

Still a wild ride after 75 years



Boardwalk Santa Cruz's Giant Dipper among elite of roller coasters

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Ollie Tyra remembers the anticipation in 1924 as the 70-foot-tall wooden track of the Giant Dipper roller coaster rose from the beach at Santa Cruz's Beach Boardwalk.

Just 13 at the time, Tyra plunked down 15 cents on opening day to experience the Dipper's 55-mph plunge. Seventy-five years later, she said, it's every bit as thrilling.

"It's a wild ride," Tyra, 87, said after taking a spin Monday with boardwalk owner Charles Canfield on the Giant Dipper's 75th anniversary.

sary. "You make that first big dip, and from then on it's just one dip after another. It's wonderful. I'm looking forward to riding again."

At a time when modern steel-track roller coasters carry riders to dizzying heights and through stomach-churning loops and whirls, the Giant Dipper stands out as an American classic.

A relic from the Roaring '20s, the Golden Age of roller coasters, the Giant Dipper is California's oldest — and the seventh-oldest still operating in the United States. Recognize **BOARDWALK**, Page 4B



PATRICK TEHAN — MERCURY NEWS

Visitors to the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk on Monday paid the 1924 price — 15 cents — to ride the Giant Dipper. A survivor from the Golden Age of roller coasters in the 1920s, it is the seventh-oldest roller coaster still operating in the United States.

The Giant Dipper celebrates its 75th

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nized as a National Historic Landmark since 1987, the Giant Dipper predates Coney Island's renowned Cyclone roller coaster by three years.

Despite its age, the Giant Dipper holds its own among its flamboyant younger rivals. World of Coasters, which bills itself as "the Web's premier coaster site," ranked the Giant Dipper its third-favorite. It was topped only by the newly built Raging Bull at Six Flags Great America near Chicago and the Magnum XL-200 at Cedar Point in Sandusky, Ohio, built in 1989.

Without peer

Among some coaster buffs, the Giant Dipper is simply without peer. David Escalante, spokesman for American Coaster Enthusiasts, said that while his 5,500-member organization doesn't officially rank rides, the Giant Dipper is his personal favorite among the 300 he has ridden worldwide.

"I have the most fun on the Giant Dipper," said Escalante, 36, of San Francisco. "It always offers up a great ride. It always runs fast and smooth."

According to World of Coasters, the Giant Dipper is faster than the 90-foot-tall wooden Grizzly, the 95-foot-tall Demon, the 100-foot-tall Top Gun and the stand-up Vortex, all at Paramount's Great America.

To celebrate the Giant Dipper's birthday, 18 riders were picked from 1,400 applicants to take 75 consecutive trips on its half-mile track. Five didn't make it. The first of them gave up after 13 rounds, and the last decided 46 trips was enough.

But 13 hardy souls survived.

"I was screaming the whole time," said Theresa McGaffrey of Fremont. "It was excellent."

Two grand-prize winners, Eric Scott of Gilroy and Pat Byron of San Francisco, won trips to Coney Island.

Under two minutes

More than 46 million people have taken the 1 minute, 52 second ride on the Giant Dipper since it opened.

The Giant Dipper was designed by Fred Church and built by Arthur Loeff, who envisioned an experience that would be a "combination earthquake, balloon ascension and airplane drop."

There was nothing like it in Santa Cruz at the time. The boardwalk's other coaster, a Scenic Railway modeled after a Coney Island ride, was relatively tame.

The Dipper was built in 47 days at a cost of \$50,000, using 327,000

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board feet of lumber. The planks laid end on end would have stretched to Los Gatos.

"A wonderful kick from start to finish," proclaimed the announcement in the Santa Cruz Morning Sentinel. "Thrills. Speed. Aeroplane Curves."

Tyra couldn't wait.

"We watched it go up and we said, 'When in the world are they going to get that thing running?'" Tyra recalled. "I was ready for it. It didn't scare me. I guess I was a little daredevil."

The Giant Dipper, which now costs \$3 a ride, has since been featured in several films, including "Sudden Impact," "Sting II," "The Lost Boys" and "Dangerous Minds."

Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk officials say the ride has never had a serious accident or a mechanical or structural failure. Four full-time mechanics assigned to the Dipper inspect its tracks every two hours.

"It's probably the best-maintained coaster in the world," Escalante said.

Personal injury suit

Nonetheless, while the Dipper's anniversary was being celebrated, a lawyer announced he had filed a personal injury lawsuit on behalf of a man who says he suffered a knee injury on the ride. John T. Love and his wife, Erica, are seeking \$10 million in damages.

Ann Parker, a spokeswoman for the boardwalk, said the suit has not been served and that she does not know what the claim was about.