fair, competitive and effective insurance solutions.

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Dave would call me at 6 a.m. nearly every day to touch base. I knew Dave had our best interests in mind. Dave was the most trusted and valued partner. He became a great friend through years of working together.”

— **Peter Pelle**, Central Amusement

Dave was incredibly thorough. He drove me and most of the office staff nuts making sure that the T's were crossed and the I's dotted. He was the best insurance man I have ever worked with and man did he save us a lot of money.”

— **Ron Burback**, Funtastic Rides

Working with Dave over the past 15 years has been nothing short of seamless. The passion, integrity and knowledge he brings to the table to merge the entertainment and insurance worlds together has been paramount in our operational success. Knowing Dave is just a phone call away brings a sense of calming that our business and guests are protected.”

— **Mike Murphy**, Triple Play

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SAFETY & OPERATIONS

► ProFun Academy, E&A announce partnership — page 48 / RLI launches new insurance solution — page 50

Venu+ DualPod lockers aim to provide safe, efficient fun for guests

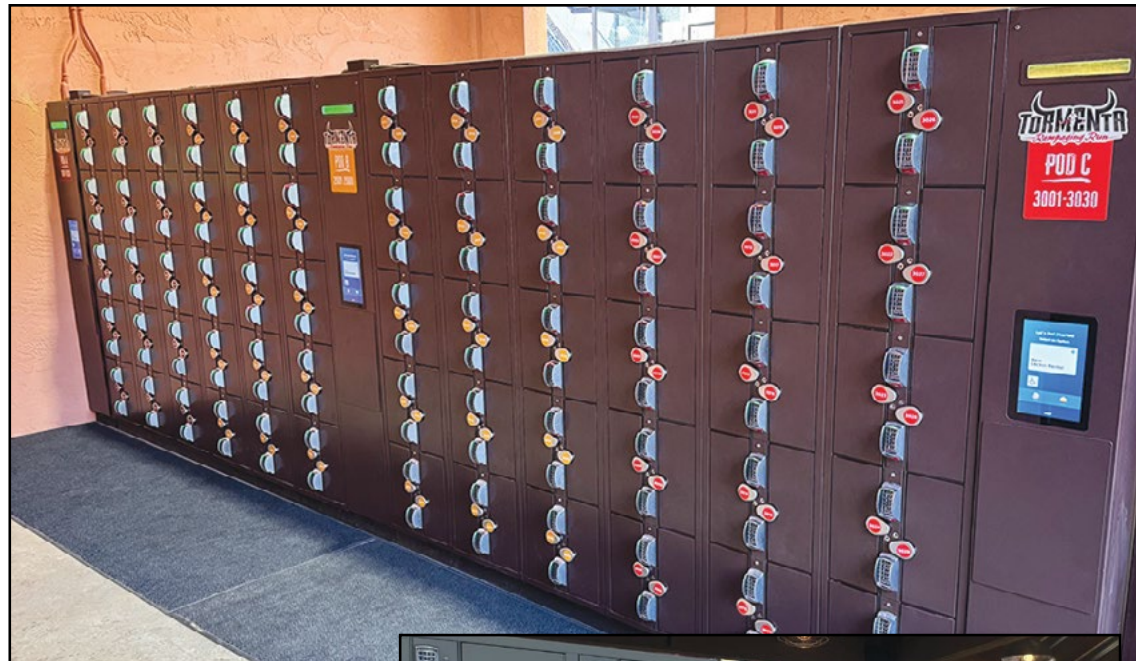
Six Flags Over Texas is latest installation for double-sided locker

AT: Jack Lathrop
Special to Amusement Today

ARLINGTON, Texas — Loose articles remain one of the more persistent safety and operations problems on modern thrill rides. Guests are carrying more items around the park than ever before: phones, wallets, car keys, sunglasses, cameras, souvenir mugs. This creates several problems for venues to address. In the past, parks often provided cubbies and bins in loading areas for attractions, but as ride systems have evolved and the number of loose articles guests carry has grown, a better solution has become necessary. Venues are also placing increasing emphasis on speeding up operations so that more guests can experience an attraction in a day. Loose articles often result in slower operations, even if by a few seconds.

Parks have attempted to solve this with a bank of lockers outside of the queue, but that approach comes with its own cost. Guests are separated from their phones and valuables during the wait, and the locker bank itself can become a bottleneck. There is often a charge for these lockers as well, which adds yet another expense to a day at the park.

A double-sided, pass-through locker design is one answer parks are increasingly turning to. Guests carry their belongings through



Double-sided lockers at Tormenta at Six Flags Over Texas (above) let guests access belongings from either side. Double-sided lockers have improved guest throughput and help maintain efficient ride operation on installations such as Cedar Point's Siren's Curse (right). COURTESY VENU+

most of the line and use the lockers only in the final stretch before boarding, retrieving their items from the opposite side of the bank on the way out. Six Flags Over Texas installed one such system, Venu+'s DualPod, in the queue of Tormenta Rampaging Run, the Bolliger & Mabillard giga dive coaster that opened July 9 and enforces a strict no-loose-articles policy given its speed and inversions.

"The double-sided ride locker was developed to improve both the guest experience and ride operations," said Kevin Miranda,



senior product manager at Venu+. "Traditional ride lockers often require guests to store their belongings before entering the queue, separating them from their mobile phones and other personal items for an extended period. Our double-sided design allows guests to keep their phones and small personal belongings with them throughout the queue and

store them only immediately before boarding the ride."

Safety, according to Miranda, was the primary target of the design, not a secondary benefit, as a dropped phone or set of keys becomes a hazard the moment a ride reaches real speed or inversions. "The double-sided locker system provides guests with a quick, simple and secure

place to store essential items such as cell phones, wallets, keys and other loose articles before boarding the ride," he said. "This significantly reduces the risk of objects becoming ride hazards while also protecting guests' valuables. Compared to having no locker solution, where personal belongings are often left unattended in unsecured areas, the double-sided locker system provides peace of mind and a much higher level of security."

The operational case is built around the same pass-through mechanic. "Guests deposit their belongings immediately before boarding the attraction and retrieve them immediately after exiting, creating a continuous, one-way flow that eliminates unnecessary backtracking," Miranda noted. "Because the lockers are built directly into the ride queue, they require minimal staff intervention while improving guest throughput and helping maintain efficient ride operations." He also points to reduced congestion around the locker area itself as a direct result of positioning it inside the ride's natural flow rather than as a separate stop guests have to detour to.

Maintenance was designed around the same minimal-footprint principle. Most service tasks on the DualPod system require only one or two common tools, according to Miranda, and the system's software provides real-time diagnostics and health monitoring,

► See LOCKERS, page 46

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Double-sided access lets attendants service lockers from both sides, reducing wait times during peak attendance. COURTESY VENU+

► LOCKERS

Continued from page 45

allowing operators to flag issues before they affect ride operations. Technicians can manage most functions from a handheld tablet rather than returning to a central kiosk.

Configuration is built to scale to a park's footprint and throughput needs. DualPod lockers are available in multiple compartment sizes, including pocket-sized lockers for items, taller, slim lockers designed to accommodate souvenir cups and similar items (like those installed for Tormenta); and traditional full-size lockers for parks that wish to offer complimentary storage for larger personal belongings. Venu+ works closely with each park to determine the optimal number of lockers, configuration, and kiosk placement for the attraction. Parks can also choose the way guests access the lockers. Barcodes, 7-digit IDs, or facial recognition are all options available. Venu+ is also the only company offering facial recognition with an opt-out option, letting guests choose between hands-free access and a traditional 7-digit ID code.

