



2007 California Extreme *An Insider's View*

By Mark Birsching



This year's California Extreme Arcade Show (number 11!) was held on August 11-12, 2007, at Parkside Hall in San Jose, California. This year's show had much to see and do as it was one of the biggest ever in the history of CAX. Machines to play, seminars to attend, films to watch, friends to meet, the show had something for every arcade lover. Here are some highlights of the show.

With over 400 machines in attendance, all set on free play, there was something for everyone. There were over 160 pinball machines and 250 video games at the show, along with some other interesting games such as Penny Pitch, Cosmo Gang, and an old 1947 Seeburg Shoot the Bear (always fun to see the bear turn around after getting hit and start chasing the dog!). The pinballs included everything from old woodrails (like Sally, St. Louis, Balls-A-Poppin, and Bank-A-Ball), to EM's such as Doodle Bug, Bank-A-Ball and Paul Bunyan, early solid-states such as Centaur, Xenon, and Black Knight to modern solid-states like Scared Stiff, Fish Tales, and the just-released Spiderman. (Yes, there were 2 Bank-A-Ball's there. Both were Gottlieb with one being a 1950 woodrail and the other a 1965 EM.) Also included were such rare machines as Kingpin and Bing Bang Bar (an original Capcom version), several UltraPins, and a complete Atari pinball line-up including Hercules. Lucky Ju-Ju was there with their trailer and several classic EM's. On the video game side, several never-released prototypes such as Teeter Torture, Marble Man, and Akka Arrh were there along with all the favorites, including laser-disc games. Imagine an 18,000 square-foot arcade in a darkened room just like the ones you went to and you begin to get the picture. Well over a thousand people had a great time on old and new favorites and ones they may never have tried before. (How long can you play before your feet hurt?)

A couple of interesting modified pinballs were there. One was a Whirlwind with the fan in the backbox replaced with an industrial blower. Its fun to try and play with what feels like a gale force wind blowing on you. Most people who tried ended up laughing so hard they could barely play. Another was an Ad-

dams Family with a set of pedals like those on an exercise bike. The harder you pedal the more power you had to the flippers (and Uncle Fester's light). If you pedal too slowly, then your flipper power weakens and you can't make your shot. I heard that at least one person was able to keep going long enough to Tour the Mansion. Great fun!

We also held a film festival with screenings of several shorter and a few longer films (including some pre-releases). "Chasing Ghosts" and "King of Kong: A Fistful of Quarters" were the feature films, and several other films such as "Tilt: The Battle to Save Pinball" and "High Score" were shown as well as some trailers for upcoming films. All together it added up to over eight hours of movies. A lot of interest was shown as some of the films had over 250 people in attendance. A great way to rest your feet for a few hours before going back to playing all those games!

Besides the films, there were seminars to attend. Chris Kuntz presented "Pinball Maintenance 101" to those who were new to the hobby of pinball and were wondering how to work on a pinball. Several technicians participated in a SuperTech Summit revealing some of their repair tips and secrets for both pinball and video games. Zonn Moore and Mark Shostak presented repair tips for Cinematronics and Vector monitors. Others included tips on achieving high scores on video games and a first-ever Arcade Trivia challenge (how well do you know your pinball facts?). Something for everyone! I had a chance to attend part of

the SuperTech Summit and found that even though I've been collecting pinball machines for over 10 years, there were some things presented that I hadn't run into before, as well as a lot of things that helped validate some of the repair jobs I had done. Tons of information was presented and those attended seemed to soak it up.

There were some vendors at the show including Marc and crew from Marco Specialties showing off their new LED displays and Rob Hawkins and Don Mueting with their table of fascinating old pinball stuff. I always love to browse through their stuff to see what treasure I can find.

The pinball tournament was held again this year with three different divisions based on eras of pinball (electromechanicals, solid state, and modern), a casual division, and a no-limit tournament. Many participated, many played, and eventually the winners were found. There was almost non-stop action in the





tournament area all day Saturday and Sunday until the last playoff game was played. The winners for the modern division were Bowen Kerins (1st), Jim Belsito (2nd), and Andrei Massenkoff (3rd). Winners for the solid-state division were Keith Elwin (1st), Neil Shatz (2nd), and Zach Sharpe (3rd). In the EM division, Jeff Rank took first place, Kyle Seller took second, and Rick Stetta took third. For the casual players Kyle Seller won first, Angelo Muro won second, and Tim Hansen and Chuck Bentley tied for third. The no-limit tournament winners included Keith Elwin in A division, Tom Miller in B, and Joe Schober in C. Lots of winners, lots of fun!

