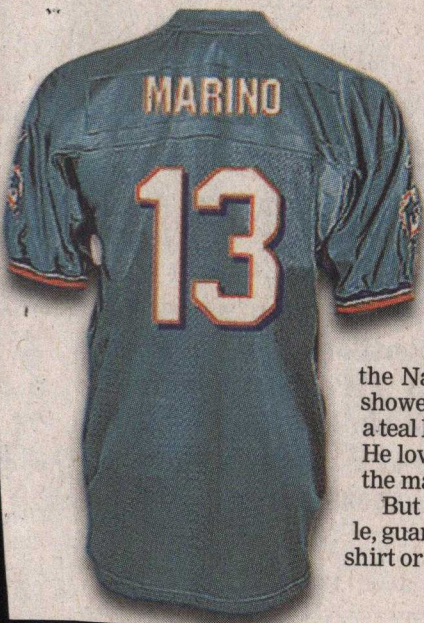


# Boardwalk: Safety takes precedent over style

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By SHANNA McCORD  
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER



SANTA CRUZ — Abraham Valle, a Miami Dolphins fan who lives in San Jose, felt "humiliated" during a recent trip to the Boardwalk with his wife and 6-year-old daughter. On a Saturday in April, the day of the National Football League draft, Valle showed up to the amusement park wearing a teal Dan Marino jersey with the number 13. He loves the Dolphins so much he even has the mascot tattooed on his biceps. But when Boardwalk security spotted Valle, guards asked the 30-year-old to change his shirt or leave because they believed his cloth-

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GENE FRUGE, GREAT AMERICA SPOKESMAN

ing, specifically the number 13, could have gang affiliations.

"The way I felt was very degrading," said Valle, who chose to leave the Boardwalk instead of buy a new shirt. "I'm Mexican and my head is shaved, but I've never been in trouble. They singled me out, and I felt humiliated and harassed."

For about a decade the Boardwalk has

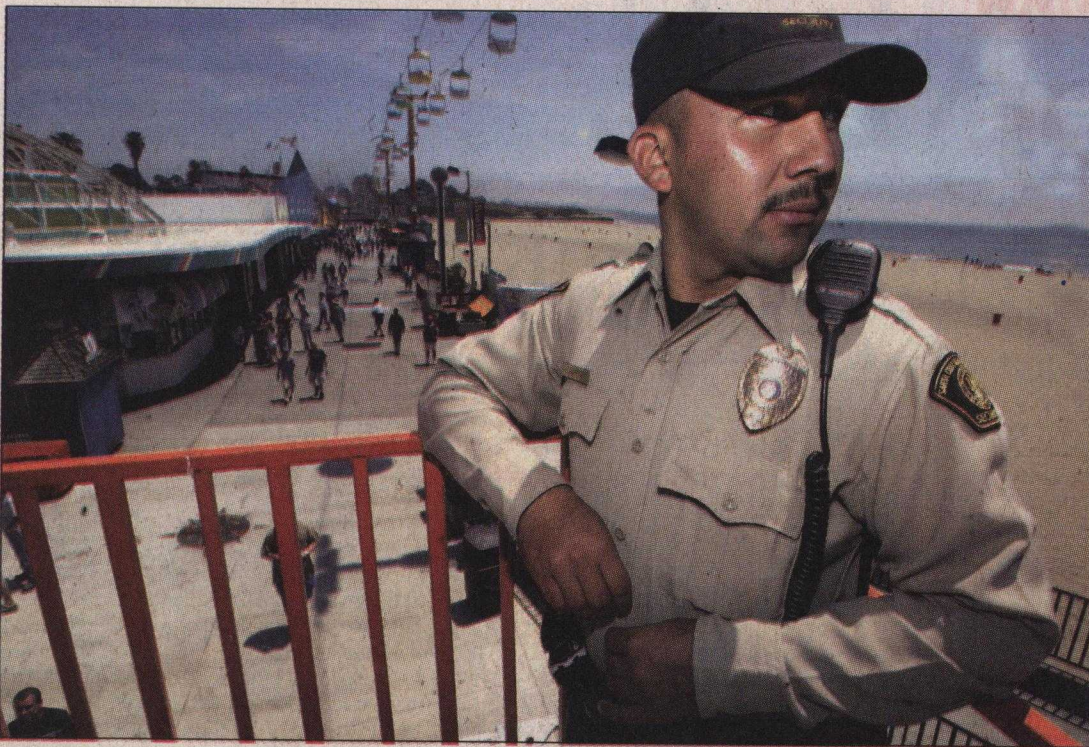
banned guests from wearing clothing it deems could have gang connections. That means any red or blue baseball hats, hooded sweatshirts, T-shirts, belts or bandannas. The colors are claimed by two area gangs. Also outlawed is anything prominently displaying the numbers 13 or 14, which also are affiliated with local

