

denver and the west

Pinball makes a comeback in Colorado, U.S.

By Jason Blevins
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Pinballer Zen, right, puts his all into the game during a monthly tournament at the Lyons Classic Pinball arcade. (Hyoung Chang, The Denver Post)

LYONS — "Banzai!"

Steve Novak doesn't flinch as the voice screams

again. Dozens of lights flicker, yet his eyes never leave the ball hanging on his flipper in the vertical backglass of the Banzai Run pinball machine.

Soon, there are several balls in play. Novak struggles to keep up. The 58-year-old nudges the machine, muttering a sort of plea as one, two, three balls tumble down the drain.

"That's called begging," he says as he pulls the plunger on his second ball. "The good guys, they never beg."

Novak is part of a growing tribe of pinballers — known as pinheads — who are fueling a revival of the game that was ubiquitous in the pre-video-game era of the 1970s and '80s.

The

Extras

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game nearly plummeted into obscurity a decade ago as arcade owners were lured to zero-maintenance video games. But today — thanks, ironically, to the Internet uniting diverse islands of pinheads — the flipper fellowship is growing. Tournaments are thriving. Local leagues draw players of all ages.

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Flippers unite

The Mile High Pinball League has doubled in size in the past five years, with about 28 players competing every Thursday in 11-week summer and winter seasons. The 20-year-old Professional Amateur Pinball Association's annual world championship draws 400 players, up from 150 in the early 1990s, and currently ranks almost 3,000 players in a database of 112,000 contests.

The International Flipper Pinball Association started in 2006 with 430 players and now ranks more than 7,500 players from 27 countries, including 3,400 U.S. players. The association grows by about 2,000 players a year, says IFPA president Joshua Sharpe.

At the once-a-month tournament night at Lyons Classic Pinball, a narrow, noisy arcade packed with 40 flashing machines, some of the ball-flippers kick up their heels or slightly twist their hips as they slap shots toward tumbling castles, Balrogs, or the dragon-flamed

musicians of Kiss. Others stand stoic when points climb to tens of millions and even billions.



Adam Lefkoff of Longmont is one of Colorado's top 10 pinball players. He has 20 pinball machines at his house and embraces the philosophical sense that "pinball is like life." (Hyoung Chang, The Denver Post)

It's a return to the roots of old-school, three-dimensional games anchored in split-second reflexes.

"When it dawned on me that this was a real skill, that's when it got addictive," says Kevin Carroll, who seven years ago ditched his plumbing gig and, with his wife, Carole, opened Lyons Classic Pinball. "It's not just random luck."

The Carrolls began their courtship with pinball as collectors, gathering as many as 20 machines in the basement of their Lyons home. In 2003, the hobby turned business as the couple opened one of Colorado's only pinball arcades.

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multiball scenario achieved only after completing several levels of seemingly impossible tasks — can fuel a lifetime of pinballing. It's a fine line, designing games that keep both experts and beginners on the flippers and pumping quarters.

"We are always trying to achieve that balance," says Marc Schoenberg, spokesman for Chicago's Stern Pinball, which for the past 11 years has been the world's sole manufacturer of pinball machines.

Challenging that search for balance is the fact that most of the games Stern now sells are heading for rec rooms in homeowner basements. It's a new direction for the company, which for most of its 24 years designed and sold games destined for arcades.

"The more we sell to homeowners, the more we want to attract a player who will enjoy at a more layman's level," Schoenberg says.

Pinball biz on the rise

While the company doesn't expect to see a return to the early 1990s, when Stern was one of several pinball manufacturers and was moving 20,000 machines a year, business, says Schoenberg, is "strong and rising" for the 35-worker company.

Mike Strauss' career as a pinball machine repairman has thrived with the boom in home pinball machines.

"Pinball is very expensive for operators to place on location and turn a profit because of maintenance. Pinball machines break," says Strauss, who has repaired the complicated machines for 30 years yet "can't stand to play" pinball. "I do enjoy working on them, though. And Colorado has a lot of pinball machines."

Kevin Carroll handles most repairs himself, even soldering switches in the middle of busy tournament night.

On this night, he fires shot after shot at a wobbling Frankenstein. A frenzy of balls floods the table. The voice in the machine endlessly hollers "Jackpot" and "Double super jackpot."

Carole grins watching her sweetheart in the zone. A crowd gathers as Kevin leans closer to the machine.

"You get in this mode where you are just connected to the ball and you just can't lose," Novak says. "It's pretty cool to watch."

Watching pinball wizards marks an evangelical angle of pinball. Once a fledgling player sees an expert in action — like Colorado's own Donovan Stepp, ranked 22nd in the world — the limitless potential is revealed. That was the case for Longmont's Adam Lefkoff, one of Colorado's top 10 players.

"You can play a game 10,000 times and on the 10,001st time you play, something new happens. Pinball is never boring," Lefkoff says. "You

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progress through the game and find new features and you know the ball will eventually d rain. In that way pinball is like life. You are going to die, so what are you going to do when the ball is in play?"

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