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coverstory

Bring on the bling-bling

The fellowship of the fast flipper grows along the Front Range

by Joel Warner (Editorial@boulderweekly.com)

It's 5 p.m., April 16, and Donovan Stepp can't get in the zone. His playing field is a trio of shiny Lord of the Rings pinball machines and the prize is tournament winner at the first Rocky Mountain Pinball Showdown. He's already burned \$20, trying to qualify as one of the final eight going for the big trophy the next day.

Stepp's first four stabs at the gold were sidelined by the retch of the three machines, a bastard that tilts at the slightest nudge, draining the ball. His next game, on a different machine, felt better, but he still hadn't cracked the 100 million-point mark or joined the top eight scorers.



Donavan Stepp

Pressure builds. Rumor at the Showdown is that big-league ringers had crashed the party to show the local boys that they don't have the balls (pinballs, that is) to hang with the national champs. Wunderkind world champion Neil Shatz has set the bar high by coming away with a whopping 205 million points on his game.

Stepp is about ready to throw in the towel. After all, what was the point on throwing down serious cash for a winning purse of only 250 clams?

The point is that this is Stepp's home turf, and he has his pinball cred to think about. Stepp's fingers are known around here. His trademark "DNO" is on the high-score lists of pinballs up and down the Front Range. The Rocky Mountain Pinball Showdown is the state's shot at the pinball big-time, and Stepp wants part of the action.

Colorado is making its presence known in the world of pulled plungers and fast flippers. After years of abdicating their bar corners to Pac Man and his digitized bunch, the sounds of pinball machines are once again filling local watering holes, movie theaters and fun centers. Lyons has become one of the go-to destinations for pinball fanatics from around the country. More and more Front Range baby boomers' rec rooms feature a pinball machine—or two, or three, or 63. And Stepp and his boys are bringing a new generation to the world of hard-core pinball competition, complete with snowboards and ski-slope lingo.

Stepp has one last go at Lord of the Rings. He's assigned to the last of the three tourney machines, and he feels his luck changing. The machine's bumpers are lined with white rubber rings, as opposed to the more common black rubber of its peers. White rubber is softer. Bouncier. Better.

Stepp's intuition is right. This time his balls hit his targets. He launches point-scoring features. Then he's in multi-ball mode, several balls sliding across the playing field. Stepp's gone, flippers like extensions of his hands, the flying silver landing jackpot after jackpot after jackpot.

When it's all over, Stepp looks at his score: 347 million. He's made the top eight. He's made the best score of the show. He's going into the Twin Galaxies Intergalactic Scoreboard of electronic game records.

The stage is set for Saturday. Smart bets are either on Stepp and his local posse or on the national gunners. But there's a saying in pinball: The ball is wild. And there's a stranger waiting in the shadows to put this saying to the test. His name is Ponytail Bob.

The whiz kid

When the arcade game was born, so was Chi Babich. In 1978, both Babich and Space Invaders came out in the same month, Space Invaders being the first arcade game to make it out of the bars and into mainstream consciousness. Babich knows this because he grew up in a videogame clan.

"Certainly my house was the house all the kids wanted to play at," says Babich.

In the 1970s Babich's family started Game Exchange of Colorado, a local amusement distributor. He grew up with easy access to the newest and coolest games, with a closet full of T-shirts sporting the latest pixilated hero. Now, Babich helps run the show at Game Exchange, a warehouse of arcade games, pool tables, jukeboxes, photo booths, table-top touch-screen games and pinballs all ready to hit the bars and arcades.

Not much amazes Babich about the amusement world anymore, but pinball has thrown him for a loop.

"It caught all of us by surprise," says Babich.

While some creative folks suggest pinball has its roots in the thrilling ancient Greek pastime of rolling stones up a hill and into holes, most scholars agree pinball was born in the 1930s with the introduction of simple Pachinko-like games involving a course of pins and point-scoring holes. Eventually developments like flippers, tilt mechanisms, electricity and free games livened up the play, and pinball reached golden eras in the late '70s and the early '90s. Then the pinball companies began closing shop one by one, bowing down to the ascendance of videogames, and by the new millennium Stern Pinball was the only pinball manufacturer. But something strange happened: Pinball came back.

