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*Tuning Up*

**BEHIND THE SCENES AT CEDAR POINT**





A Look  
Behind the  
Scenes as  
Cedar  
Point  
Prepares  
for Another  
Season



**By Eric Minton**

photos by Dan Feicht and Eric Minton



# Park Profile

**E**ven in winter, Cedar Point appears like Oz across the bay, a multi-colored skyline of needles, loops, and corkscrews. Set on a peninsula hooking into Lake Erie from Sandusky, Ohio, where winter blows through relentlessly, the park maintains a fresh luster and keeps itself presentably tidy. On the midway, turquoise *Iron Dragon* cars sit on pallets lined up like jets on an aircraft carrier ready for duty on the bright red twisting track above. An army of trash receptacles stand at parade rest in a plaza. Maintenance crews scurry about with an air of urgency, but there is no litter. Even in winter, Cedar Point doesn't let up.

Now it is June, and like other amusement parks north of the 34th parallel Cedar Point is getting into the swing of its season. This, its 129th edition, concludes a decade in which Cedar Point achieved consensus status as the "best roller coaster park in the world" and became the industry benchmark for operations and customer service. But to understand how this park runs so well in June is to see it in winter. It is then that Cedar Point truly establishes its reputation for customer service well before customers or even seasonal staff get there. It is then that 112 ride mechanics like Tim Brauer, in his fifth year here, ensure Cedar Point's status as a vaunted roller coaster park.

Brauer brushed Slip Plate graph coating on the wheels of a car that in a few weeks would tear through the massive wooden *Mean Streak* roller coaster. Around him were the trappings of a typical car garage, except that these cars ride the vaunted skyways of Cedar Point's coasters. The vehi-



Keeping the trains running on time during the season requires diligent maintenance in the off-season.

cles held in high esteem by families and fanatics sat about stripped of their dignity and everything else. *Iron Dragon* cars lay in various states of undress. Lap bars were piled on the ground, a wheel served as a doorstep. One *Mean Streak* car rested upside down adorned with a grimy, torn piece of sweatshirt and a jar of Never-Seez lubrication compound.

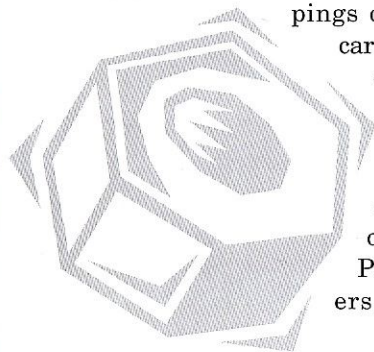
The shop is actually the sheltered picnic pavilions near Cedar Point's main gate. As soon as the park closes in mid-October, temporary walls go up around the site where corporate outings and youth groups are normally feted. Every one of Cedar Point's 3,000 ride vehicles is pulled from its tracks, troughs, channels, and platforms and moved to the makeshift shop to be disassembled, every part inspected and many replaced, and then reassembled.

Meantime, the tracks themselves undergo thorough inspections. Crews evaluate the wood frames on *Mean Streak*, *Gemini*, *Blue Streak* and *Mine Ride* board by board and make necessary replacements. "I would say every year we open up there's a cer-

tain percentage of those rides that is new," says Monty Jasper, Cedar Point's vice president of maintenance and construction. The steel coasters go through magnetic particle non-destructive testing (NDT) for cracks. Jasper, who uses outside NDT experts, opts for the magnetic particle method over X-ray because the latter is more expensive, difficult to accomplish, and harder to interpret.

When the reassembled vehicles and their tracks finally reunite, the rides go through extensive test runs, both empty and weighted. Jasper has used many kinds of weight, including sand, lead shot, and people-shaped water weights, but he prefers saddle bags filled with cheap metal washers—up to 60 pounds per bag—strapped to the seat or lap bar. "All you're looking for is weight, you're not looking to pay a lot to get it," he says.

The amount of test run time depends on the ride and its maintenance status that particular year. A carousel may run four to eight hours, the inverted coaster *Raptor* 40 hours or more. The tests must be completed before the state inspectors arrive in





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*"To understand how this park runs so well is to see it in winter."*

late April, though Cedar Point uses the state inspections as further testing opportunities. "Quite frankly, I think that's one of the reasons we have successful operating systems," Jasper says. "You don't want your first guests to experience all the things you could have gotten rid of in the month prior to opening."

