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## local news

### A pinhead's pursuit

Donavan Stepp has the dexterity, but so far, pinball's pinnacle has eluded him

By Robert Sanchez

Denver Post Staff Writer



Donavan Stepp, above with two pinball machines in his Lakewood kitchen, is ranked as the world's 69th best player. Starting today, he'll compete at the Rocky Mountain Pinball Showdown, where the World Poker Tour machine, below, will pose a special challenge for him. (Post / Helen H. Richardson)

**Lakewood** - The polished ball bearing weighs 4 ounces, is one-and-one-sixteenth of an inch in diameter, and on this night at an Attack From Mars pinball machine in Lakewood, Donovan Stepp is its daddy.

"How do you like that, huh?"

"Oh, yea, baby."

"You can't beat me."

You see, Stepp isn't just a pinball player. The 38-year-old is a master of pinball - at least in these parts - and he plans to display his prowess beginning today at the Rocky Mountain Pinball Showdown at the Jefferson County Fairgrounds in Golden.

The event - the nation's third-largest - should be a cakewalk for a man with two pinball machines in his kitchen. Friends and family say Stepp's deft maneuvering with the flipper is unparalleled, his ability to hit metallic ramps

and plastic targets, almost god-like.

Yes, after eight years of playing competitively, Stepp would be among the giants in the ever-obscure world of professional pinball except for one detail: When the stakes are high, he says, "it's a classic choke job."

Sure, the world's 69th best player can put down 21 billion points (really) on an unsuspecting amateur who comes to his home, but on the big stage, his goose is cooked.

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(Post / Mateo Leyba)

He has never won a major tournament, and the most recent losses are bitter and lasting. Stepp has been a favorite the last two years at the Showdown, but has yet to win the \$500 grand prize, a typical pot at pro events.

And last year, at the World Pinball Championships in Pennsylvania - the Super Bowl of pinball - Stepp missed qualifying for the finals by two ratings points. A few bad balls on Jack\*Bot were the culprits.

The payout from that event would have been \$10,000 had he won, not to mention worldwide bragging rights.

"That killed me. The nervousness sets in, your heart starts going and it's hard to relax," says Stepp, who lives in Lakewood, runs his own business leasing games to bars around the metro area and has had a love for pinball since he was a child.

But in the age of high-tech PlayStation and Xbox, pinball is gaming's version of a mullet. Still, among a passionate, global flock, it's the only game in town.

"There's more interaction, the games are physical, and they're real," says Jeff Knight, a 45-year-old player from Monument who has six machines in his home. "It's like a picture of beer versus a pitcher of beer."

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The popularity of the whizzing, dinging machines has enjoyed a mini-revival in recent years, as games have become increasingly challenging and hip - even the "Sopranos" television show has a machine. The intrigue, though, has waned mightily since pinball's glory days in the 1970s and '80s.

From 1989 to 1999, the number of pinball machines nationwide slid from 1 million to 360,000, according to the trade publication Vending Times.

This year, Stepp will try to overcome past failures on one of the newest machines - World Poker Tour - at this year's Showdown. For the first time, the tournament is sanctioned by the International Flipper Pinball Association, and the event's top players will get points toward worldwide rankings.

"It gives us credibility, like we're an event that people should come to," says Dan Nik olich, who co-founded the tournament with his wife three years ago. This year's Showdown, which will cost an adult \$15 for one day, will have more than 100 games for anyone to play and is expected to draw more than 1,000 people during the three-day event.

At the tournament level, at least 50 serious competitors are expected to play, though the tournament is open to anyone who is willing to pay \$5 for two games. The top eight players go to the finals.

For Stepp, the Showdown could begin his long-awaited ascension to the pinnacle of professional pinballers



worldwide.

"He's got aspirations, and I really believe he'll get there one day," says Neil Shatz, a professional "pinhead" from California who holds No. 3 in the world pinball player rankings.

Maybe things will change for Stepp at the final machine Sunday. He has envisioned the moment: He'll lock on his game, earn the multi-ball, hit his slots, nail the targets and cradle that ball bearing as if he were setting up his last shot ever.

"Just once," he says, "I'd love to win it all."

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