

Boardwalk

A Search for the Meanest Ride

The Ultimate Roller Coaster

The High Rollers

By Robert Cartmell
Special from the New York Times

New York

SUMMER madness has set in. A thundering roar, a chain of screams, and another roller coaster drops its passengers over a 90-foot precipice. It's all clenched teeth and "look-no-hands" grins and "will-I-make-it-back-alive" shrieks, fallen wigs and wallets. Operators keep their secret: "There's a fortune under coasters."

Roller coasters? Does anybody care any more? Haven't they gone the way of the De Soto and the pompadour? The fast answers: Millions care, and the roller coaster is very much alive and bucking. New coasters are still being built, there are more on the drawing boards, and they're pulling passengers into amusement parks at a great rate. Says Harry Henninger Jr., a superintendent at Kenywood Park at West Mifflin, near Pittsburgh: "We just took a survey, and customers told us — by six to one — that they preferred coasters to all other attractions."

Most of the amusement parks built in the past few years have gone the coaster

"They spend the winter talking about coasters, reading about coasters, corresponding with amusement park owners and designers and old-time coaster operators—all in the effort to build up their lists of the highest, longest, steepest and meanest coasters. Now their season has come..."

route. Kings Island Park near Cincinnati, for example; Cedar Point in Sandusky, Ohio, the Six Flags park in Atlanta, and the Sugartree Park in Danville, Va. Even Disney World in Florida will have its "Sugar Mountain" coaster, and there is one at the World's Fair in Spokane, Wash.

The fans are much the same as they always were — families and their kids — with one major difference. There's a new wave of coaster nuts, mainly college stu-

coed from upstate New York. "A bunch of us will hitch rides from town to town and try to cram in as many different coaster rides as we can."

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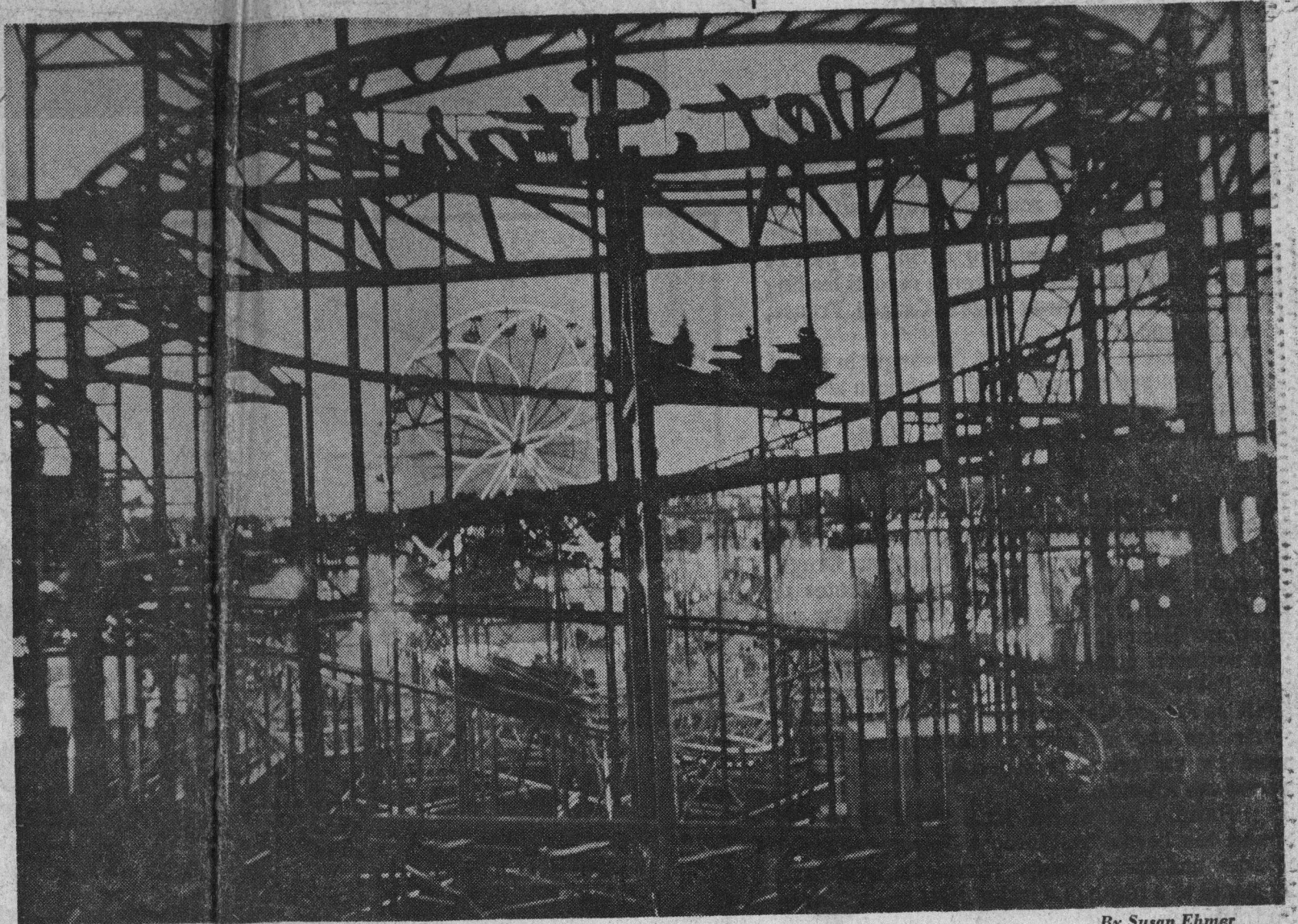
THESE YOUNG enthusiasts have a variety of explanations for their addiction. "A coaster run makes my blood hurt," says one freshman, and another comments, "It's that Cloud-9 sense of flight." A common view is that coasters offer "speed and danger." Actually, the speed of the cars as they rattle along the metal tracks, which usually have a gauge of around 42 inches, is often exaggerated in the industry. Some operators falsely contend that their rides hit 90 m.p.h. but the parks will not reveal the methods used to measure speed, and one owner confesses: "We're like the entertainment business. You never tell the exact truth."