Glancing around the maintenance shop a month before the May 8 season opener, it's difficult to see how the rides can be readied in time and the area cleared for picnics. But, said Brauer, "it all gets done somehow." As Ted Brubaker prepared to reassemble the seats, lap bar, and suspension mechanism on an *Iron Dragon* car, he thought back on his 20 years at Cedar Point and couldn't recall a ride ever failing to make the season opener. You'd have to go back to 1978 when construction delays postponed the grand opening of *Gemini*. If a ride

weren't ready by opening day, says Richard Helzel, vice president of park operations, "Somebody would have to answer a real big question. And they're probably better off just to get in their car and go home permanently."

Simply put, Cedar Point doesn't like to be caught with its coasters down, ever. "Our game is a very short game, and we've got to make hay when the sun shines," Jasper says. "That means everything has to be ready so the person who comes in the gate on the first day has the same experience as the ones in the summer and the ones toward the end of the season." Equally, guests who visit throughout the summer must have the same experience as those in May. So, while Jasper's maintenance crew must meet their deadlines, they can't take shortcuts. "We maintain rides to the hilt, all the way out to the point



*During the off-season every car in this roller coaster capital is disassembled and thoroughly inspected.*



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where you think it's ridiculous that we're doing what we're doing," Jasper says. "But we're still doing it because it gives us that extra edge as far as reliability or comfort or safety or how the park looks and feels to our guests."

Jasper admits this can be a costly standard, at least up front. But presented with the scenario of a wheel that would cost more to change relative to its potential risk of failure, "We're going to change it," Jasper replies, repeating himself four times. He points to his division's downtime

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then reassembled.

record last year of less than 2 percent—"The best I've ever had in a maintenance division," says Jasper, who started his career as a ride operator at Six Flags Houston in 1973—and argues that the choice is a customer service issue, not a budgetary one. "The guests don't want to hear that I took a chance on a \$27 wheel and the *Magnum* is down because of that. They paid their money to come through that front gate, and they want to have a good experience while they're here, so I don't have a leg to stand on trying to gamble in that area and lose."

This attitude is ever more important because of what Janice Lifke, Cedar Point's public relations manager, calls "the immediacy of technology" of camcorders and cell phones. When a ride goes down, she often hears about it first from a TV station in Cleveland, Toledo, Detroit, Columbus, or Pittsburgh, who got it from a guest at Cedar Point. (Consequently, Helzel this year added the marketing department to ride operators' call list for stoppages of any duration.) "Everybody has become real comparison shoppers, and information about your purchases is instantaneous," Helzel says. "So we have to be really sharp and make sure. We can't say, 'Well, we'll do better tomorrow' because we may not get a chance tomorrow."

## Safety

Cedar Point's unimpeachable safety record is a direct result of such exacting maintenance efforts. The park has not had a ride-related fatality in 128 years, despite giving 43 million rides every 130-day summer season. On the employee side, "There have been significant reductions [of incidents] in all areas from year to year," says Monty Jasper, vice president of maintenance and construction. Though he would not reveal exact figures, he is eager to get on his safety soapbox. "I think safety is a mindset,

and you have to instill that mindset," he says. He offers four steps.

- Tie supervisor raises and bonuses to the entire division's safety record, not just the performance of their particular department. "Get everybody in the same boat. We all sink or swim in safety. If I walk along and you're an employee in the maintenance division and you're not wearing your goggles and you don't work for me, I still have to be able to stop you as a supervisor and say, 'Why don't you put your goggles on.' It is very, very important that we all cross-check ourselves, so this is the way I do it."
  - Enforce safety training in departments. Supervisors conduct frequent safety training classes, and at every staff meeting Jasper reiterates his safety mantra. "I'm a firm believer that if I talk enough about safety that's going to take care of the vast majority of your issues."
  - Never skimp on respirators and filters, earplugs, gloves, goggles, and shields. "Make sure they have the tools and utensils to be safe."
  - Discipline. "You have to put some teeth in it. You have to be able to say, 'Look guys, if you can't follow the procedures and be safe, then maybe you should work someplace else, because we are a safe organization.' I don't think you can dance around it or pay lip service about being safe. I think you have to put some muscle behind it." Though he's never terminated anybody for safety violations, "we have disciplined individuals for lapses in their safety training, and those individuals obviously changed their ways. Usually it only takes one time."
- These steps have helped Jasper combat typical industry complaints that young workers don't take safety seriously and that older workers refuse to alter their long-held habits. "I think you can be successful with



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*Cedar Point proudly proclaims thrills to be their only theme.*

those kinds of individuals. And young people just need to be trained. If you take the time to train people on how to be safe then they'll do it.