"There has been a slow and steady resurgence over the past several years. I don't know if it is a reaction to the video game world getting so intense and expensive or people wanting something more tactile," says Marc Schoenberg, project manager for Stern. Now Stern has created a dream team of pinball designers, culling the best game engineers from its defunct competition.

Babich has another theory about the resurgence: "A big part of what is drawing these big purchases is 9/11. If you own a pinball and put it in your house, you are going to be keeping kids safe, in the house."

For whatever reason, pinball has been rejuvenated. Once relegated smoke-filled arcades and roadhouses, pinball machines are now appearing in "Family fun centers." You used to have to pay people to haul pinball machines out of your basement—now used machines go for \$1,000 to \$4,000. Babich is finding that new machines sell out before they even arrive at the Game Exchange.

"I think it is the whole renaissance fascination in this country. There's always something coming back," says Babich. "Thank God it wasn't bellbottoms."

The dreamer

Kevin Carroll was normal. Then he got a pinball machine.

Carroll grew up on the Jersey Shore, bangin' the pleasure machines at the dusty arcades, but was never a big-time player. It wasn't until he moved out to Lyons, Colo., and his wife gave him a vintage KISS pinball machine for his 38th birthday that they both fell off the deep end.

Carroll, a master plumber, would spend his nights hitting the flippers. Neighbors came over and joined in. His wife would disappear on Saturday morning, only to be found hours later wracking up high scores in the basement.

Then one day, Carroll quit his job and did what any sane person would do: He blew all his savings on pinball machines. Then there was little he could do but try making money off his toys, so he started Lyons Classic Pinball.

Walk into Lyons Classic Pinball on Main Street in Lyons and it's as if you fell into a Bruce Springsteen song. Thirty pinball machines from the 1970s to the 1990s line the walls. Electronic voices mix with the "ka-ching, ka-ching" of thumper bumpers. There's Kit Kats in the vending machine, ice-cream sandwiches for sale behind the counter. It ain't Asbury Park, but it's damn close.

If Carroll's not too busy, he'll talk your ear off about the Pavlovian aspects of pinball or what pin art would have been like if Monet had been around in the 1970s. Or you can take the self-tour of this pinball museum, where plaques note trivia like how the 1970s Captain Fantastic pinball machine features illicit pictures on its back glass and how Haunted House offers the only three-level playing field.

Only a little over a year old, Lyons Classic Pinball already has a reputation as being one of the best pinball arcades—anywhere. People have come from New York, Nebraska, even Alaska to flip Carroll's flippers. But, most importantly, the arcade is rejuvenating Colorado's silver-ball scene.

"Just by doing this we are seeing we are part of Colorado's resurgence," says Carroll. For years Colorado's pinball locations have been few and far between. So finally, Front Range closet pinball fans have a place to congregate, to talk shop, to foster a community. Players in the Colorado Springs Pinball League are meeting collectors from Greeley. People with pinball machines in their homes are organizing open-house tours. At least once a week Carroll finds himself closing shop late because people don't want to leave.

Carroll and his wife aren't getting rich off their unusual venture, but they're happy and have found pinball a good investment ("We are doing better with

these machines than we did with the stock market," says Carroll). While it's too soon to say whether or not Carroll will have to pack up his toys and go home, he remains optimistic.

"It's the 'If you build it, they will come' theory," says Carroll. Luckily for Carroll, they're still coming.

The junkie

It all started when 15-year-old Tradd Hastings began mowing the lawn of his neighbor Dave Mercer and noticed something unusual through Mercer's windows. Then Mercer began showing Hastings flyers from his job, ads for strange machines featuring mesh targets and turbo bumpers. Finally, when Hastings was invited into Mercer's house, he discovered Mercer didn't have furniture—he had pinball machines.

"I'm basically out of outlets," says Mercer of his Fort Collins home. His basement, his living room and part of his dining room are taken up by his hobby: pinball machines. The rest of his home is reserved for his job: pinball machine parts and supplies. In short, Mercer represents both sides of the hard-core pinball collector's world: He's a pinball junkie and an international pinball-junkie supplier.

