

GAMEROOM

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Pinball Expo Turns 25

An interview with Mike Pacak

T.J.'s Barcade

Tamra and Jesse Bohnsack's Game Room



Ahoy Mateys, it's Pirate Pete's!



A Family Entertainment Center Survives and Thrives in Rough Economic Waters

by Rob Craig

Just when I thought that news about Family Entertainment Centers (FEC's) was only about bankruptcy and equipment auctions, I learned that a fresh concept in coin-op entertainment (at least to this growing rural area) is arriving in my back yard. It didn't happen overnight. In fact, the first news of Pirate Pete's arrived about a year ago in our local newspaper, The Southern Illinoisian. It was in that paper that I learned about Ditto Basso, a retired state worker from the Illinois capitol who had a vision for a business that he could leave to his family some day.

The idea was to create a FEC that merged specific elements of Chucky Cheese and Dave & Buster's, and reformulating what made those places magical to their respective target customers. The original plan was to open in November 2008, but that date came and went with no news or obvious construction in the local mall. I thought that it was another great idea that had been pulled into oblivion by discouraged investors and lawyers. In this economy, those things happen daily.

To be honest, I've always felt that that a FEC would do well in our area. We have a ridiculous amount of success with 30+ restaurants in the area. Most local folks to our humble town of Marion, Illinois don't like to

wait 45 minutes for a table at Red Lobster, Applebee's, or any of the other restaurant chain dining options. We get swamped by hungry patrons from the local "cluster" of small towns that surround Marion during weekends or after Southern Illinois Miners baseball games. Even the mom'n'pop local eateries have waiting lines for tables. With all of this eatery success, you would think that someone has picked up the hint that we are hungry for an entertainment option. The area has a few large theaters and some nice bowling venues, but no real place to have various flavors of fun for everyone in the family.

Some have tried in the past. We had an Orlando-styled miniature golf course once. But it tanked after a few years of unfaithful customers. Could it have been the Orlando miniature golf prices? Before the putt putt of paradise was a combination game room, miniature golf, and go-kart track. That place actually made a good run for some years, but eventually faded away after an apparent loss of interest by its owners.

Today, if you want the Chuck E. Cheese kiddie party experience, plan on an hour drive. Dave & Buster's will cost you 2 hours or more in a car to St. Louis, Mo.

If someone is going to build a FEC anywhere and survive, it has to be handled with the utmost attention to the intended market and carefully deployed. Beyond small business basics of securing money and real estate, the business model has to address today's consumer need for entertainment, and be forward looking enough to see trends with a willingness to chase where those dollars are going. After 6 months of hearing no more about Pirate Pete, I had concluded that his ship had sunk.

It was late July and I was comfortably propped up in my easy chair with the local paper on my lap. Scanning through the classifieds (for those oddball "pinball for sale" ads that never show up) I found a classified for Pirate Pete's Family Entertainment Center. Apparently the ship was afloat, and sailing into port. I made a pass through the local mall, driving the perimeter in search for an entrance but finding nothing with obvious markings of pirates, ships, or the mysterious Pete. I questioned a few mall employees during various routine trips to mall stores, but no one had any details about the place. I was cautiously excited about the mystery, not wanting to be disappointed in what could be a lackluster attempt at family entertainment.

I had horrible visions of a sterile white dining room with paper thin pizza that smelled and tasted like the frozen pies we see in the bargain stores, made with almost real cheese. I shivered at the possibility of coin-op auction rejects that might line the un-interesting walls. I've been to places like this in the past and left with a sick feeling, wondering if there was any hope left in the world for fresh coin-op entertainment for the entire family.

I am an amazingly lucky guy sometimes, falling into the most interesting news at the best times. While hosting a pinball gathering at my place, I learned from a pinball colleague that Pirate Pete's was having a press day before their first opening to the public. I was not exactly invited to this event, but that hasn't stopped me before. The next day, I drove to the entrance that was recently a blank brick wall, and found that big yellow letters introducing the new business were freshly mounted above a previously blank and empty entrance. I waved my camera, a copy of GameRoom Magazine, and two young men dressed in Pirate Pete attire welcomed me inside. Within 5 minutes, I was being greeted by Ditto Basso himself.

This 50 something retiree greeted me a gruff voice and a proud smile. An outstretched arm pointed towards a table filled with colorful samplings from the restaurant. "Try everything, and please tell me what you think!", he said. We're off to a great start! Everywhere I looked had polish. The walls were painted like a cartoon backdrop. Not like a daycare mind you, but thematically correct to the vision one would get if stuck in a cartoon about pirates. The restaurant has a resemblance of palm trees, and various ship ahoy'ish items painted on the walls.

Moving away from the restaurant brings you to a very large room with a high blacked-out ceiling, a dim ambient lighting, perfect for 35+ deluxe coin-op amusements scattered in a thoughtful, professional arrangement on the floor. Every wall in the game room was painted like cartoon buildings, holding true to the theme. The token desk was constructed of wooden planks, with barrels, ropes, and nets located in various places. To my right was a very large redemption room.