More and more venues are turning to dual-sided locker solutions to help ensure safe, efficient operations. "The response has been tremendous," said Miranda. "Over the past 12 months, we've seen demand for double-sided ride lockers grow significantly as more parks recognize the operational and guest experience benefits they provide."

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ProFun Academy, E&A announce strategic training partnership

AT: Pam Sherborne

psherborne@amusementtoday.com

RIYADH, Saudi Arabia — The **Profun Academy**, headquartered in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, announced in June a strategic partnership with **Safety Skills Training DMCC (SST)**, the international training division of **Ellis and Associates**, a major force in aquatic safety, lifeguard training and attractions operations.

This partnership marks a significant milestone for the leisure and attractions industry across the region, empowering the Profun Academy to deliver Ellis and Associates' globally recognized suite of professional training and certification programs to operators, venues and individuals throughout the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and beyond.

Ellis and Associates has long set the benchmark for aquatic safety standards worldwide. Safety Skills Training DMCC serves as its dedicated international arm, managing global partnerships and training delivery outside of the United States.

"At the heart of this partnership is a shared belief that well-trained professionals save lives and create exceptional guest experiences," said **Ryan Phillips**, general manager, Profun Academy, during the announcement of the partnership. "We are proud to work alongside the Ellis family of companies to ensure that the highest standards of training are accessible to operators and professionals across the region."

Through this collaboration, the Profun Academy becomes an authorized delivery partner for the full



ProFun Academy announced a strategic partnership with Safety Skills Training DMCC, the international training division of Ellis and Associates. COURTESY ELLIS AND ASSOCIATES

Ellis portfolio of programs and services; bringing internationally accredited programs to the doorstep of the region's rapidly growing leisure, water park and attractions sector.

"This partnership represents an important step in supporting the rapid evolution of Saudi Arabia's attractions and entertainment industry," said **Scott Deisley**, managing director, SST. "By combining the Profun Academy's local expertise and industry reach with the globally recognized training standards of Ellis and Associates, we are helping

operators build a culture of safety, professionalism and operational excellence. We are excited to contribute to the Kingdom's Vision 2030 ambitions by developing the next generation of aquatic safety and attractions professionals."

Through this partnership, the Profun Academy will deliver the full Ellis suite of internationally accredited programs across four core areas, offered through traditional, blended and online learning pathways to meet the needs of today's leisure and attractions professionals.

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CPR, AED, Basic Life Support (BLS) and First Aid, available in both blended and traditional delivery formats to suit different learning environments and operational needs.

The programs include Aquatic Safety and Lifeguarding, Aquatic and Attractions Operations, Aquatic Leadership Program and Workplace Safety and Compliance.

Headquartered in Riyadh, the Profun Academy is the region's leading specialist training institution for the amusement, attraction, cultural and entertainment industries. The academy is built by operators, for operators. Backed by over four decades of Profun expertise, spanning more than 500 clients across 50-plus countries and supported by an expanding network of world-class learning partners, the academy delivers tailored, internationally accredited programs that set the standard for professional development across the industry.

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Preparing your team, guests and equipment for temperatures

The race to Labor Day is when the attractions industry is pushed to its limit. Longer days, larger crowds, reduced staffing and peak attendance create incredible opportunities, but they also bring one of the most challenging operational conditions every park faces: extreme heat.

High temperatures don't just affect guest comfort. They influence employee performance, ride operation, equipment and the overall guest experience. A proactive approach to heat management helps keep people safe, protects equipment and minimizes operational interruptions.

A strong safety culture means preparing for predictable risks before they become emergencies, and heat is an annual challenge to address through training, communication and daily vigilance.

The first line of defense is your team. Every employee, from ride operators and maintenance technicians to management, should recognize the signs of heat-related illness. Heat exhaustion often begins with heavy sweating, dizziness, headache, nausea, muscle cramps, fatigue or confusion. Untreated, it can progress to a life-threatening emergency.

Keeping employees cool requires more than water. Schedule hydration breaks before employees become thirsty. Rotate team members through shaded or air-conditioned assignments. Provide cooling towels or fans where practical, and ensure break areas offer meaningful relief. Supervisors should actively check on employees throughout the day rather than waiting for a reported problem. Encourage staff to speak up if they notice a coworker struggling. A simple comment like, "I don't feel right," should always be taken seriously.

Guests also need extra attention during extreme heat. Clear communication about hydration stations, shaded seating and cooling areas can improve both comfort and safety. Signage, mobile apps and public announcements can remind visitors to drink water, apply sunscreen and recognize the signs of heat stress, particularly for young children and older adults.

Heat affects equipment just as much as people. Elevated temperatures can impact hydraulic systems, electrical components, motors, bearings, sensors, control cabinets and other critical ride systems. Maintenance and operations teams

should remain alert for unusual odors, abnormal noises, warning alarms, overheating components, slower-than-normal operation, or changes in ride performance. Early reporting can prevent minor concerns from becoming major operational issues.

Daily inspections become even more valuable during heat events. Verify cooling and ventilation systems are functioning properly, monitor operating temperatures where applicable, and follow manufacturer recommendations for inspections, lubrication and maintenance. Encourage operators to report anything that looks, sounds or feels different.

Heat preparedness isn't solely a maintenance or operations responsibility, it's an organizational responsibility. Every department plays a role in recognizing hazards, communicating concerns and supporting one another throughout the busiest days of the season.

The strongest organizations understand that safety is not a checklist it's a mindset. Preparing your team to recognize what to look for, what to listen for and when to act will help protect guests, support employees and keep attractions operating safely throughout the hottest days of summer.

Space for this AIMS page is provided courtesy of *Amusement Today* as a corporate partner of AIMS Intl. Content is provided by AT & AIMS.

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 **STREICHER Group**

RLI launches new insurance solution for entertainment and amusement operators

PEORIA, ILL. — RLI announced the launch of its Entertainment & Amusement insurance product, a specialized property and casualty solution designed to meet the unique needs of entertainment and amusement venue operators.

The product serves a broad range of businesses, including amusement parks, family entertainment centers, fairs, festivals, mobile amusements, concessionaires and similar attractions. Coverage is available on a non-admitted basis in all 50 states.

"Entertainment and amusement operators need an insurance partner that understands the demands of their industry," said **Jen Klobnak**, chief operating officer. "Our investment in this market reflects our commitment to providing customized insurance solutions, expert underwriting and responsive service."

RLI has named **Kym Tormey** as vice president, Entertainment & Amusement, to lead the product. Tormey brings more than 35 years of insurance industry experience, including nine years leading specialty entertainment and amusement insurance programs. She will lead the strategic growth and underwriting operations of the new business.



Tormey

"I'm excited for this opportunity because it allows me to work with a community I genuinely respect and have experience serving," said Tormey. "My team and I look forward to contributing our expertise while bringing fresh ideas, curiosity and energy to support our customers' success."

Entertainment and amusement venue operators interested in learning more about available coverage should contact their insurance broker.