"We're making it happen. And I'm more proud of that than anything else we've done around here."

Founded as a beach resort in 1870, Cedar Point grew to prominence under the leadership of G.A. Boeckling around the turn of the century. Though he focused on Cedar Point's hospitality side as a resort of-

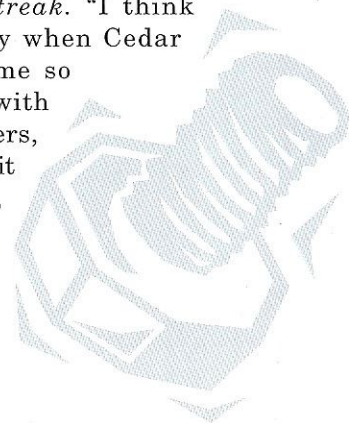
fering a beautiful sand beach, good food, entertainment, and other amenities, a midway featuring rides and games grew on the property, too.

Cedar Point's first coaster, the *Switchback Railway*, opened in 1892, eight years after a similar ride first appeared at Coney Island in New York. By 1920, Cedar Point had three large coasters, and in 1929 it opened *The Cyclone*, a bruising contraption that ranked among the Midwest's best. One by one, the old coasters de-

teriorated and were razed, and Cedar Point became better known in the '40s for the big band sounds coming out of its Coliseum than for squeals and laughter on the midway. When the causeway crossing the bay to the peninsula was completed in 1957, Cedar Point as an amusement facility nevertheless faced closing as George A. Roose and Emile Legros purchased the resort intent on turning it into a housing development. But the amusement park's lease had another two years to run, so the new owners had to wait, a period that, thanks to Disneyland in California, saw the industry's revival across America. Cedar Point thus got a new lease on life, and Roose and Legros, and later Robert L. Munger Jr., and now Richard Kinzel have subsequently and steadily built the park to its present grandeur.

Despite the construction of Frontiertown in 1968, Cedar Point never set out to be a theme park. "We are an amusement park," Lifke says. "Our theme is thrill rides." A theme they began pursuing in earnest in 1976. Though *Blue Streak* went up in 1964, the *Mine Ride* in '69, the *Wildcat* in '70 and the *Jumbo Jet* in '72 (since dismantled), it was the triple-looping *Corkscrew* that took Cedar Point to a whole new level, both in attendance and prestige.

"If you go back to us old-timers, everybody felt that when the *Corkscrew* came about, that was a really big change in amusement parks altogether," says Helzel, who was then an area supervisor overseeing *Blue Streak*. "I think that's really when Cedar Point became so associated with roller coasters, even though it was, what, two years before we built another one."





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## Thrilling Credentials

<b>1964</b>	<i>Blue Streak</i>	Philadelphia Toboggan Co.
<b>1969</b>	<i>Cedar Creek Mine Ride</i>	Arrow Dynamics
<b>1970</b>	<i>WildCat</i>	Anton Schwarzkopf
<b>1976</b>	<i>Corkscrew</i>	Arrow Dynamics
<b>1978</b>	<i>Gemini</i>	Arrow Dynamics
<b>1979</b>	<i>Jr. Gemini</i>	Intamin AG
<b>1987</b>	<i>Iron Dragon</i>	Arrow Dynamics
<b>1989</b>	<i>Magnum XL-200</i>	Arrow Dynamics
<b>1990</b>	<i>Disaster Transport</i> (rethemed 1985 <i>Avalanche Run</i> )	Theming: ITEC Productions
<b>1991</b>	<i>Mean Streak</i>	Curtis D. Summers Inc./Dinn Corp.
<b>1994</b>	<i>Raptor</i>	Bollinger & Mabillard
<b>1996</b>	<i>Mantis</i>	Bollinger & Mabillard
<b>1999</b>	<i>Woodstock's Express</i>	Vekoma

Notable among Cedar Point's credentials as a coaster lover's park are the *Magnum XL-200*, the first to top 200 feet in height; *Mean Streak* reaching 161 feet high, 890 feet long; the inverted coaster *Raptor*, the stand-up *Mantis*; and the new family coaster *Woodstock's Express*. Documenting the success of the theme, the *Guinness Book of Records* this year cited Cedar Point for more roller coasters (13) and more rides (67) than any other amusement park in the world.

