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PINBALL



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Pinball 101: Keith and Randy Elwin's New "How to Play Pinball" DVD

When Keith Elwin offered to send me a pre-release of his *Pinball 101* DVD, I couldn't pound out my mailing address fast enough. Keith is not only a great pinball player, but the co-creator behind this instructional video project on how to play pinball. Keith's brother Randy is to blame for the hours of polished editing, among other things. Those of us that have been aware of the project have seen bits and pieces of footage for a while. While some are growing impatient, I can personally attest to the marathon required to create a decent full-length video. Patience yields a more polished and fluid product in the end. This DVD proves that point well.

Before I start sharing some words about the content of this DVD, let me make it clear that my copy is a pre-release DVD. It's not the final product, but something close to what you'll see when it is publicly released. What I reference here may not be exactly what the public will see, but I'm told that it will be very close.

With that out of the way, let's start off with what this DVD isn't. It is not anything like the *This Old Pinball* series of DVD's. There are no tips on pinball repair or restoration, nothing is blown up, and there are no models to look at. Nor is it anything like the Popbumper.com *Life After Death* series of DVD's. It does not chart the rebirth of a dead pinball machine or follow the story of raiding a warehouse. What the Elwin's have created has a production quality that is superior to both of the aforementioned series. It has been shot and edited in a widescreen format (16x9) so it looks very nice on your up-scaling DVD player if you are feeding a widescreen LCD or plasma TV. There is a strong sense of professionalism with the



entire production. The staging and framing of shots, proper use of lighting, usage of slow-motion effects, B-roll footage, and their selection of audio bits and pieces set the bar for pinball "fan" video a lot higher than it was before.

But what does the title *Pinball 101* mean? What discipline of the pinball world does this cover? Don't worry. It's not another fix-it video, there are no pinball schematics or cleaning techniques to be found. This one addresses a topic that has often been overlooked and perhaps unintentionally ignored in pinball video. Pinball 101 removes the smoke and mirrors surrounding high end pinball flipper skills and breaks them down to a speed that anyone can understand.

The video starts off with an animation. Little Billy is playing a fictitious pinball machine called Fanman, struggling to keep the ball out of the drain. He glances over at the arcade's pinball wizard and decides he'll shake it like the pinball stud. He tilts the

Fanman machine and decides to put an end to the offending pinball machine with a large hammer. But, he's interrupted by a man that drops him a VHS copy of *Professor Flipper's Pinball Primer*. Billy watches the video tape (it really looks like a VHS tape), and offers some of the most basic tips that everyone should already know. Little Billy begins to glaze off while watching, and we learn that all of this was just the intro to the title of the Pinball 101 project. What follows is a series of beautiful video pans across various playfields of well known pinball machines. A few moments later and we're into the meat of this title's purpose. The basics pinball skills are covered, including Ball Cradles, Flipper Passing, Bounce Passing, and Post Passing. Each one is professionally but quickly demonstrated with a warm female narration. The filming of each machine used in each tip is well framed. There is a nice balance of lighting to keep all the ball movements vivid. We even see the techniques in slow motion

with some use of overlaid directional arrows from time to time.

After this first bank of pinball tips, we get a break in the topic for the demonstration of what is called The Lawlor Jackpot Trick. This is where the skill level of the top feeding pinball players start to ink its way into the video. In just a few moments, we learn how to send two balls up the center ramp on *Monopoly* (one from each flipper during multiball modes) to trick the machine into thinking a side ramp jackpot shot was made. It turns out that *No Good Gophers* and *The Addams Family* are also susceptible to this blooper. Immediately afterwards we get a *Roller Coaster Tycoon* tip on trapping a ball under the upper right flipper during multiball. It's a way to keep one ball out of the way while you concentrate on making jackpot shots. Both of these are quick bits that make pretty advanced pinball techniques. The video makes them both look very easy to perform. While they are not, the fact that we see the techniques clearly inspired me to take a break from the viewing action and try a few of the techniques covered thus far. After an hour of flailing flippers and ball drains, I came back for the rest of the course.

There are segments that continue throughout the video that break up the academic adventure. Billy's storyline continues as we see the animated kiddo learn some skills and work to take down the arcade wizard. I'll leave the ending of this thread for you to watch. It's entertaining and creative to incorporate Flash-style animation within a video like this. So strong kudos awarded to the Elwins for the hard work required to pull this non-essential piece of the story off. There is another re-occurring featurette that utilizes a miniature camera on a remote controlled car. This gizmo is small enough to move around most of the pinball geometry and provide a very nice pinball perspective. You will see very interesting views of the playfield geometry as the little camera travels across many popular modern pinball machines. This mini-cam actually becomes a large portion of the overall Pinball 101 material. Each bit has a techno-induced audio track and seems to flow well. If there was a negative point to be found, it would arguably be that the number of mini-cam sequences scattered throughout the video are plentiful. Still, I don't recommend skipping a single one the first time through the disc. The DVD has plenty of tight chapter breaks so you can get the most out of the presentation whether you're in a pinball learning mood, or in a purely entertaining mood.