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PortAventura World focuses on regenerating the environment

TARRAGONA, Spain — **PortAventura World** sets out in its 2025 Sustainability Report how sustainability has been integrated across the company. Over the past year, the Costa Daurada resort has consolidated its energy transition and decarbonization strategy. Even with the addition of new businesses, the **Hotel Ponient Marinada** and the industrial laundry, the theme resort has reduced its scope 1 and 2 emissions by 21.3%, in line with its reduction commitment validated by the Science Based Targets initiative (SBTi).

Efficient resource management has also been reflected in progress on the circular economy and water management. The latter is especially sensitive given the region's water stress. The company has a system based on the separation of circuits, recirculation and the use of non-potable water, which has enabled 5% water efficiency across the resort, equivalent to the annual consumption of more than 1,500 inhabitants.

Especially mindful of its role as a player in the region, in 2025 PortAventura World opened the PortAventura Facility Services industrial laundry, open to local businesses and which, thanks to its water and heat recovery system, cuts water consumption by 16% compared with a conventional laundry. In addition, the water used is 100% non-potable.

Among other sustainability developments, "The Energy Circuit" stands out, an educational area at PortAventura Solar that aims to bring renewable energy generation closer to schools. PortAventura Solar has become a key asset since its creation in 2022. With more than 15,000 solar panels, the photovoltaic plant has generated 36.87 GWh since it opened, equivalent to the annual consumption of more than 11,200 households in Spain.

In addition, since PortAventura World's earliest days the company has contributed to protecting

biodiversity. In 2025 the Swallows Project, carried out in collaboration with the **Institut Català d'Ornitologia**, recorded 214 common swallow nests, 14% more than the previous year, and reached 86 active nests, the highest figure since monitoring began. An ethical urban wildlife management program has also been launched, and more than 150

cats have been neutered to control the population and safeguard animal welfare. This initiative has had the active involvement of employees.

With more than 15,000 solar panels, PortAventura Solar has become a key asset since its creation in 2022.
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World's Largest Swimming Lesson continues to address water safety

Annual event succeeds in building skills to prevent drowning

AT: Jeffrey Seifert
jseifert@amusementtoday.com

INTERNATIONAL — Just days before millions of Americans flocked to pools, lakes, beaches and water parks for the Independence Day holiday, communities across the globe joined forces for the annual World's Largest Swimming Lesson (WLSL). The global initiative serves as a timely, crucial reminder that basic swimming instruction and water safety education remain the most effective tools for drowning prevention.

During the 17th Annual WLSL, tens of thousands of children gathered to learn essential skills, reinforcing a simple but powerful message: "Swimming Lessons Save Lives." Throughout the day, dedicated lifeguards and instructors taught foundational safety habits while encouraging families to view lessons as a core component of a layered drowning prevention strategy.

"The World's Largest Swimming Lesson is proof that local action can create global impact," said **Rick Root**, president of the **World Waterpark Association**. "Thanks to the thousands of aquatic professionals who shared their time and expertise, children around the world gained essential water competency skills that can help save lives. Every lesson taught strengthens our shared commitment to drowning prevention."

Across six continents, community organizations and aquatic facilities teamed up to expand access to safety education.

At **Disney's Typhoon Lagoon**, Olympic gold medalist **Simone Manuel** joined Florida's largest WLSL event, where more than 600 children from five local nonprofits participated. **Tajiana Ancora-Brown**, director of external affairs at **Walt Disney World**, noted that for many kids, it was their very



Dollywood's Splash Country, which has participated for 16 years, set a record for the single largest lesson worldwide. COURTESY WORLD WATERPARK ASSOCIATION

first time at a water park — making the experience both fun and life-changing.

Partnering with the **Swim Global Project**, The **Life Saving Association of Uganda** joined the event for the first time, introducing more than 620 youth to water safety. **Nathalie Martin**, founder of Swim Global Project, emphasized the importance of the program's international scope.

"When I see communities in Uganda and across Africa joining the World's Largest Swimming Lesson, I see more than participation. I see possibility," said Martin. "No matter where we come from or what language we speak, we all speak the language of water safety. Every new country strengthens a global movement that believes where you are born should never

determine whether you have access to lifesaving skills. Together, we are creating opportunities, building local leadership, and making our communities safer, one lesson at a time."

Dollywood's Splash Country in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, hosted its 16th consecutive year, the park set the record for the single largest lesson location worldwide, training 1,442 participants. **Jordan Leach**, director of operations, praised the park's commitment to ensuring guests stay safe wherever they enjoy the water.

As families gear up for peak summer swimming, the World Waterpark Association urges parents and caregivers to keep vigilance and water safety top of mind. This year's WLSL demonstrates the incredible impact achieved when global communities unite to protect children in and around the water.



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Thank you for making every lesson count and helping children around the world build lifesaving skills. Together, we turned one simple truth into action: **Swimming Lessons Save Lives™**.

Save the date! June 24, 2027

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MOBILE MIDWAYS

► Giant Ferris wheels celebrate America — page 62 / The simple success of Scott Amusements — pages 64-65

Ten-Day Red River Valley Fair held in by 110-degree heat index

AT: B. Derek Shaw

bdshaw@amusementtoday.com

WEST FARGO, N.D. — The Red River Valley Fair uses the tagline, “The Ten Best Days of Summer.” This year, with temperatures above 100 degrees many days, it should have been called “The 10 hottest days of summer.”

“We experienced an extremely hot fair this year, with multiple days reaching heat indexes between 100 and 110 degrees,” said Sophia Thompson, marketing and partnerships coordinator. “While the temperatures certainly created some challenges, our guests, staff, volunteers and vendors showed incredible resilience. We worked hard to provide cooling opportunities, hydration stations and shaded areas to help everyone stay comfortable and safe.”

Final attendance figures have not yet been released for the 115th annual fair; however, the 2025 fair attracted 143,740 people, making it the second-best attended in the fair’s history.

The dire temperatures also created challenges for livestock exhibitors, who used fans, misting systems and coolers to help keep animals comfortable throughout the week. “It was a real challenge with the heat,” Thompson told WZFB. “We did our best to adjust.”

“We were proud to celebrate America’s 250th birthday throughout our opening weekend. Thanks to a partnership with the City of West Fargo, West Fargo resi-



AMP was back for a fourth year as the carnival provider, bringing 37 rides with nearly half kiddie ones. Supplementing them were 20 games and seven food stands. COURTESY RED RIVER VALLEY FAIR

dents received complimentary gate admission on the Fourth of July. Combined with our patriotic festivities, live entertainment, family activities and nightly drone shows, it was a wonderful way to celebrate this historic milestone with our community,” explained Thompson.

Amusement Midway Providers (AMP) was back for a fourth year as the carnival provider, bringing 37 rides with nearly half kiddie ones. Supplementing them were 20 games and seven food stands. The **Preston & Barbieri** Big Surf slide, the only one in the United States, was back for a second time. It, along with the **Chance** wheel and **Air Maxx** (a rethemed Street Fighter) from **Technical Park**, were the most popular rides, along with a healthy assortment of classic rides.

Jason Wagner, president of AMP, was asked about



their relationship with the fair. “Man, they are fantastic! **Cody Cashman** (CEO) is an energetic, out-and-about [leader]. A go-getter that is on top of his game.”