It is not speed but the tremendous acceleration that thrills the coaster rider and makes him believe he is hurtling along at a colossal rate. To switch in mere seconds from 5 m.p.h. on an incline to 60 m.p.h. and into a state of weightlessness on a drop is the glory — or wretchedness — of a roller coaster ride.

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DEVOTEES often argue about which seat is best. A front seat heightens that floating sensation, since there's nothing in front — or so it seems — below you, and it gives the smoothest ride. The rear seats are great for spectators because they can watch all the activity of the other passengers, including the screamers and the "Look-Ma-no-handers." The rear is also where riders receive the roughest trip; it's the tail end of a giant whip, a fact that is particularly evident when you top a hill and the car lifts off the tracks.

Coasters run largely on gravity. The only part of the ride that is motor driven is the beginning, the part where the cars are pulled by drag chain to the top of the first incline, usually the highest point of the entire structure. Here the train is automatically disengaged and from then until the end of the ride it is shooting along



By Susan Ehmer

Some roller coaster pilgrims will make their way to Spokane to check out the new one at the World's Fair

with no more aid than gravity and its own momentum.

The fear that the cars will leave the track completely and the passengers be thrown out scares many people out of riding coasters. In fact the cars can not jump the tracks because they have under-track wheels to prevent their flying upward and side-friction wheels to keep

them on course, as well as wheels that merely carry the weight of the train.

The sensation that the train has left the rails comes atop a hill, when the wheels carrying the weight do momentarily part company with the track. (Indeed, the rails at the summit of many hills get rusty because the wheels are out of contact and cannot buff them.) But the undertrack and side wheels keep the train safe on its hurtling journey. As for the passenger, an iron bar is locked across his lap during the ride and it can be released only by an attendant or by a device on the track just short of the unloading platform.

