

Two-ten gets you a blue beanbag bear or a stuffed Animal (the Muppet character). A score of 300 wins a plush fish or dragon, and 360 earns a large honey bear. A perfect score on these Skee-Ball alleys at Six Flags Great Adventure in Jackson, New Jersey, is 450: nine balls in the 50 hole.

Darren Wainwright has been playing Skee-Ball for about half an hour, shelling out \$1 per game. His two daughters, ages four and five, lay out his winnings, which will total 27 bears, two fish, and seven other animals by the time he finishes. "It's hard to get the big one," he says of the 360-point bear. Wainwright estimates that his collection of stuffed prizes at home numbers about 300; countless others have been donated to charities. All told, on this day he will have failed to win a minimum prize only three times in 38 games, and he blames

daughter interference for one loss. At one point, after rolling a dozen straight prize-winning games, Wainwright holds his ninth ball with the digital scoreboard showing 160. His left leg against the alley's edge, his right foot planted about 18 inches back, he swings his right arm straight as a pendulum. With a twist of the wrist, he releases the wood ball, which spins up the center of the alley, bounces up when it hits the lip at the top of the lane, and plops down into the 50 hole, winning him yet another beanie bear. He's beginning to look like the Joe DiMaggio of Skee-Ball.

"Aim for the 40," he says of his strategy, "and if you're lucky you get 50." Tall, wearing wire-frame glasses, a gold cross among a tangle of chains around his neck, and his jet-black hair pulled back in a ponytail, the 34-year-old dockworker has other secrets

to share about winning at Skee-Ball. He holds one ball in his left hand while shooting with his right. "It's more comfortable," he explains. And bring chewing gum. It's for the kids, a bribe that allows him to focus on his game.

If Wainwright doesn't fit your image of the venerable arcade game's typical customer, you haven't been to an arcade, family entertainment center, amusement park,

evolution of video games, and virtual reality, it's amazing that Skee-Ball is still going strong," says Wayne Cimorelli, whose Coin Castle arcade in Seaside Heights, New Jersey, boasts 11,000 square feet of video games, slot machines, and

Skee-Ball

cruise ship, or sheik's yacht lately. In fact, the best way to envision the average Skee-Ball player is to take a look in the mirror—you'll see the kind of person typical of the game's

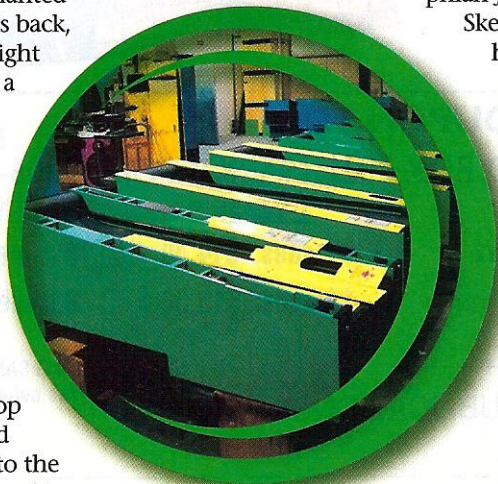
fan base. Invented by Philadelphian J.D. Estes in 1909, Skee-Ball is still at the height of its popularity due to its remarkable cross-demographic appeal.

"When you think about all the technology, the whole

redemption skills games. Along the back wall he has had a bank of 14 Skee-Ball alleys since the day he opened in 1978. "Sometimes when you come into this arcade, especially if it's more adults..." Cimorelli pauses a moment. "I shouldn't say that. Skee-Ball appeals to all ages. You have teenagers and the college folks playing Skee-Ball. Mom and dad. Mom and the little kids. The grandparents. And there are times the only concession that's really busy is Skee-Ball." He notes that Skee-Ball is the only one of his games that appeals to all cultural and ethnic groups. "Everybody plays Skee-Ball."