Running For Amusement Only pinball supplies out of his house, Mercer and his dog Sneezer live among boxes of plunger housings, toggle bolts, ball guides, drop targets, micro switches and everything else that makes a pinball game shock and awe. He also has 20 drawers of pinball schematics, plus instruction manuals, promotional flyers and informational magazines. He even has pinball key chains, "Pinball Alley" road signs and pinball posters signed by pinball designers like Pat Lawlor and Steve Ritchie.

"We're so geeky these guys are gods to us," says Mercer.

While Mercer has 24 machines in his house, compared to some collectors he's a lightweight. Just take David Metsch, who has more than 60 machines in his home in unincorporated Douglas County.

"There is kind of a Zen quality to pinball that appeals to me," says Metsch. "I found pinball to be very relaxing. I found it to be like a form of meditation. To play pinball, you have to be very focused on the game you are playing."

The rise of collectors has spawned a lucrative cottage industry, made up of pinball suppliers like Mercer and pinball repairmen like Tom Grobe (who's

been repairing pinball machines for the past 25 years straight and says he can't remember meeting a pinball machine he couldn't fix).

Some pinball collectors are like auto mechanics, taking apart the games, learning how they work and fixing them up. Some are like wine enthusiasts, displaying their games like rare vintages. Some, of course, just love to play.

For the soft-spoken Mercer, part of the fun of his collection is introducing novices to the hobby. When neophytes like Hastings come over, Mercer will pop open a pinball machine or two and explain the intricacies of solenoids, bumpers and relays. Then he'll take you on a tour of his collection. There's a OXO pinball machine from the Midnight Silver arcade that used to be on the Hill. There's a Wizard from France. There's Mercer's first pinball machine, The Jungle, which changed Mercer's father's post-work routine from "have a drink, eat dinner, have another drink, go downstairs and watch Cronkite" to "have a drink, eat dinner, have another drink, go downstairs and play pinball."

Mercer's passion is infectious. Now Hastings comes over all the time, grabs some candy out of the refrigerator, turns on Attack from Mars and starts blasting away aliens.

"One of the disadvantages [of the supply business] is that I don't get to play as much as I want to," says Mercer as he looks on. "But Tradd has me playing again now, since he's getting good enough so he can beat me."

Hastings looks up and grins.

The pro

Donavan Stepp doesn't look like you're typical hot-shot pinball player. For one thing, he's young, in his 30s. For another thing, he wears baggy shorts and T-shirts and punctuates many of his sentences with the kind of staccato laugh more in line with snowboarders than pinball players.

Actually, says this Denver resident, hitting the flippers isn't all the different from hitting the slopes: "They are both fun, they both go downhill and they both require skill."

Stepp's mother managed amusement games and a roller-skating rink when he was a kid, so he learned the ropes at a young age hitting the flippers on Captain Fantastic and Evil Knievel at the rink for hours at a time, wearing roller skates so he could see the playing field. Soon he was rolling the games, scoring so high the point counter would roll back to zero. After high school he became a game

technician; now he's an amusement machine operator, managing pool tables, jukeboxes and, of course, pinball machines at local bars.

Several years ago Stepp joined forces with a group of snowboarders in Breckenridge. He showed them the finer points of pinball while they helped him learn the slopes. Now Stepp and his buddies, who have monikers like Nate Dogggg, Trailer Tom and Ffej Knar (backwards for Jeff Rank), are the stars in a series of homegrown Warren Miller-esque films chronicling their exploits. PinPin I, PinPin II and PinPin III feature the boys snowboarding over moving cars, base jumping, lighting themselves on fire, picking their noses, breaking Rubik's Cube world records and, of course, showing off their mean pinball skills.

Stepp and his buddies long ago blew away all the competition at the Climax Lounge pinball tournaments in Denver, and at Lyons Classic Pinball they leave behind a trail of free games. Stepp can easily pass the ball from one flipper to the next, and perform tricks like bang-backs, where he knocks the ball back into play after it's dropped below the flippers. But Stepp has a bigger goal in mind: He wants to make a name for himself on a national level.