Wagner also feels this fair has a tremendous amount of growth potential. “They have a great sponsorship program and consistently land big entertainment.”

Fair staff enjoyed a positive experience with the carnival provider. “AMP has been a great partner for us over the past several years. They consistently provide a quality midway experience, and our teams work well together throughout the planning process and during the fair,” said Thompson. “We appreciate their professionalism and their commitment to helping create a positive guest experience.”

The fair is an economic booster for the area, as



Thompson explained. “The Red River Valley Fair has a significant impact on the Fargo-Moorhead region each year, driving visitors to local hotels, restaurants, retailers and other businesses throughout our 10-day run. It’s always exciting to see the community come together and benefit from the increased tourism the fair brings.”

Special promotions included a kids day. This was a \$25 POP ride wristband. A lunch break promo gar-

nered free admission from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., while a senior day provided free admission from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. for 55+. Also, a heroes day gave free admission for active military, veterans, and first responders. Finally, there was a \$25 wristband day.

Among the biggest changes this year was an expanded grandstand concert format, with multiple nationally recognized performers each night instead

► See VALLEY, page 54



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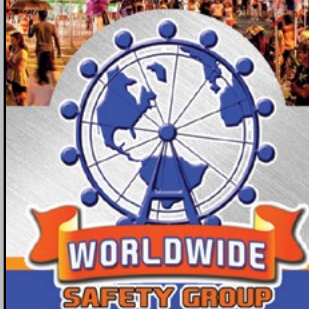


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► VALLEY

Continued from page 53

of a single headliner with a lesser-known opening act. Thompson said the change encouraged visitors to spend more time at the fair and increased the value of admission tickets.

Thompson provided insight into their media mix. "We utilize a well-rounded media strategy that includes digital advertising, television, radio, outdoor advertising, email marketing, text messaging, social media and strong partnerships with local media outlets. Each platform plays an important role in reaching different audiences.

"We've continued to see digital marketing provide the strongest return, particularly through social media and targeted digital campaigns, while our local television and radio partners remain incredibly valuable in building awareness across the region. We believe success comes from the combination of all channels working together rather than relying on any single platform," said Thompson.

One of our most talked-about additions this year was the Limestone Fair Beer, a salted lime lager created in partnership with **Icwind Brewing** exclusively for the Red River Valley Fair. It was a fun collaboration that gave guests a unique fair-exclu-



AMP's Chance wheel was one of the most popular rides along the midway. COURTESY HARDWIG MEDIA

sive beverage to enjoy.

The fair continued to invest in the future of the event, with the addition of the new Dakota Magic Casino Stage, elevating the guest experience. "We're always looking for ways to enhance entertainment, improve operations and create new traditions for our fairgoers," said Thompson. Those who played on the new grandstand included the **Stone Temple Pilots, Candlebox, Pop Evil, Jason Derulo, Trace Adkins, Chase Matthew** and **Uncle Kracker**.

The annual Faith and Family Night continued to be one of the fair's largest attractions. Thompson said organizers were pleased with the partnership with **Pulse**, which featured Christian artists **Chris Tungseth, Matt Maher** and **Anne Wilson**, along with a message from evangelist **Nick Hall**. While attendance did not reach last year's record-setting **Lauren Daigle** concert, Thompson said the event

still attracted one of the fair's largest crowds.

Reflecting on the 2026 fair, Thompson commented, "The Red River Valley Fair has always been about creating an experience that offers something for everyone. From nationally recognized concerts and motorsports to agriculture, family entertainment, educational experiences and incredible food, we strive to make every visit memorable.

"This year was especially exciting with the debut of our new **Dakota Magic Casino** stage, enhanced grandstand production, and nightly drone shows. Beyond the 10 days of fair, we're also proud to be a year-round organization through the **Red River Valley Fair Foundation**, investing in agricultural education, youth programming, and scholarships that benefit our community long after the fair ends."

The 2027 edition comes around July 9 to 18.

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Expertise of industry veterans key to B&K Carnival Company launch

AT: Ron Gustafson
Special to Amusement Today

RALEIGH, N.C. — As seasoned veterans of the industry, **Katie Wilson** and **Brian Bitner** relied on their expertise when they launched **B&K Carnival Company** back in 2015.

"I've been involved in this business for more than 30 years," Wilson reflected during a conversation with *Amusement Today*, minutes after the show opened at the Got To Be NC Festival (May 15 to 17) on the North Carolina State Fairgrounds.

"Brian and I both got our start back in the 1990s with **John Stine** (former **Stine Amusements**)," she recalled. "John bought his route from **Bob Childress** (former **Childress Shows**) as well as a number of rides from him."

With the passing of Stine in 1998, **Billy Clark** purchased the carnival and renamed it **Smokey Mountain Amusements**, basing the operation in Robbinsville, North Carolina.

"We worked with Billy and his wife, Sue, the entire time they had the show," Wilson said of the years with the Clarks on Smokey Mountain Amusements.

When the opportunity presented itself in 2015, Wilson and Bitner purchased the business from the Clarks and ramped up their new operation, **B (Brian) & K (Katie) Carnival Company**, in Gresham, South Carolina.

Among the thrill rides in the Clark acquisition was a **Wisdom Rides of**



A rare Astroliner (above) is still part of the B&K Carnival Company experience. Brian Bitner's first large ride purchase was this Yo-Yo (below) from Palace Playland in Old Orchard Beach, Maine. AT/RON GUSTAFSON

America Astroliner, one of the first screen-based simulator attractions in the amusement industry dating back to the late 1970s.

Wilson and Bitner continue to feature the attraction, which is a rarity on midways today. B&K's Hurricane (**Kilinski Mfg.**) and Expo Wheel (**Childress Mfg.**) are also from the Smokey Mountain purchase.

On the road

B&K hits the road in April and runs through the end of October with locations in North and South Carolina as well as Tennessee.

Wilson said the early season has been solid so far with the Raleigh contract new this year. **Brinkley Entertainment**, Walnut Grove, North Carolina, was the previous midway provider for a number of years but ceased ride operations after the 2025 season. B&K



had supplemented the Raleigh date with rides when Brinkley held the location.

"Our help situation is pretty good so far, about what it is supposed to be," Wilson said of domestic and foreign employees.

While touring the midway as festival activities ramped up, she was proud to point out the colorful wraps on the carnival-owned food concessions.

"I help design those," she noted, while pointing

to the funnel cake trailer. "Brian is the painter and handles the rides, and I manage the office."

"I do it all out here — mechanic, welder, electrician," Bitner said of his role in taking care of the mechanical rides with the show. "I just finished refurbishing the Fireball (**Larson International**) — the toughest paint job I've ever done. We went through 30 gallons of primer and paint on it."

Maintenance work is

done at the show's Gresham shop where Bitner likes to tackle two to three major projects each winter. He also repainted the carnival's Round Up (**Frank Hrubetz & Co.**) this past offseason.

Anchoring one end of the midway was B&K's Yo-Yo (**Chance Rides**), which was Bitner's first big ride purchase back in 2004. He acquired the piece from **Joel Golder**, owner of **Palace Playland**, Old Orchard Beach, Maine.