The pinball skills demonstration continues and covers a progressively more difficult technique list. These include Drop Catch, Alley Pass, Tip Pass, Flick Pass, Live Catch, Loop Pass, Tap Pass, Post Catch, and Multiball Tricks (Cradle Separation, Cradle Juggle, Newton's Cradle, and Dual Action Flipper). There's a fantastic summary demonstration of most of these multiball techniques occurring live during a multiball mode in *Attack From Mars*. This part piece in particular is worth repeating a few times over, if for any reason, just to see how someone with real flipper skill is able to control multiple balls on the playfield.

The mini-movies within Pinball 101 will be worth the cost of the DVD on their own merit. My favorite is "Magna-Trance", a music-video styled piece that demonstrates several interesting slow motion clips of balls moving around various pinball machine ge-

ometry including some under playfield shots of pinball mechanicals in action. Proper Pinball Etiquette is a fun black & white "old film" deviation that actually shares some important points about proper pinball etiquette. You'll see Keith and others in funny scenarios that depict the things that occur in public pinball places that shouldn't. Let's hope that some of those offenders will see these pointers and take them to heart.

There's a few clips in Pinball 101 that take on a MythBusters type of approach to demonstrating what is and isn't particularly effecting in pinball performance. Jilt with the Tilt is one of them. This piece is a nudging and shaking demonstration that fully instructs the viewer on how to properly nudge. Direction of ball travel and how it impacts the rebounded direction is explained and techniques are shown with full graphical demonstrations. Slapping (think slap saving)



is fully covered with its more useful purposes explained. Flipper Aiming is a fantastic featurette on flipper reflexes and shot direction. They show actual ball speeds and how they differ from the flipper at rest (cradled) as opposed to a ball zooming through the inlane feed to the flipper. With all of these more scientific pieces, additional camera views are often integrated to show the effects of the technique on tilt mechanisms.

Every skill element that has been demonstrated in the video up to this point is re-summarized in action with full explanations and live examples using *Attack from Mars*. Before starting, each part of the playfield is broken apart into shots and elements. This piece is probably the most impressive of anything in the video. It's like a video version of *Attack from Mars* rule sheet indicating the complete shotmap. The viewer's newly learned shot techniques are all orchestrated

to demonstrate ball control, and ultimately a run at mastering the machine itself.

Just when you think it's a wrap, there's more. "Illegal Moves" is a segment that teaches the viewer how to do things that will get you expelled from pinball tournaments. I'm talking about Bang Backs and Death Saves. Both are similar and shown clearly. There's a really nice closing bit on *Funhouse*.

There are several game specific tips and tricks embedded throughout the video. Those included *Dracula*, *Attack from Mars*, *No Good Gophers*, *Aztec*, *Tommy*, *Addams Family* (2 separate segments), *The Shadow* (long), *Starship Troopers*, and *Champion Pub*.

You want to know what I think of this video? I'm sure you've already been able to pick up on my own enthusiasm throughout this review. For a more thorough discussion, let me elaborate. The female narrator is professional. The editing is far from

brash and rough. It's quite smooth and professional, leaving you feeling like you're watching something that a professional team put together. There are so many cool pinball techniques demonstrated that you'll be reaching for the remote to repeat them a few times. The guys must have known this was of possible interest because the chapter marks are tightly scattered in all the right places making navigation to repeat or skip over parts of DVD a breeze. Most of the machines presented are clean and nice, which really makes everything better. Nice DMD and even hand-to-flipper button split screen effects really bring the professionalism and effective instructional quality to this video.

It's hard for me to find any shortcomings in this DVD. Some might not like the heavy use of the mini-car camera. Others might not like the opera "video" that features fantastic slow-motion video moments of close-up pinball playfield action. Still others might not care to follow the story of little Billy. But in all cases, a chapter forward press on the remote keeps everyone happy.

A video like this requires a top tier player to be made. But that alone doesn't work without an understanding of scripting, framing, lighting, video editing, and an overall understanding of what it takes to make an entertaining video. All of the elements came together in *Pinball 101*. It's a must-own product. Keith tells me that the DVD should be released in August or September and should be priced near \$20. Since the bulk of it was shot in high definition, we can also hope for a Blu-Ray release in the future.

Keep your browsers pointed to Pinball-video.com for release information. **GR**