Several years ago Stepp started going to national pinball tournaments, major events held in places like Chicago and Las Vegas. Winners at these events take home thousands of dollars or brand-new pinball machines. Of the 200 to 300 people who show up, Stepp is usually one of the 16 people who qualify, but he hasn't really reached the inner sanctum of people like Neil Shatz, Mike Mahaffey, Bowen Kerins, Rick Stetta and Lyman Sheets who've dominated the game for years. These are the legends who look beyond the lights and gimmicks of pinball, who know all the point-scoring features and who have no problem breaking into a machine's wizard mode, super-scoring programs where billion-point returns are not uncommon.

"It's hard to break into that group," says Stepp. "The more pressure that's on, the better they do, which is tough. They have the ability to put themselves in the zone whenever they want to. We can get there, but not on demand."

Still, Stepp is young and optimistic—and he's smart enough not to take all the pressure too seriously. After all, even when he loses at a big tourney, he can always break into some break dancing for his buddies filming the event, and the footage will likely end up on PinPin IV.

"Some of these guys are better than us, but we have more fun," Stepp says, punctuated by a staccato laugh.

The natural

Ponytail Bob takes his place among the final eight at the Rocky Mountain Pinball Showdown tournament at 4 p.m., Saturday, April 17, without a ponytail and without a reputation. But he does have a history.

The Showdown, the brainchild of Arvada engineer and pinball collector Dan Nikolich, has so far been a major success. More than 350 people show up at the two-day event from all over the state and beyond. Many come in U-Hauls, station wagons and pick-up trucks filled with pinball machines. Chi Babich donates pinball machines from the Game Exchange for free play all weekend, and Kevin Carroll and Dave Mercer enter several of their machines in the "Best in show" competitions. Carroll's 1970s Fireball, chromed out like a racecar, takes first place. In the tight-knit, growing world of Colorado pinball, everyone seems to know everyone else. Everyone, that is, except Denver resident Bob Winter, a.k.a. Ponytail Bob.

Winter grew up slapping the silver ball at his local Elk's Club. He soon progressed to the local bowling alley, where he would buy a pinball game for a dime, rack up 15 free games and sell them to other kids, three games for a quarter.

In 1992, Winter showed up at the world pinball championships in Milwaukee. When this unknown Montana boy with a ponytail finished in fourth place, it was a sensation.

"A lot of people were very surprised that I did well because I looked like some clown off the street," he says.

Twelve years later, Winter ponytail is long gone, put to rest by the harsh reality of the working world. There were no more world championships after 1994, and financial problems kept Winter from traveling the country, hitting the national pinball tourneys. Winter could never even afford the luxury of owning a pinball machine to practice on. But now the Pinball Showdown is on his home turf, and Winter is ready to get back in the game.

Winter had never played Lord of the Rings before, so he burned through eight qualifying games the first day learning the kinks. On Saturday morning he had come in optimistic, quickly qualified and prepared for the head-to-head finals.

"It's total offense. There is no defense. The big factor in the game is the intimidation factor," says Winter. "You have to put down your best ball right away. It forces your opponent to do something they wouldn't necessarily do."

As the single elimination finals begin, Winter puts down strong balls right out of the starting gate, racking up several million points. Winter bobs and weaves with the game. He treats the machine like a pool table, looking down the flippers like a cue stick. Soon four of the final eight are out, including Donavan Stepp. Now it's just Winter, Stepp's buddy Jeff Rank (Ffej Knar) and national champs Mike Mahaffey and Neil Shatz.

Winter continues to put up solid scores, while the others struggle to keep up. At the end of his game Winters has a solid 38 million on the scoreboard, the best of the four—so far. Shatz, who wowed the audience they day before with his 205 million-point game, has the final ball, and with 16 million points racked up on his scoreboard, all he needs is a good multi-ball round to leave Winters in the dust. Shatz puts his last ball into play... and gets multi-ball. Winters doesn't watch, preparing mentally for second place.

In the world of pinball, sometimes the steel balls fly straight, finding those elusive jackpots. Sometimes the balls seem to sing, pulling in points out nowhere. And sometimes the spheroids collide on the playing field and drain. Shatz' balls take the later route. His final score reads 28 million—10 million less than Ponytail Bob.

The ball is wild.

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