Rounding out the rides

The Raleigh midway also included B&K's Circus Circus walk-through fun-house (**Owen Trailers**), Rock Star (**ARM USA**), farm tractors and combo (**Dalton Kid Ride Rebuilders**), Orient Express coaster and Tornado (**Wisdom**), Fun Slide (**Frederiksen Industries**), Barrel of Fun (**Sellner Mfg.**) and Racing (**Zamperla**).

B&K also presented a two-abreast carousel (**High-Lite Rides**) and circus train (**Zamperla**). Both rides were purchased from Brinkley. Wilson said the show will bring out its Scooter bumper cars (**Majestic Mfg.**) and Orbiter (**Tivoli**) later in the season.

"We'll also be getting a Sizzler (**Wisdom**) soon," she noted.

Powers Great American Midways (**PGAM**), Whiteville, North Carolina, brought in its Monster Trucks and family Himalaya (**Wisdom**), Mini Paratrooper (**PWS Rides**), Cliff Hanger (**Battech Enterprises**), Kite Flyer (**Zamperla**) and Magic Maze (**Owen Trailers**) to round out the ride presentation.

B&K offers wristbands for \$30 as well as ride tickets at \$1.50 each, with rides requiring three and four tickets.

The annual Got To Be NC Festival featured antique farm equipment displays, live entertainment and a variety of vendors showing products made in the state.

•bandkcarnival.com



A busy midway — provided by B&K Carnival Company — takes shape during the Got To Be NC Festival on the state fairgrounds in Raleigh, N.C. (above left). Patrons enjoyed the Fun Slide along the midway (above middle). The company's Fireball (above right) was refurbished before hitting the road for the 2026 season. AT/RON GUSTAFSON

2026 Alameda County Fair increases revenue, per cap spending

Butler Amusements provides more than 40 ride midway

AT: Pam Sherborne
psherborne@amusementtoday.com

PLEASANTON, Calif. — The **Alameda County Fair**, held annually on the fairgrounds in Pleasanton, California, ended its 2026 run July 12 with nearly 400,000 guests who came out to enjoy the food, rides, concerts, animals, competitions, pleasant weather and more. It began on June 19.

"It was a great fair," said **Liz Rosinski**, fair spokesperson. "We didn't have a single day of triple-digit temperatures, which can happen here during fair time. Everyone seemed to enjoy all aspects of the fair. We always have a great concert series, and this year we brought back our Demolition Derby, which we hadn't had in a while.

"And we celebrated July 4th and the 250th birthday of America with a big fireworks show that was really well attended," Rosinski said.

Beyond just the fun, the Alameda County Fair proved to be a major economic driver for Pleasanton, the Tri-Valley and Alameda County. A recent Economic Impact Study showed that the fair and year-round events at the fairgrounds generated a \$312 million economic impact,



The 2026 edition of the Alameda County Fair, Pleasanton, California, held June 19 to July 12, drew close to 400,000 guests. To celebrate July 4th and the United States 250th anniversary, the fair held a large fireworks show that was very well attended (above right). COURTESY ALAMEDA COUNTY FAIR



supporting nearly 2,000 jobs, more than 16,000 hotel room nights and producing \$14.3 million in sales tax.

Food continued to be the number one reason people gave for attending the fair, and guests came ready to eat, devouring 82,766 corndogs and 20,400 funnel cakes. Fairgoers also crowned a new Foodie's Choice Winner, The Main Squeeze, a strawberry lemonade cookie from The Dough Show booth.

"Fair food once again took center stage this year," said **Jerome Hoban**, CEO of the Alameda County Fairgrounds, at the end of the event.

Aside from the fireworks show, the fair celebrated America's 250th birthday with other events and exhibits, including the Rising Together: In Remembrance

of 9/11 exhibit. This memorial featured an actual piece of the Twin Towers structure and also paid homage to the nearly 3,000 people who lost their lives on September 11, 2001. Nearly 1,000 handwritten notes of hope, along with white roses, were left by fair guests at the survivor tree included in the exhibit.

Also to commemorate the 250th anniversary, a special time capsule was installed at the fair on June 26. Mementos such as awards, photos, letters, flags and more were sealed and installed into the ground. The capsule was buried by dignitaries, as well as staff and board members of the Alameda County Fair, and will be re-opened in 2076 on America's 300th birthday. There was a special commemorative

250th fountain installed on the grounds.

Butler Amusements provided the midway at this year's fair with over 40 rides and attractions. Rosinski said the carnival brought new rides to the midway, including the Viper, Sound Wave, Quad Runner, Atlantis, Crown Merry Go Round, Viva Las Vegas funhouse, Eagle 16 and Bear Affair.

During the fair, many guests flocked to the AgVenture Park to learn about the fair's agricultural roots and to watch the racing pigs and enjoy an original margarita at Hussong's Cantina.

The Safeway Barn, which housed farm animals like sheep, goats, dairy cows, beef cows, piglets and a horse, featured educational demonstrations including sheep shearing and bottle feedings, as well as hundreds of hatching baby chicks.

The Junior Livestock Auction on July 12 closed out the fair, raising \$1,349,407 to support various youth agricultural education programs, including FFA and 4-H.

The fair made a significant impact on the community through its community drives, including the annual Blood Drive to benefit the **Red Cross** with a total of 11,787 pints of blood donated.

The community drives also proved crucial for several other organizations, with the fair collecting 59,221

meals for the **Alameda County Food Bank** and 1,906 pounds of pet food collected to benefit **Valley Humane Society**, a combined increase in donations of a staggering 268%.

The **Big O Tires** concert series continued to be one of the most popular features at the fair, featuring performances from the **Beach Boys** featuring **John Stamos**, **Flo Rida**, **Boyz II Men**, **En Vogue**, **K-Pop Tribute to Demon Hunters** and **Tower of Power**.

Fair attendees took advantage of the expanded shopping areas this year, including the brand new Fair Factory and the Artisan Market, which showcased handcrafted goods, artwork and specialty items from talented local makers.

Some of the other well-attended activities included the Fiesta at the Fair, the Wine Fest and the return of action sports shows every weekend at the grandstands with the already-mentioned Demolition Derby and Monster Trucks, Arena Cross and Tractor Pulls.

Also, at the Grandstand were entertaining events like the Rubik's Cube competition, America's Strongest Teen competition and the Corgi Races.

Another feature this year gave guests the opportunity to get into **World Cup** soccer fever with various watch party locations throughout the grounds.

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Weather, local support yield fantastic San Bernardino County Fair

AT: Pam Sherborne
psherborne@amusementtoday.com

VICTORVILLE, Calif. — By all accounts, the **San Bernardino County Fair**, held May 23 to 25 and May 29 to 31, was a complete success.

"We had a fantastic fair," said fair CEO and General Manager **Jennifer Morgan**. "The weather was great and our community came out to support their local event. We are already looking at next year, which will be our 80th, so lots of surprises and excitement to come."

Morgan said the fair drew more than 40,000 people through the gates which was on par with the 2025 event.

This year's Star Wars-themed "May the Fair be With You" was a popular one with the fair-goers.

A new highlight, Morgan said, was the Sea Lion Splash Show.

"It was a favorite, and we brought back turkey races, which the community was excited to see," she said.

