

Some Amusement Parks not so Amusing

By Reg P. Wydeven
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When I was a kid, my parents would try to take my sister and I to Great America once every few summers for a fun-filled day of games, rides, shows and the big parade at night featuring all the Looney Toons characters.

My favorite memory of Great America was the summer I was finally taller than Wile E. Coyote's hand that measured 48 inches off the ground, meaning I could now ride the big roller coasters. My second favorite memory was when I went to Great America in high school with my buddies and my best friend who is 6'7" (whom we coincidentally call 'Tree') would run up to the Wile E. Coyote sign in front of every roller coaster just to make sure he was tall enough for the ride.

Amusement parks featuring gigantic, twisty roller coasters are popular summer vacation destinations for thousands of American families. Unfortunately, instead of having great memories associated with amusement parks, some families have nothing but nightmares resulting from roller coaster tragedies.

For instance, June Alexander was celebrating her son's 15th birthday at Rockin' Raceway Amusement Park in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee. Alexander and her son boarded The Hawk, pendulum-like ride that swings higher and higher before turning 360 degrees, and the ride began before her safety harness was secured. Alexander's harness came loose in midair, and she fell 60 feet to her death as her family watched.

The Pigeon Forge Police Department investigated the accident and ended up charging Charles Stanley Martin, the general manager of Rockin' Raceway, with second-degree murder for Alexander's death. Their investigation uncovered that The Hawk had been tampered with, causing the ride to commence before all the safety harnesses were secured. The police found jumper cables in the system's electrical panel that expert witnesses testified had bypassed the backup safety mechanisms. Employees of Rockin' Raceway also testified that Martin was the sole staff member with access to the panel and motivation to alter it.

The police in Pigeon Forge have lots of experience investigating amusement parks, for the city is also Dolly Parton's hometown and the site of her amusement park, Dollywood. In fact, Robert Fox, Dollywood's chief safety inspector, testified for the prosecution to compare the safety standards for maintaining the rides at Dollywood to those of Rockin' Raceway.

Martin was acquitted for second-degree murder, however, he was convicted of the lesser charge of reckless homicide for Alexander's death. Martin faces up to four years in jail and a \$5,000 fine.

Meanwhile, a 45-year-old Brooklyn woman injured her neck and her knee on The Big Bambu water slide at Six Flags Hurricane Harbor water park in Jackson, New Jersey, when the raft she was riding in bottomed out because there was not enough water in the pool at the end of the ride.

The woman claimed the park knew of the potential danger because six other people had previously suffered similar injuries on the ride. Accordingly, she sued Six Flags who later settled the suit by paying her \$750,000.

Amusement park accidents are rare, but they do occur. To help track such accidents, a consumer watchdog group started 'Rideaccidents.com', the self-proclaimed "world's single most comprehensive, detailed, updated, accurate, and complete source of amusement ride accident reports and related news." The site contains records of fatal amusement ride accidents in the U.S. since 1972.

So to ensure all of your amusement park memories are good ones, check Rideaccidents.com before planning your summer vacation this year.

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