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Security guard Hugh Moreno keeps an eye on the Boardwalk on Thursday afternoon. One of the things Moreno enforces is the Santa Cruz amusement park's dress code.

Bill Lovejoy/  
Sentinel



## Boardwalk

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gangs. Gang tattoos and area codes visibly shown also are banned.

Boardwalk officials say the policy is necessary for keeping the amusement park safe for families and children — along with other rules such as no smoking, bottles, bikes or dogs.

Similar dress codes, designed to prevent gang problems, are in place at amusement parks statewide, including Great America in Santa Clara, as well as at many public schools and community festivals.

"We make contact with the guests in question, and tell them, 'We're bringing this to your attention for your own safety,'" said Dick Damon, the Boardwalk's chief of security. "We ask them to get another shirt in their car or turn it inside out."

Only as a last resort are guests asked to leave, Damon said.

Police say prohibiting such clothing in public places where large groups gather is an effective way to curtail crime and make areas uninviting for gang members and others who may be looking to cause trouble.

In the Boardwalk's case, police said, crime has dropped dramatically there in recent years, largely due to the proac-

tive efforts like the dress policy.

"It sends a clear message to the gang community that gang activity is not tolerated in that amusement park," Santa Cruz police Lt. Rick Martinez said. "We've seen a huge change in the environment down there since the 1980s and '90s, to the point we're no longer needed every weekend."

Profane and gang-type clothing are also safety concerns at Great America.

Security officers at the amusement park keep a close eye on what guests are wearing, often stopping patrons before they enter the gates, park officials said.

"We want to reduce the friction before problems can occur, and the clothing policy is one way to do that," Great America spokesman Gene Fruge said. "Clothing signifies who you are. If you're dressed like Eminem, you have to take responsibility for wearing the up-to-no-good uniform."

Boardwalk security guards confront guests about the clothing policy every day, and most are cooperative and agree to change, Damon said. About half a dozen people each year are forced to leave the amusement park, he said.

Last Sunday, a man with area code 408 tattooed across his chin was asked to leave, Damon said. The same day, a man was injured in a gang fight at the park.

Gang clothing can be obvious, but not always. The 50-member security force at the Boardwalk is trained extensively to know what to watch for, according to officials with the Seaside Co., which owns the 100-year-old park.

Kids in street gangs use clothing, colors and certain signs and logos to communicate which gang they are affiliated with. Wearing a certain color, red or blue, can be an act of aggression among rival gangs, police said. Knowing what to watch for can help in preventing fights and violence, according to Martinez.

Valle, who was employed with the nonprofit South County Housing in Gilroy for several years until recently taking a job with Washington Mutual, said he isn't ready to return to the Boardwalk any time soon.

He said being targeted by security officers for wearing a Dolphins jersey has left him disgruntled.

"I understand their policy completely," Valle said. "But they should make the signs more clear. You shouldn't feel like a criminal when you haven't done anything."

When asked about Valle's experience, Damon said, "Our objective is to look out for his safety whether he appreciates it or not."

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