The San Bernardino County Fair runs on two consecutive weekends at the end of May. The first weekend, it runs Saturday



Helm and Sons Amusements provided the midway at the 2026 San Bernardino County Fair, Victorville, California, with more than 25 rides and attractions this year (right). With agriculture a large focus at the San Bernardino County Fair, performers dress up as farm animals and entertain guests (above). COURTESY SBC FAIR

through Monday. The second, Friday through Sunday. Operating days each day are 2 p.m. to 10 p.m.

Fair officials brought back the special \$20 Truckload Special admission. For \$20, the driver and everyone wearing a seatbelt received admission to the fair. All walk-ins of groups of six persons or less also received the \$20 admission fee.

There were other promotions for fair admission and carnival rides offered before and during the event.

While fairgoers were excited about the sea lions and the turkey races, they were also excited about the myriad of other offerings at the fair.

Helm and Sons Amusements provided the midway with over 25 rides this year. New rides to the midway were the Madness and Fun Factory.

The two-weekend fair included the High Point Dirt Series with Tuff Trucks and more on May 23, the Demolition Derby on May 24, and the Western Heritage Pro Open Bull



Riding event on May 25.

The second weekend featured a Route 66 Centennial Celebration Car Show and Fan Fest. The San Bernardino County Fair is the only remaining fair operating along the historic Route 66.

The fair's concert series included a performance by country music artist **Colt Ford** on May 30, followed by Latin Night on May 31 featuring **Voz De Mando**, **Los Cadetes de Linares**, and **Conjunto Elevado**.

The San Bernardino County Fair's Junior

Livestock events also took place on May 30. Livestock auctioned this year included rabbits, swine, beef cattle, lambs, goats and poultry.

Agricultural exhibits showcased projects by the youth in the community. This fair even provided Agriculture Mechanics exhibits.

On both weekends, there were strolling entertainers such as comedians, clowns, jugglers and live bands.

There were competitive displays and shopping and a lot of fair food and drink.

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A new highlight this year was the Sea Lion Splash Show. Fairgoers were excited to see that as well as all the animals displayed at the fair, including the small donkeys taking a walk down the midway. COURTESY SBC FAIR



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SNAPSHOTS

B&K Carnival at Got To Be NC Festival



The cotton candy concession was staffed by (l to r) Iris Castro Herrera, Andrea Hernandez and Esmeralda Zaval Rodriguez. AT/RON GUSTAFSON



Eric Bryant serves as general manager. AT/RON GUSTAFSON



Rafael Ramirez Hernandez is the ride superintendent. AT/RON GUSTAFSON



The funnel cake trailer on B&K Carnival is handled by (l to r) Maria Alicia Novorro Jimenez, Nancy Pineda Mendez, Karla Estefany Quin Hernandez and Miriam Herrera Hernandez. AT/RON GUSTAFSON



Katie Wilson and Brian Bitner own B&K Carnival Company and have years of experience in the industry. AT/RON GUSTAFSON



Hazel and Kerry Curtis have food and games on the midway. AT/RON GUSTAFSON



MIDWAYSCENE

AT: B. Derek Shaw
bdshaw@amusementtoday.com

Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo officials recently announced the creation of a new C-level leadership position called chief operating officer and general manager. This new position — which is being filled by current Chief Revenue Officer **Amber Burda** — aims to unify strategic direction as well as align programming and strategy for the annual rodeo event.

Burda has served as chief revenue officer since 2023, although she was initially hired in 2017 as the executive director of sponsorships, business and corporate development, where she led the creation of official rodeo sponsorships.

"This organization is built on tradition, volunteers, agriculture, education and community," Burda said in the release. "I am honored to help align the teams and departments that bring the show to life each year, ensuring we continue to deliver an exceptional annual experience while protecting the heritage that makes the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo unlike any other event in the world."

In the new role, Burda will oversee most public-facing aspects of the rodeo. Her focus will be on ensuring cross-departmental coordination to enhance operational efficiency, while aligning pricing and revenue strategies with the organization's mission, per the release. Burda will also be involved in the creation of the organization's new agricultural complex. The project will be the largest single facilities investment in the rodeo's more than 90-year history and is expected to add more than 1 million square feet of event and programming space, **Community Impact** reported.

As the rodeo works to expand its impact, President and CEO **Chris Boleman** said it is essential that the leadership structure reflects the complexity of the annual event and the transformational opportunities ahead.

"Amber has a proven ability to bring people, partners, volunteers and departments together around a shared goal," Boleman said in the release. "Her experience across sponsorship, ticketing, business development and large-scale event operations makes her uniquely prepared to help lead the show into its next chapter."

In mid-July, the **Kern County Fair and Event Center**, Bakersfield, California, selected **Sean Andrew** as

the new chief executive officer. He is taking the role on the retirement of CEO **Michael Olcott**, who held the position since January 2012.

Andrew was born and raised in Bakersfield and brings a strong connection to Kern County, according to officials. He will oversee the Kern County Fair and Event Center, which includes the fair and year-round facility programming.

The **Western Fairs Association** officially launched the WFA AI Model, now available exclusively in the members-only section of the WFA website.

This marks a significant milestone for an initiative that began as an idea, evolved through member collaboration, and now stands as one of the most innovative industry resources ever developed specifically for fairs, festivals and event professionals.

The WFA AI Model is not a generic artificial intelligence platform. It was designed to function like an experienced fair-industry advisor. Someone who understands the realities of fair operations, seasonal pressures, board governance, sponsorship development, community engagement, revenue generation, volunteer management and long-term strategic planning.

Developed through the "Dare to Be Different: Innovating Fair Experiences for the Future" educational programming at the 2026 annual **Western Fairs Association Convention**, the model draws upon industry knowledge, member insights, SWOT analyses, financial benchmarking and operational expertise contributed by fair professionals throughout the Western region.

The **European Showmen's Industry** will hold its 44th ESU Congress in Paris, France, on January 18 and 19, 2027. It will be held at the **Pavillons de Bercy**, a venue steeped in tradition. This is also the home of the world-famous **Musée des Arts Forains**, which, with its unique collection of historic rides and fairground art, provides the setting for this international industry gathering.

The ESU Congress is a significant gathering of the European fairground community. Representatives of national fairground associations, industry experts, and guests from the worlds of politics and business will gather to discuss current challenges and future issues facing the industry at the European level, exchange experiences and develop common positions.



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Giant Ferris wheels help punctuate the America 250 celebration

AT: Ron Gustafson
Special to Amusement Today

WASHINGTON / CHARLESTON, W. Va. — While America continues to celebrate its 250th anniversary across the nation at summer fairs and festivals, giant mobile Ferris wheels were signature attractions during two significant events.

In Washington, D.C., the National Mall's 16-day Great American State Fair, June 26 to July 10, featured the Freedom 250 wheel provided by **Talley Amusements** of Fort Worth Texas.

The 110-foot portable wheel (**Levent Lunapark**) offered spectacular views over the nation's capital as thousands flocked to the mall area to see state exhibits and live entertainment. Wait times to ride the wheel were 30 to 45 minutes daily.

Biggest Wheel, LLC, Winter Park, Florida, erected its mammoth 230-foot America 250 Wheel (**KMG**) during the July 2 to 5 Capital City Celebration at the capitol building in Charleston, West Virginia.

Both events provided free rides on the observation wheels. In Washington, the rides were sponsored by Freedom 250, a subsidiary of the National Park Foundation backed by private donations. It marked the first time a Ferris wheel had been erected on the mall.