But, how did this all take place? What does it take to put a show like this together? As one of the organizers, let me open the door to a “behind the scenes” look at the making of California Extreme.

Our show planning begins almost immediately after the last one ends. The staff meets to talk about what worked, what didn't, and what concerns others may have. For example, how did the traffic move by the registration desk (how long was the line)? How was the machine layout – did it leave enough space for everyone to be able to participate? The good, the bad, and the ugly tend to come out at this meeting, serving as a springboard to the next year. Ideas for improvement and maybe new things are talked about as well as potential dates for the next show. After this meeting is done, we usually take a hiatus for a few months as we just finished spending countless hours getting ready for the last one and need to actually not think about pinball and videos for awhile (besides the fact it takes me several weeks to get my stuff back to where it belongs!).

As we get closer to the holiday season, talks return to potential dates. It would seem to be an easy task, but we are competing with many other groups who want to use Parkside Hall. Since this is downtown San Jose, we need to check out other events in the area for potential conflicts. For example, three years ago the Grand Prix came to San Jose on the very weekend we had planned to hold the show. Since they were taking over the whole downtown, we had to find a different date. Several other groups were impacted as well, so it took quite a bit of time to nail down our date. Changes in the staffing at the venue also make things more difficult as they don't remember from year to year who we are and we always have to “re-train” them. Holding a show of this size limits which venues are available (and we've looked!), and where we are now seems to be the best compromise of space, accessibility, and amenities.

Once a date gets nailed down and contracts are signed, we start planning the show. Some of the staff has now been together for several years and certain jobs have been adopted by each. Since I am an accountant, the administration side of the show is my strong suit, so I take care of the front desk, databases, tickets, and volunteer scheduling. If you send an e-mail to us (info@caextreme.org) I'm most likely the one who will respond to you. Ken Chaney is a founder and the main organizer of the show.

He's good at getting speakers and seminars lined up and t-shirt design (this year with the help of Dan Fontes and Bobby Tribble). He also makes sure everything gets taken care of. He's the one who ends up taking care of anything that no one else does, which keeps him quite busy. There are other staff members like Bob Ellingson (programs, ads, and flyers), Jonathan Koolpe (game lists and contacts), Tom Bombaci (website, printing, and flyers), TJ Beyer (repairman and all-around mover/helper), Bowen Kerins (tournaments and film festival) and Scott Evans (prototypes and audio/visual). While we all have our various things to do, we also help each other when needed. Since all of us are volunteers, we have to do all this apart from work hours, which can mean some late nights/early mornings.

We meet to plan themes, t-shirt designs, logistics, and seemingly a thousand little details that need to be taken care of. We send out a flyer every year to the people in our database. Last year we sent almost 2,700 flyers! After the flyer is designed and reviewed, it gets printed and folded. Last year it took five of us over three hours to label, staple, and put stamps on the flyers. In addition to the flyers, we send out e-mails to each person for whom we have an e-mail address announcing the show as well as some close to the show announcing the speaker schedule and other featured events.

Game calls go out asking people to bring games to the show. We get over 400 games each year, and it wouldn't happen without people participating. The staff brings about half of the games each year (Ken and TJ usually bring at least 100 themselves!), and the others are brought by people of the community. We do everything we can to try to get as many people involved as possible (bring three, get in free – bring four and also get a t-shirt). We also look for volunteers to help us set things up and take things down, help with security and front desk duties among other things. Organizing all that takes quite a bit of work, so we are thankful for all the help we can get.

T-shirt design is an important area to take care of. If you've ever tried designing a t-shirt, you know how hard it is. We try to find willing artists to pitch in and help (especially since I have no artistic ability at all!) and spend quite a bit of time refining the ideas. There is always an early deadline as the printer needs enough time to print all the t-shirts and we try to find out from the people who will attend what their preferences are for colors, etc. A lot of time is spent trying to make sure this comes out well, and judging by the reaction of attendees, it seems to be a bit hit!

As we get closer to the show, things start to ramp up. A lot of things seem to wait until almost the last minute. Confirmation of the speakers and seminars usually takes place during the last week before the show. Volunteers get confirmed about three before the show. A lot of last minute scrambling goes on (along with countless number of phone calls between the staff). Forms get printed, speaker schedules get finalized and announced via e-mail, the program gets put together (which has to get done in time to be printed), the volunteer list is published along with their time slots to help, signs get made, and many e-mail inquires



get answered. Last minute dealings with the convention center staff need to take place as well as making sure everyone bringing stuff needs to know when and where to show up. It tends to be stressful at times as everyone wants everything at once!



