



Donovan Stepp (left) and rival Bob Winter

PHOTO: TODD NAKASHIMA

Battle for the Silver Ball

Fast flippers go head to head at Rocky Mountain Pinball Showdown

Next time you spot a pinball machine, take a second to check out the high score. If the top spot is occupied by the initials "DNO," you'll know the machine's been under the capable hands of Donovan Stepp. Part of a young, hip breed of pinballers, the goateed, thirtysomething Stepp and his buddies spend their time snowboarding in Breckenridge and playing pinball tournaments at the Climax Lounge in Denver, chronicling their exploits in a series of Warren Miller-esque films called *Pinpin*. When playing pinball, Stepp's a master at multiball modes, high-scoring rounds where several silver balls careen across the playing field at once. He hopes to break onto the national pinball scene, where champions can bring home thousands of dollars per tournament. That means practicing at least two hours a day on machines like "Road Show" and "Creature from the Black Lagoon." When the first-ever Rocky Mountain Pinball Showdown pinball tour-

namment was announced last year, word was that Stepp would be the local to beat. No one counted on Bob Winter.

Winter, an unassuming Denverite in his late 40s, caused a sensation at the 2004 Pinball Showdown by walking in as an unknown and winning first prize over Stepp and several visiting national champs. Winter was once the pinball hustler known as Ponytail Bob. Back then, his career high was a fourth-place finish in the 1992 World Pinball Championships. A busy work schedule and married life have kept Winter—high-score initials "BOB"—from making a local name for himself. While he lopped off his trademark ponytail years ago, Winter still maintains his enviable

pinball skills at Denver watering holes, anticipating the spin of the ball to know where it's going to be three or four bounces ahead of time.

Now, Stepp and Winter will likely face off again at the second annual Rocky Mountain Showdown, April 22–24. The Showdown is emblematic of the resurgence of the silver ball in Colorado, thanks to a cadre of fanatics as colorful as the games they play. Lyons Classic Pinball north of Boulder (339-A Main St., Lyons, 303-823-6100) attracts players from as far away as France, as well as Colorado's hard-core home collectors.

Pinball Showdown attendees can take on Stepp, Winter, and other pinball wizards for the title of fastest flippers along the Front Range, or try their hands at upwards of 100 pinball machines on free-play and seminars on all things pinball. As Winter says, "It's all just the roll of the ball."

JOEL WARNER

The Rocky Mountain Pinball Showdown, April 22-24

Jefferson County Fairgrounds
15200 W. Sixth Ave., Golden, \$15 per day or \$30
for a three-day pass. 303-938-9889