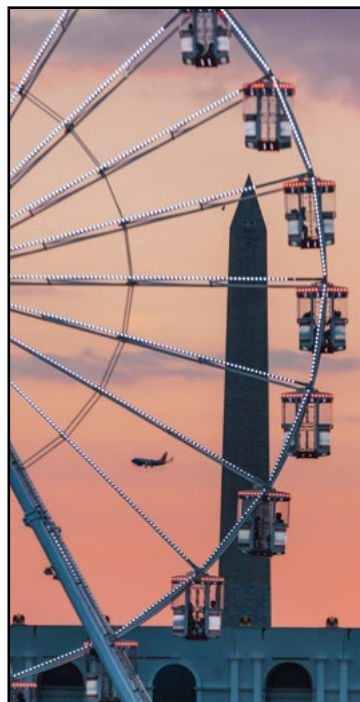
In Charleston, the state used the Governor's Civil Contingent Fund to pick up the tab.

Biggest Wheel's spokesperson **Jen Puente** said more than 30,000 patrons rode the American 250 Wheel and everyone received a commemorative button for participating.

Biggest Wheel, LLC is a partnership between **Frank Zaitshik**, president of **Wade Shows**, Livonia, Michigan, and **Michael Wood**, president of **Wood Entertainment Company**, San Antonio, Texas.



The Freedom 250 wheel was a centerpiece during the Great American State Fair on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. COURTESY CHRIS SHEPHERD



The U.S. Capitol (above left) and the Washington Monument (above right) were backdrops for the Freedom 250 Ferris wheel as it operated during Great American State Fair on the National Mall. COURTESY CHRIS SHEPHERD



Taylor Talley of Talley Amusements jumps in the air, excited that it's time to get in line to ride the Freedom 250 wheel during the Great American State Fair on the National Mall. COURTESY CHRIS SHEPHERD



The America 250 Wheel, provided by Biggest Wheel, LLC, was erected in front of the West Virginia capitol building during the July 2 to 5 Capital City Celebration in Charleston. COURTESY AMERICA 250 WHEEL



A rainbow formed over the capitol building and America 250 Wheel in Charleston, West Virginia, during the Capital City Celebration July 2 to 5. COURTESY AMERICA 250 WHEEL



Patrons patiently awaited their turn to ride the America 250 Wheel in Charleston (above). Commemorative buttons were provided to those who rode during the event (right).

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Keeping it simple spells success for Iowa's Scott Amusements

AT: Ron Gustafson
Special to Amusement Today

PILOT MOUND, Iowa — Brothers **Russell** and **Robert Scott** are finding success by keeping things simple and close to home with their carnival company, **Scott Amusements**.

The siblings got a taste of the industry as youngsters by working summer jobs with carnivals near their hometown of Palmer, Iowa, and finally fielded their own show in 2019.

"Our grandfather owned **Scotty United Shows** back in the 1940s and '50s," Russell reflected during an interview with *Amusement Today*. "Dad (late **Lester Scott**) used to take us to carnivals to visit friends, and I worked in the cotton candy then. That was **Smith Amusements**, and we became like family with them. Rob (Robert) also worked for the Smiths during that time when we were teenagers."

Robert stayed on with Smith Amusements for nearly a decade before settling down in Pilot Mound on a family farm. He took a position as a grocery store manager and also as a caterer.

"My wife, **Lorna**, farmed all her life with her dad," Robert explained. "We live on a farm where we raised our seven kids — six of them siblings we took in through foster care. Our biological son, **Bryce**,



Scott Amusements acquired and rebuilt a rare Fireball thrill ride (shown above at a fire department event in Tama, Iowa) for the 2026 season. The provider's Hustler thrill ride got a facelift during the offseason in the company's maintenance facility (below). COURTESY SCOTT AMUSEMENTS

is now a co-owner of the carnival, and Lorna manages the show office."

After hop-scotching with various carnival jobs, Russell took a sales position in 2010 with **Fare Foods**, a concessions supplier based in Du Quoin, Illinois.

Offer to buy

"In 2017, **Steven** and **Vicki Smith** (Smith Amusements) called and asked if I would be their general manager," Russell said of his return to the carnival business. "At the end of the season, the Smiths retired and wanted us to buy the show, but we couldn't come up with money."

The following year, Russell convinced himself it was time to take the plunge and start a family business. The Smiths agreed to sell eight rides and a generator to the Scott brothers, and



the new show was born.

"Lorna and Bryce were heavily involved in 4-H and had an understanding of the needs of farmers and community celebrations. Bryce has served on many community committees, which in turn helped us book the carnival," Robert said of the transition.

Today, Robert and Bryce supervise the setup and operation of the company's rides. Russell is the lot manager and lays out the midway at each location and does the ordering for the food and game concessions.

Focus on smaller events

Scott Amusements focuses on servicing smaller town celebrations, county fairs and some private events in Iowa with a schedule that spans six months.

The business model

created by the family has allowed the company to quickly expand from a handful of attractions to an arsenal of 22 rides, eight food concessions and a lineup of games.

"We saw a demand for a second unit, and that's how we currently operate," Russell said of the rapid growth. "We don't buy big,

new rides as we can't afford them, but purchase used ones and refurbish them.

"This season we are playing 44 towns, with 80 percent of them short jumps for us. We do have four events in a two-week period, which will be hectic. We send in eight to 12

► See SCOTT, page 65



Scott Amusements owners (l to r) Robert, Bryce and Russell Scott were honored as Showmen of the Year at the 2024 Association of Iowa Fairs convention. Bryce Scott holds the award above. COURTESY SCOTT AMUSEMENTS



The food concessions lineup on Scott Amusements features funnel cakes, curly fries, donuts and cotton candy. COURTESY SCOTT AMUSEMENTS

MOBILE MIDWAYS

A Phantoms Revenge swinging ship is part of the Scotts Amusements operation (above left). The seat hangers and bonnets for the provider's Paratrooper ride got fresh paint in the Scott Amusements maintenance shop (above middle). A classic Eyerly Aircraft Rock-O-Plane remains a popular featured attraction along the Scott midway. The midway features multiple kiddie rides, including an Allan Herschell Sky Fighter (below). COURTESY SCOTT AMUSEMENTS

►SCOTT

Continued from page 64

rides at each location."

As for business strategy, he pointed out that contract clauses include an advance sale guarantee.

"We do a lot of pre-sale with a guarantee up front on wristband vouchers," the carnival owner asserted. "They are 20 dollars in advance and 25 dollars at the ticket box."

Individual ride tickets are \$1 each at events, with discount packs of 24 for \$22 or 48 for \$40. Rides require three to five tickets.

Rebuild it and they will come

The most recent major ride acquisition is a rare Fireball built by the former Frank Hrubetz & Co., Salem, Oregon.

"There were only eight of them made," Robert said of the thrill ride. "We got it from Mike House in Kentucky, and it need-

ed repainting and fiberglass work on the tubs. We rebuilt everything, and it is beautiful now."

The ride made its debut at the Tama Fire Department Picnic May 13 to 16 in Tama, Iowa.