This wasn't a little glass counter with rubber snakes and plastic rings. Those items were in there, but more importantly were "grown up" items of interest. T-Shirts, board games, even a Wii were possible prizes to be "earned". It was a redemption store, not a redemption counter. And the ticket "pricing" seemed to be thoughtful (as opposed to random). The smartest item in the store was



self-promoting Pirate Pete's T-Shirts. They were modestly priced, and as I learned weeks later, a strong selection from patrons. Having customers purchase self-promotional items is what every business owner hopes to achieve.

I realize that many of you reading this column have been either voluntarily brought to, or otherwise forced into places like Pirate Pete's before. If you are like me, you hope to find anything of arcade interest. I have truly given up hope in finding a pinball machine anywhere in a FEC, new or otherwise.

True to the trend, there was nothing with flippers to be found, but being open minded and hopeful that non-redemptive arcade machines still have some life in places like this, I went on the hunt for something that resembled an arcade machine. It was really difficult for me to overlook the giant deluxe ticket-spitters—beautiful lights, brilliant

artwork, and crafty attract modes screamed out for my attention as I strolled through the room. Totally distracted, I almost fell into an adult ripping (playing) a plastic axe (guitar) on *Guitar Hero Arcade* from Raw Thrills/Konami/Activision. I've seen a couple of these before, but not in an environment like this. There were a few other games like *Big Buck Hunter*, a pair of *Fast & Furious Super Bikes*, and a pair of *NASCAR Arcade* "roll-bar" style cabinets.

There was another deluxe called *Tank Adventure*. The title doesn't seem too exciting, but the game was huge and demanded attention. Digging through the Internet ether revealed that this 62" LCD behemoth was the creation of Taiwanese company TecWay. The tank itself moves forward and backward with a turning / pitch effect that is unfortunately only on-screen.



There was more still as I passed basketball machines, skeeball lanes, and the requisite air hockey game. Off in a corner was a brightly lit yellow room with a large entryway and windowless openings. As I walked closer, it was obvious that this was the kiddie ride and kiddie game room.

What was especially worth noting was the inclusion of some free fun for the smallest patrons. A Lego table sat in an open area with chairs scattered around, reminiscent of a kindergarten room. Another corner had a wireball table where kids who are completely broke can still get a little free play time on an old fashioned non-electronic toy. But if you had some gold tokens, you had plenty of things to spend them on.

Hopefully what you gain from the photos and description of this game room is that someone has taken the time to address the demographic data of a specific area. The owner, Ditto, wants to make an obvious profit.

The data, as it turns out, dictates the size. After consulting with distributors, it also dictates the game room content. While we all would argue that a room filled with pinball and very cool arcade machines would be the “most fun” thing to do in an establishment such as this, the bitter truth is that it would kill his bottom line. If not due to the amount of maintenance required to keep pinball up

and running, it would be from the lack of interest from entire families seeking a broad array of entertainment. It is indeed ironic that the home gameroom demand for pinball still keeps those machines among the highest priced devices on eBay (and at coin-op auctions), yet few have the guts to dare operate them in public.

I should also add this important point for you to consider. After running a pinball show in the region for 5 years, we have put out a strong impression of how much fun pinball can be. It has been introduced to the youngest of children, and the oldest of grandparents. The show attracts people who want to play pinball, and understand that pinball is the only entertainment that is given a showcase in the facility. At Pirate Pete’s, it’s a different, less specialized group of people that walk through the door.

Before I wrap this up entirely, I would do a great disservice by failing to mention the laser tag arena. It’s not my forte’ to be sure. But, the eye-popping artwork from Disney skilled black-light artists is worth a few words and photos. This laser tag attraction is designed like everything else in the house – all the way. Players walk into a briefing room and get a short discussion from an animated pirate skeleton. The next room is the “suit-up” room where staffers prepare the

players for a various configuration of laser games. Upon entering the arena, the players are flooded with black lighting, green lasers, and the most amazing black-light air brush art I have ever seen. I’m not sure how the players can focus with this level of detail on every wall.

After taking this all in for a couple of hours, I got the opportunity to chat with the owner and listen to his vision for Pirate Pete’s. It was an inspiring story, similar to those you might have heard before from people who recount how their franchise was built on a foundation of great food (or experiences) and superb customer service. I couldn’t help but think that this man has found a sweet spot, perhaps a new niche that hasn’t been exploited by the big boys.

Pirate Pete’s is a smaller brother to a multi-million dollar Dave & Buster’s. Yet, it has all the ingredients to meet the demands of a smaller population without diluting the experience. The food is great, helpful staff are everywhere, and the entertainment experience seems supersized for such a small venue. I suppose time will tell if Ditto Basso and Pirate Pete will truly be an unmatched partnership. But for this season, they have everyone’s attention focused on a text book example of modern coin-operated family entertainment. **GR**