

MISSOURI TRAVEL

Thrill Ride

State's image among roller coaster enthusiasts is picking up momentum

By CONNIE FARROW
Associated Press

Aaron Girard let out one of those screams that start deep in the belly and cause the throat to ache as the wooden roller coaster he was riding entered its first drop: a 310-degree, double-down spiral.

When the Ozark WildCat came to a stop 90 seconds later, the 7-year-old from Wichita, Kan., had one thing to say: "I want to ride it again."

The \$4 million coaster is the centerpiece thrill ride at Celebration City, the new theme park that formally opened in May on the western edge of Branson.

It's attracting vacationers to southwest Missouri. It is also increasing the state's visibility among roller coaster enthusiasts who have long flocked to Six Flags St. Louis, Kansas City's Worlds of Fun and Branson's Silver Dollar City, which is Celebration City's sister theme park.

Ohio and California are the roller coaster kings, but Missouri has begun to attract more attention, said Jeff Mast of Independence, a regional representative for the 8,000-member American Coaster Enthusiasts.

Six Flags, located in the St. Louis suburb of Eureka, has five roller coasters, while Worlds of Fun and Silver Dollar City each have four. Along with the wooden Ozark WildCat, Celebration City also has two steel coasters — Thunderbolt and Jack Rabbit.

"I think a roller coaster becomes a park icon as far as guests are concerned," said Elizabeth Gotley, spokeswoman for Six Flags St. Louis.

"There's a certain segment of your audience that will identify you with your coasters."

That's one of the reasons that theme park operators are constantly looking for the latest and greatest technology.

"Coasters are a status symbol," Gotley said. "If you are going to live in a certain neighborhood, you have to drive a certain car. If you are going to be in the theme park industry, you better have a great coaster."

Cristy Welsh, spokeswoman for Worlds of Fun in Kansas City, agreed that the trend is to "one-up" the other parks. Of course, the new kid on the block generally is outdone in a year or two.

Ozark WildCat is the first wooden roller coaster in southwest Missouri. It soars eight stories high and is a natural fit with the tree-lined landscape surrounding the park, said Steve Honeycutt, general manager of Celebration City.

The track stretches 2,600 feet, considerably

shorter than Six Flags' wooden The Boss (5,051 feet) and wooden Screamin' Eagle (3,872 feet) and Worlds of Fun's wooden Timber Wolf (4,320 feet).

But roller coaster fans are not necessarily looking for the biggest or fastest ride.

"It's a top-notch coaster," said Barry Hon, 31, of Fort Myers, Fla., after trying out the WildCat. "I would put it in at number two on my list."

Hon has ridden 125 other roller coasters across the United States and drove to Branson specifically for a turn on Ozark WildCat. Lightning Racer at Hersheypark in Hershey, Pa., is his favorite wood coaster.

"The WildCat has lots of good turns, good speed and it's smooth," Hon said after taking his 10th ride.

Mast's group, American Coaster Enthusiasts, doesn't bother ranking roller coasters because riders' tastes are too varied.

There are two things most so-called professional riders look for: Gut-wrenching drops and good "air time," those few seconds when riders feel as though they are floating.

Mast gives high marks on both counts to The Orient Express at Worlds of Fun, a 23-year-old steel coaster that remains his favorite.

But he was so excited about Ozark WildCat that he made several trips from his home in Independence to Branson to monitor construction by Great Coasters International Inc. of Sunbury, Pa.

"The woodies have more personality," Mast said. "They bombard you with different senses."

There has been a revival of wooden roller coasters since the 1970s, said Jeff Pike, vice president of Great Coasters.

Six Flags at St. Louis dominated the national race toward bigger and better coasters in 1976 when it opened Screamin' Eagle. At the time, it was the tallest, longest and fastest wooden coaster in the world.

The trend now is toward rides with curves, twists and bunny-hops that keep the rider guessing what is coming next.

Ozark WildCat is the first wooden roller coaster to have a 310-degree twist all the way to the bottom of the first drop, Pike said.

It's what won the hearts of young Aaron Girard and his father, Mike Girard.

"It's scary," Aaron said. Mike Girard said he enjoyed the nostalgia aspect of the wooden coaster, but he prefers steel coasters because of their speed.

"It's a personal thing," he said. "They're all fun."

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ELIZABETH GOTLEY
spokeswoman for
Six Flags St. Louis



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Aaron Girard, 7, and his father Mike Girard of Wichita, Kan., ride the WildCat coaster at Celebration City theme park in Branson.

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