

colorado sunday

The call of the silver ball

By John Hendrickson
The Denver Post

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Josh Henderson, 11, of Chicago plays the KISS machine at Lyons Classic Pinball. The town in the small Boulder County town attracts players from across the nation and even abroad. (Photos by Daniel Petty, The Denver Post)

On a warm Thursday night in July, 11-year-old Josh Henderson of Chicago nervously shuffles on the patio of Lyons Classic Pinball. He's waiting for Kevin Carroll, the long-haired, sleepy-eyed owner, to scribble the name of his next opponent on a piece of poster board taped to the outside

window.

In the 6 1/2 years since it first opened, Carroll's establishment has become a celebrated destination for pinball addicts. His third-Thursday summer tournaments routinely draw players from around the country, and, on some nights, the world.

"We're on a cross-country family trip," said Mark Henderson, Josh's father and promoter.

"We structured it around places where Josh could compete in pinball."

Still, most players who come to

Slide show

- [View a slide show of the Lyons Classic Pinball.](#)

Lyons are from Colorado. There's Adam Lefkoff, 42, from Boulder, who brings his 6-year-old son, Escher, along for the ride. According to Lefkoff, who's ranked as a top-50 pinballer by the International Flipper Pinball Association, Lyons Classic Pinball has the best-maintained collection in the country.

Leaning over on the railing, there's Donovan Stepp, from Denver, also 42. Stepp's reputation precedes him as No. 22 on the IFPA's hallowed rankings.

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Over there, in the blue Spider-Man T-shirt, that's Basil LeBlanc, eyeing the March Madness-style bracketology of the tournament. He moved to Loveland from Orange County, N.Y., after a trip to Lyons got him hooked on the silver ball.

"I don't play too good, but it's fun," says LeBlanc.

Inside Lyons Classic Pinball, the glowing and clinking machines are huddled into three dimly lit rooms. The wall-to-wall carpeting, the low ceilings, the range stove hidden behind a bamboo curtain all eerily evoke the quintessential American rec room circa 1973.

Like every aspect of the game, the price hardly has changed. Almost every machine still costs only 50 cents. Older machines are a bargain at 25 cents. Newer, high-tech games, such as Lord of the Rings, require three quarters.



D. Gottlieb & Company manufactured 950 units of its Pyramid pinball machine in 1978, according to the Internet Pinball Machine Database. (The Denver Post | Daniel Petty)

Back on the front porch, Josh has learned that Stepp is his third-round opponent.

"You may choose," he tells Stepp, who reaches into an upside-down top hat and blindly draws a button — the egalitarian method for choosing games at Carroll's tournaments.

Josh is probably the best young pinball player in the U.S., says his father.

"In another year or two, he'll have more upper-body strength," he said. "He'll be able to manipulate the machine like all the greats."

Stepp reads the name of the game on the button he's drawn.

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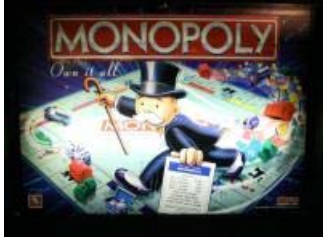
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"Andromeda," he announces, prompting murmurs from the small crowd gathered around them. It's a game that Josh has never encountered before, despite his estimation that he's played "about a



The backglass of the Monopoly Pinball game in Lyons Classic Pinball on Thursday, July 16, 2009. Stern Pinball, Inc., manufactured about 3,640 units of the game in 2001. (The Denver Post | Daniel Petty)

next month for the Professional Amateur Pinball Association world championships. After a nail-biting final round, Stepp is this week's champion, clutching the first- place purse of \$110.

A few stragglers remain inside, playing for fun.

"They come from so far away just to be here, just to play," Carroll says.

"I stay open a little late most nights. This is the only place where people understand."

million" machines in his young career.

Stepp, of course, knows Andromeda, a challenging game with an angry leonine temptress in a revealing bodysuit glaring down from the backglass. He handily beats Josh, who slams his water bottle on the floor and storms outside, fighting tears on a bench facing the darkened Aspen Leaf Motel.

By 11 p.m., the Hendersons are on the road back to Chicago , though they'll land in Pittsburgh

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Flipping out with Kevin Carroll

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Owners Carole and Kevin Carroll inside Lyons Classic Pinball. (Daniel Petty, The Denver Post)

Before he and his wife, Carole, opened the most celebrated pinball arcade in Colorado, Kevin Carroll was a master plumber. Then Carole bought him a KISS pinball machine as a gift, and it changed his life. Within days, he says, "we were both hooked." *John Hendrickson, The Denver Post*

Q: How many machines do you have at home?

A: Oh, jeez, I don't know. It started with KISS,

then Addams Family, then Black Knight. These days, I'd say about 40. They're all over the house. Not just the basement, but the living room, the dining room, everywhere. Luckily, I have a loving wife who allows that to happen — though she likes to play, too.

Q: Do you ever stop for a game on your way to the kitchen?

A: All the time. We'll pick three machines and play a series at any moment. Like I said, it's addictive.

Q: Is there an ultimate machine out there? A "Holy Grail" of pinball?

A: Not really. Nor is one machine necessarily harder than another. Everyone has their personal preference. Our Hercules, though, is pretty rare. It's twice the size of a normal machine and uses a cue ball instead of a regular pinball. Less than 300 were ever made.

Q: What's the average age of a serious pinballer?

A: You won't believe me, but if you look around, there really is no average age. We have kids like Escher (age 6) come and play and guys well over 50. It totally varies, and anyone can be competitive once they learn to do more than just bang the flippers.

Q: How does drinking fit into the game? Do players ever come in with a "tilt" of their own?

A: We don't serve alcohol here, if that answers

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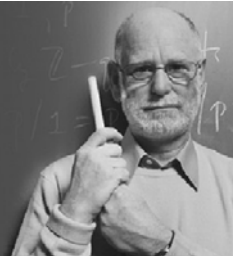


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your question. But at other places, yes, one or two drinks can loosen a player up and help them relax with a machine. It's like anything, though — too much and you lose your eye/hand coordination. When you lose control of the ball, you lose control of the game.

Q: What does the Who's rock opera "Tommy" mean to pinball fanatics?

A: I think most of us like the album better than the movie, really. It's so hard to watch them destroy all those beautiful machines at the end! Sometimes, when I look around and see a lot of new faces here — people just stopping in to play for fun — I'll throw on "Pinball Wizard" and everyone will freak out, as if it's the world's biggest coincidence and they're here to experience it.

Q: So what else is there to the game that the average Joe doesn't understand?

A: Do you want to go play?

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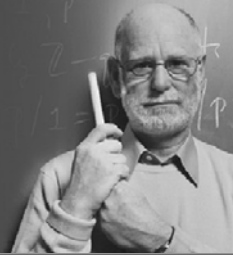


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