## Everywhere You Look...Coasters

Promoting itself as a thrill ride park,



Topping 200 feet in height, the *Magnum XL-200* provides immediate visual evidence that the ride is up and running.



Cedar Point puts its coasters on public display. The blue-cupola topped *Blue Streak* and brilliant green *Raptor* beckon drivers on the causeway. *Magnum* soars along the beach and through Cedar Point's waterpark Soak City. "You're floating on an inner tube watching the train go by and hearing the screams," says Lifke. *Mean Streak* towers over the peninsula's point and menacingly surrounds its own queue line. *Corkscrew* touches down right on the midway, and next door *Iron Dragon's* red rails intertwine with *Mantis'* red, yellow and electric blue track. "We found that by doing brilliant colors, the newspapers can't resist putting in a color photo," Lifke says. After dark outline lights and strobes give the coasters singular nighttime personalities.

Putting thrill rides on such public display comes with its own set of challenges. Aside from being safe and reliable, the tracks simply have to look good. "You now and I know I could put a plain steel ride out there and it would be every bit as good as the painted one," Jasper says. "But it will rust over time. So I want to protect the investment and make it pleasing to the eye in the process. It is very important that the rides that come up close to our guests look good. I'm a big proponent of people, when they go to an amusement park, looking at things like that because that tells you whether or not you have a good maintenance program."

## Creating Specific Maintenance Fluencies

Another challenge of maintaining itself as a cutting edge coaster park is keeping up with all the new ride technology. That, for Brubaker in the maintenance shop, is a bigger issue than meeting the annual deadlines. Jasper sends some technicians to specialized computer courses for the newer rides, but he relies on experience and familiarity for training in the hard mechanics of wheels, chassis, and vehicle fittings.



Ride technicians at Cedar Point specialize in certain rides to ensure their familiarity.

With a staff ballooning to 160 people in the summer, technicians specialize in specific rides with only the supervisors cross-training in other ride systems. "I think it's important that folks know what they're doing, and not know just 50 percent of what they're doing," Jasper says. "And during the operating season people are staged in areas where they can give us the most aid with their expertise. So, if the *Mine Ride* goes down, generally speaking people who respond to that shutdown are people who are very expert on the *Mine Ride*. You kind of stack the cards in your favor."

Increasing ride sophistication is also changing the focus for line employees. Helzel recalls operating the manual brake systems himself in his early days at the park, "We didn't have an electrician come to the *Blue*

"We maintain rides to the hilt, all the way out to the point where you think it's ridiculous that we're doing what we're doing," Jasper says.



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*Though desolate compared to summer, Cedar Point is busy year-round delivering a safe, well-maintained facility.*

*Streak* unless the lights were bad. Then you got the *Mine Ride*, and the electrician took care of relays and things." Today, computer programmers handle ride mechanics, and the operators at most push a button. "We'll get this next level of specialization where the actual operation will be taken care of by the ride itself, and the employee will be 100 percent customer centered," Helzel predicts. With disability accessibility issues and increasing restrictions on riders with medical conditions, plus liability factors, "the operator, instead of running a ride, has become this critical interface between guest and machinery that they weren't before."

Therefore, in training his line

staff, Helzel points out that the typical Cedar Point guest pays much more than the \$32.95 gate admission. It's the dad who gets off the swing shift in Detroit and drives the family down early in the morning. They get off to a late start because the excited children have been horsing around instead of packing. Then they hit highway construction upon crossing the border into the "orange barrel state." By the time Detroit Dad has arrived at Cedar Point, he's hungry and edgy. "Everything that could go wrong has gone wrong by the time he gets to the front gate, and we haven't talked about what it's going to cost him to stay the night," says Helzel, pointing out that the family could spend as much as \$200 for a room in

Sandusky. Add in gas and meals. "When you look at it from that standpoint, that one ride on *Magnum* just cost him how many hundreds of dollars?" Helzel says.

"Employees need to understand that this experience for (Detroit Dad) is a lot bigger than what you're seeing here. That's why you don't want the thing that really sets Dad off to happen here. It's important that we understand that the two-minute experience the ride operator is responsible for at that point in time really is key to a lot larger experience."

That seems to be the successful bottom line at Cedar Point, where every nut and bolt plays a key role in the "larger experience." Even in winter.