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3300-foot-long track, shocks you from the beginning with an immediate plummet from the loading platform into a valley that is flanked by bushes and ingeniously hidden by fences. After the valley come two perilous drops and a tunnel, and then the train is hauled uphill by the chain lift to new section erected in 1968. Here there are a series of bruising turns that so disorient you that the gaping valley to the right — or is it the left? — is forgotten. Without warning, the cars are then plunged into the valley, 80 feet below. Next they roar up a hill and glide to a saner speed, but while the riders' sighs and giggles of relief can still be heard the train suddenly drops 90 feet before running home.

An Expert's List

The Top Ten

Many view roller coasters as among

A hill like this at the end of a ride is

ents. They spend the winter talking about coasters, reading about coasters, corresponding with amusement park owners and designers and old-time coaster operators — all in the effort to build up their lists of the highest, longest, steepest and meanest coasters. Now their season has come, and this month thousands of them will begin to fan out across the nation, in Airstream trailers, on motorcycles and by thumb, in their quest for the ultimate roller coaster.

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THE FIRST HINT of a coaster movement among young people came in the late nineteen-sixties, and perhaps the chief reason for it was the fear that the big thrill ride would disappear. Many parks were being turned under by bulldozers to make room for apartment buildings and parking lots, and the coaster lover felt that the chance to zoom down a steep track was about to become no more than a memory. Today, while the fanaticism has increased, that sense of panic has subsided. The number of coasters in this country has stabilized at around 200, a far cry from the 900 or so in the nineteen-twenties, but still...

If there was a turning point for the fate of the coaster, it was probably in 1970. Since then the surviving classic coasters have been carefully manicured and seem to be attaining the status of historical monuments. Simultaneously, magnificent models costing more than \$1 million apiece (which is what a first-class coaster runs to these days) have become the main attractions at the new amusement parks.

Kennywood Park is planning to add another coaster to its existing four, and this park is bound to be on the itineraries of the coaster crazies who are touring the country. "I'm going to travel in a coaster caravan for a month," says a 19-year-old

New York

THE "Thunderbolt" at Kennywood Park in Pennsylvania, which I have described in the accompanying article, heads my list of the "Top Ten" roller coasters. My other choices differ widely as to design and dimensions; the ultimate test is the quality of the ride.

The "Racer" ("La Montana Rusa") at Chapultepec Park in Mexico City. At 110 feet high it is the highest coaster in the world. It is one of the few that requires both a lap bar and a seat belt. The track is 4000 feet long and the cars carry up to 96 passengers per trip.

The "Cyclone" at Coney Island. This is probably the most famous coaster in the world, and it was a favorite of Charles Lindbergh. Built in 1927 by Harry C. Baker and Vernon Keenan, it's still fast and furious. The first hill seems as close to a vertical drop as offered anywhere.

"The Great American Scream Machine" at the Six Flags Over Georgia Park, just off Interstate 20 on the western edge of Atlanta. It claims a 105-foot drop and a track length of 3800 feet. The ride was built in 1972, and it's so smooth you might think the tracks are waxed. The reflection in the nearby lagoon seems to add to the nightmarish height.

The "Giant Coaster" in Paragon Park at Nantasket Beach south of Boston. This ride, the latest in a series of great coasters at Nantasket, is extremely steep and fast. It has a 98-foot drop resembling the old Palisades Park coaster and is 3200 worrisome feet long.

The "Giant Dipper" at Santa Cruz just south of San Francisco. Despite its age — it was built in 1923 — this remains one of the most beautiful coasters in the world. There are curves everywhere and it's a most exciting ride.

The "Racer" at Kings Island Park, 20 miles northeast of Cincinnati. At one point the cars separate and fork out over two huge turnarounds before returning to parallel tracks and a sprint for the unloading platform. It's fast and smooth, and a real family ride (I've seen 6-year-olds on it).

The "Coaster" at Dorney Park in Allentown, Pa. Experienced riders continually cite the first drop on this coaster as one of their favorites. It's something like being pushed off a cliff into the nearby parking lot. The coaster performs its acrobatics



The coaster fak's moment of truth

through picnic grounds and finishes with a roar.