During the offseason, the carnival gave its Hustler (Grover C. Watkins) a new color scheme and is currently refurbishing a Paratrooper (Hrubetz). The Paratrooper has a split hub, allowing the sweeps to all be folded toward the back of the trailer so the ride can be pulled as a double. It is expected to be out on the show later in the season.

The Scotts have also rebuilt their Rock-O-Plane (Eyerly Aircraft), purchased four years ago, and Sky Fighter jets (Allan Herschell).

"There was no paint on either ride when we got them," Russell noted. "The Sky Fighter needed a total rebuild."

The carnival also



features a Sizzler and Go-Gatorcoaster (Wisdom Rides of America), Loop-O-Plane (Eyerly), Dizzy Dragon (Sellner Mfg.), kiddie fire trucks, three bounce houses and a 1954 trailer-mounted Bert Lane carousel.

"It takes five minutes to set up and is a strong piece for us," Russell said of the carousel.

Amusement Devices and Manufacturing (ADM), Schaller, Iowa, is

around 100 miles from the Scott farm and has also provided numerous attractions to the carnival, including its Ballistic and Cyclone Swings, Phantoms Revenge ship, Barn Swing, Tubs Of Fun and Funny Farm walk-through funhouse.

"When it's time to get our equipment to Florida to the Gibtown show, the Scott brothers help truck it down," said ADM President Brian Woodke. "They are great guys and said they are going to Gibtown anyway, so why not help and take some ADM equipment."

The Scotts added a new Burger Barn trailer this season, which serves popular smash burgers on its menu. The show has funnel cake and cotton candy/sno cone concessions on each unit along with lemonade stands and a soda/slush cart.

Service and accolades

The Scotts are also generous donors as they occasionally host groups

of challenged children to enjoy free rides and food, while supporting other groups through fundraising initiatives.

Statewide work by the Scott family has been honored in recent years with Lorna and Robert inducted into the Iowa 4-H Hall of Fame in 2022, and the Scotts were named Showmen of the Year at the 2024 Association of Iowa Fairs convention.

"Those guys have done a tremendous job coming into the industry over a period of a few years," said Thomas Barnes, executive director of the association. "They are now servicing quite a few fairs in Iowa and genuinely care about their customers and our industry."

The Scott brothers shared their enthusiasm and passion while discussing the business, saying the biggest reward for their hard work is "seeing smiles on the kids' faces."



The company's fire engine ride (above left) is a rare attraction that was built decades ago by a manufacturer in Coney Island, New York. Families also enjoy the provider's Dizzy Dragons attraction. COURTESY SCOTT AMUSEMENTS



T.J. Schmidt provides Parks and Recreation Spring Carnival midway



WYOMING, Mich. — T.J. Schmidt & Company, Standish, Michigan, was the midway provider at the Parks and Recreation Spring Carnival in Wyoming, Michigan, in April 29 to May 3, 2026. A variety of rides, games and food concessions were provided at the annual event. COURTESY KRISTINA HEMSTREET

Thrill Ride shares the story of Hersheypark and its local community

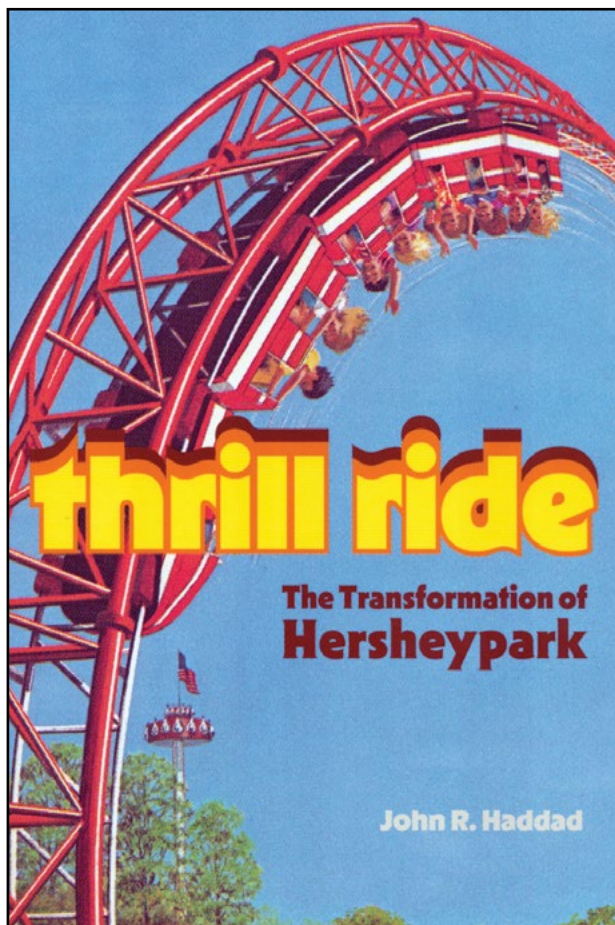
REVIEW: Tim Baldwin
tbaldwin@amusementtoday.com

Many amusement parks have had books written about them. Fans have relished park histories recounted within pages detailing the comings and goings of attractions. *Thrill Ride: The Transformation of Hersheypark* is different. Instead of a day one-to-modern times account, author John Haddad, a professor of American Studies and Popular Culture at Penn State Harrisburg, has done painstaking research to come up with something completely different. Instead of focusing on rides and attractions at a park, he has instead told the story of a park's relationship with its community.

Milton S. Hershey cared for his employees deeply. He knew he needed them but wanted them to be happy. An unwritten compact was formed when he provided amenities and services to the town of Hershey and its people to help develop loyalty to his aspiring business of making popular milk chocolate. His idea in 1893 to mass produce chocolate to bring it to the everyday customer needed a dedicated town of workers in his factory. One of the benefits he provided was Hershey Park.

The original Hershey Park was an ungated property that allowed townsfolk to come in and picnic, hear a concert and possibly hop on a few rides at a low price. The townsfolk termed it "The Perfect Hershey Day."

Thrill Ride illustrates how the relationship with the community changed after Milton



Hershey's death. Outside executives came in with new ideas. After seeing the costs of all these donated amenities and services, they changed what the townspeople had embraced.

The addition of the Hershey Medical Center also brought in new types of people from various races, backgrounds and political

mindsets. Changes were unsettling.

As the park began to deteriorate, this book tells of the solutions the new leaders felt they had to take: turn Hershey Park into a new theme park. Now gated, the new Hersheypark met with resistance from the townspeople who preferred it the old way. "It's no longer for us anymore" was the mentality.

Modernization of the 1960s and '70s took away the park's identity, its "sense of place." Hersheypark was now a "location."

As *Thrill Ride* recounts, executives only had predictions of how the new theme park would perform. The preview exceeded expectations, and even with mixed reviews, the park had a successful first season. New themed sections (Tudor Square and Rhineland) gave nods to the past, as did the retention of the carousel and Comet. When paired with modern additions, it symbolized the coexistence of different cultures occurring in the town as well.

Attendance was good, but a term coined in the 1970s, "stagflation," hindered tourism as oil prices surged and affected the cost of most goods. A risk of adding an early looping coaster paid off. When most theme parks suffered in 1977, the addition of sooperdooperLooper led to record attendance — for a year.

As the book concludes, it shows how the majority of town residents were eventually won over, but the overreaching arch of the body of research never loses sight of the connection between the town of Hershey and its park. It is a thought-provoking read.

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