And, of course, I need to get my games ready for the show. This process starts for me usually right after Christmas with whatever machines I have at home at the moment. Some are just fine, some need repairs after the show from last year, and some are new acquisitions in various states of repair (usually needing to be shipped). I managed to get 29 of the 33 pinballs I own and some of my video games to the show this year. I live in a condo, so only about half are there at anyone time. The rest are scattered in various storage facilities, work, friend's houses, and church. After I get the ones at home running and ready to go (which takes a lot of parts as I like to make sure the machines are very playable before they go), they get collapsed and staged in one of the rooms. Then the job of retrieving all the other games starts. Eventually, all the machines I plan to take are collapsed and either in my house or at one of the storage units. Sometimes one I planned to take either dies on me or turns out to need more repair work than I will have time for (this year it was Time Machine - it was working when I stored it, but when I turned it back on, it had one dead display and no feature lights. I tried a few easy-to-fix things, but, after I zapped myself on the high voltage for the displays, I decided it was going to take more time than I had to get it going).



Then there is the process of moving and setting up the games. Did you know that you can get 27 collapsed pinballs on a 24-foot truck? This year it was going to take two trips, so we loaded some other machines from Ken and TJ onto the truck in order to have a good number there on Thursday morning. We got those unloaded and set up in a semi-circle along with some others that showed up early. At 10 am a local TV celebrity showed up to shoot a live spot with Ken about the show for the local morning show. It turned out great! After that, the rest of my machines were loaded and unloaded. Then the process of setting them all up begins. By the time we finished, my arms were really complaining. Thankfully, all of my games made it and at least were working at the beginning of the show.

Friday was spent getting any bugs out of the games and getting the show floor and registration desk set up. People bringing equipment started showing up early in the morning and throughout all the day. The vendors came to set up their booths, the tournament area machines were chosen and set up, the machines were moved to their final locations, and all sorts of last minute things were taken care of. The crew in charge of floor setup was there until 2 am getting the last pieces in line and powered up.

The day of the show starts early as I get there around 8 am to set up the front desk and get ready for the line. Pre-registrants were able to enter at 10:30 and those who wanted to pay at the door got in at 11:00 am. People started showing up around 9:30 this year to wait in line. Once we started processing and opened the show, we had a constant line for at least three hours with

no breaks (no one, fortunately, waited more than 10 minutes). After that, it was steady for the rest of the day. The volunteers helped keep the desk going and the door secure as I held the raffle drawings and answered a lot of questions. The tourna-

ments and seminars were held as well as people having a lot of fun playing games. Of course, along with all the stuff the staff takes care of during the show, we try to get back to fix machines that have a problem so they can continue to be enjoyed (how can a machine that works perfectly all year at home have a complete meltdown at the show?) Thanks to the technicians at the show who helped keep the machines running. A nice crowd of people were there, and one could tell they were enjoying all that was offered. By the time I left that day, it was almost time for the show to close at midnight.

The second day was much the same only not quite so hectic. The grand prize raffle drawing on Sunday afternoon always is popular (choice of a video game or pinball). This year's winner chose a Global Arcade Classics machine. At 9 pm the show closed and the clean-up began as many people took their equipment with them that night. For some of us, we came back on Monday to collapse and load all the equipment. By the time I finished Tuesday morning, I was really tired and sore! (And, I had to go back to work that day!) I spent the next several weeks re-setting up machines and getting them back in all the right locations.

Now that the show is over, it's time to update our database and sort through all the registration forms for this year. We also take a look at how people found out about CAX to see what works best for spreading the word. We take care of the mountain of bills and plan for the next year as it takes all the revenues to keep the show happy and healthy. And, of course, then the whole process starts again for next year! Even though it's a lot of work, I am glad that people can enjoy the show as they are taken back to the golden days of the arcade. It's a huge undertaking, but to me, it's worth it!

California Extreme is always looking for volunteers to help out and to bring equipment to the show. We love to see every era of pinballs from the early woodrails to the newest release. The more, the merrier! Also, we are always looking for people to help in the planning and running of the show. Running a show like this takes a lot of dedication and hours (for some of us, hundreds each year). Each person who volunteers is greatly appreciated and helps us spread out the workload. For more information, please see our website.

So, another year is in the books. Hopefully you've gotten a glimpse of what it takes to put on a show. It's a lot of work, but it also is great to show off ... errr I mean share my machines and play machines from other people's collections. Getting a chance to meet some of the great people involved in the arcade industry is a lot of fun as well as catching up with your friends, some of whom you only see at shows. Come, join the fun in 2008 and see why people return year after year! Happy flipping! 

Catch CAX 2008: July 19-20, www.caextreme.org