The "Comet" at Cstal Beach Park on the Ontario se of Lake Erie, 30 minutes west of the Peace Bridge at Buffalo, N.Y. The tallest steel coaster in the world towers 104 feet above the ground and seems even higher because the le is an additional 20 feet below. bps of 96 feet and several of 70 wd put this 4800-foot-long monster anyone's preferred list. It's all hill and few curves.

The "Cyclone" at Lalide Park off Interstate 70 in the nowestern section of Denver. Designed and built by Edward A. Vettel of the eat Vettel family of coaster buils (Andrew built the "Thunderbolt"), the ride is a twisting thriller. e scenery is spectacular with throckies nearby, but diabolically plat curves and banks scramble the viero one horrendous blur.

R. C.

the safest rides at an amusement park and no more dangerous than a merry-go-round. Every morning before the opening, mechanics go over each board, nut and bolt, and "walk road" — from the highest hill through the sharpest curve — just like trackwalkers over railroads. A good mechanic, like a Grand Prix racer with his car, can tell just from the sound of the ride whether it is working properly.

Yet despite all the safety features and precautions, coasters certainly look hazardous and have a reputation for danger, an image that can be attributed partly to good old showmanship. As far as the operators are concerned, however, the only real dangers are heart attacks, storms and fires. A few years ago a lightning bolt narrowly missed a descending car of the "Space Rocket" coaster at Le Sourdsville Lake north of Cincinnati. The lightning left the steep track behind the car in flames, but no one was hurt.

There are plenty of less frightening tales of coasters like the one — also from Le Sourdsville — about a girl who wore nothing more than a paper dress on the coaster, failed to prevent the rush of air from ripping it off and arrived naked at the exit point.

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IF THE element of danger adds to the glamour of a coaster, so does the claim of having the highest. But most park owners agree that the tallest of all is the "Racer" at Chapultepec Park outside Mexico City, which stands 110 feet.

The Mexican giant is not, however, the highest coaster ever built. The record is held by the "Blue Streak" at the old Woodcliffe Pleasure Park in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., whose builder, Joseph McKee, said it stood 120 feet tall. The park's manager boasted that it was 138 feet high. In either case it was a record measurement.

The coaster with the most exciting motion, many connoisseurs agree, was the one at Palisades Park at Fort Lee, N.J., which was demolished in 1972. The Palisades thriller was not of great size but its hills, curves and surprises earned it its place of honor.

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MANY OTHER coasters that were highly regarded, including the "Cyclone" at Crystal Beach in Ontario and the "Bobs" at the old Riverview Park in Chicago, have gone. But there are still plenty of topnotch coasters left. If there is an "ultimate coaster" today, I think it is the "Thunderbolt" at Kennywood, a park that stands on a bluff overlooking the Monongahela River.

The "Thunderbolt," which has a

unthinkable, unfair, but it's just one of the joys to be experienced on this king of coasters.

The ride lasts one minute and 58 seconds — longer than most.

Robert Cartmell teaches art at the State University of New York in Albany and is the art critic of the Albany Times-Union. He is organizing a display of roller coaster photographs for the Smithsonian Institution.

The Most Fearsome

New York

WHICH ROLLER coaster was the most terrifying of all? Legend has it that the "Cyclone" which was built at Crystal Beach Amusement Park on the Canadian side of Lake Erie in 1927, deserves that title.

"The 'Cyclone' is the only coaster I've heard of that had a nurse manning a first-aid station at the unloading platform," says E. G. Hall, the vice president of Crystal Beach. "It was a wicked ride. Before the last car had left the top of the first hill, the front car had already started on a bank. Every turn was twisted sharply, and there was a figure-eight which the cars ran at top speed." Women riders, he said, often fainted, and broken ribs from flying elbows were not unusual. "Because of its severity," Hall adds, "the ride was taken only by a courageous few, although people came from all over the world to watch. As a result, and for insurance reasons, we had to tear it down in 1941."

On its opening day the "Cyclone" attracted 75,000 people to Crystal Beach, and the railings around the coaster were knocked down as the crowds pushed forward to get a close-up view of it. And despite Hall's recollections, one man liked the coaster so much that he rode it 67 times — within three hours — on its first day. The following day two boys hurtled around it 52 times.

—R. C.