The game's manufacturer, Skee-Ball Amusement Games of Chalfont, Pennsylvania, has steady sales in North America and growing sales in

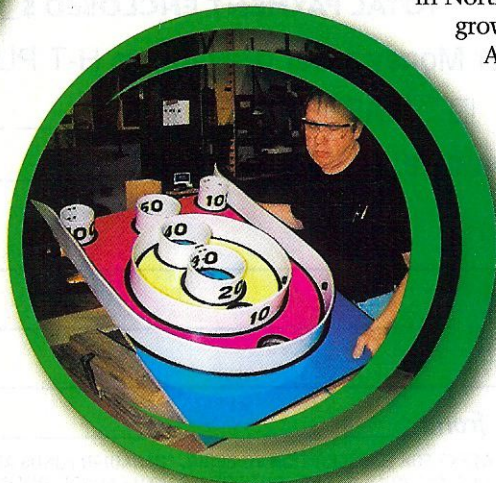
Asia, the Middle East, and South America. It has put alleys in Moscow's Gorky Park, and in Beijing, China. "We have five machines on a Middle East sheik's private yacht,"



Lanes for Skee-Ball X-treme (above) wait for other components to be installed.

Bob Owens (right) prepares a target board for the X-treme lanes.

Mike Camlin (far right) assembles the target cabinet for a Skee-Ball X-treme lane.





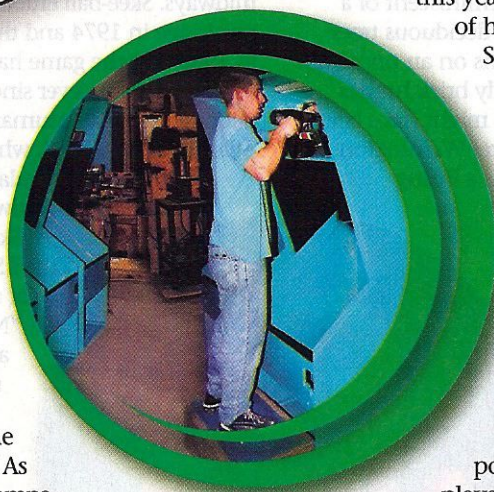
by Eric Minton

says the company's president Joseph Sladek. In an example of the game's cross-age appeal, Skee-Ball supplies the chains of Chuck E. Cheese's (children) and Dave & Buster's (young adults), and even private homes (middle age and up).

What accounts for the length and breadth of Skee-Ball's popularity is that it may be the most democratic game of skill ever invented. All players are created equal, aside from dedicated practitioners like Wainwright. If you can roll an 8-ounce ball made of wood-stained congealed sawdust up a slightly inclined 10-foot cork-covered plywood lane, you can conceivably score 450 points or, in some of today's configurations, 900 points. On the other hand, even if you can bench-press 450 pounds or consistently roll 300 at the bowling alley, you still might score only 90 points in Skee-Ball. "You don't have to be a strong man," Sladek says. "Weak kids or strong kids, whether girls or guys,

can play and be equally adept."

Which explains in part why Skee-Ball reigns supreme as the most romantic game in the arcade. As video-game companies continue to target male teens, and redemption games are marketed to preteens, Skee-Ball remains a favorite boyfriend-vs.-girlfriend activity. Its only rival, according to Cimorelli, is air hockey. Its reputation as a dating game contributes to Skee-Ball's nostalgic value. Many adults recall playing Skee-Ball with their then-future wives or husbands, including Wainwright and Sladek, a "finance guy" who purchased the



Skee-Ball company in 1984 at a time he was looking to run a business, any business, near his Philadelphia home. "When I was dating my wife in high school, she always wanted to play Skee-Ball down at the shore, and she always kicked the wooden bejesus out of me," Sladek recalls. "I hated Skee-Ball because I couldn't beat her at it. But now that's a very fond memory."

Skee-Ball's nostalgia is not limited to the grandparent set. When Cimorelli's daughter was about to turn 17, it had been years since Coin Castle had hosted her birthday parties. She asked her father if she could celebrate

this year by bringing some of her friends to play Skee-Ball. "What she remembers

most about those parties is playing Skee-Ball. They'll do other things when they come, but their primary reason for coming is to once again play Skee-Ball as a group."

The game is so popular that even God plays it. In the movie

Dogma, writer-director Kevin Smith builds his plot around the notion that God has gone missing because She likes to disguise herself in human form and visit the Jersey shore for some Skee-Ball action. "God loves Skee-Ball," proclaims the seraph played by Alan Rickman. Can you think of any other activity that could carry off the joke so well with its combination of silliness and reverence? God playing Whack-a-Mole? ▶

Mortal Kombat? Even air hockey? With whom? This last question points to another unique advantage of Skee-Ball in the arcade environment: It can be played solo, in couples, in families, in groups. At the Coin Castle, it's the only concession where Cimorelli has placed benches for people to sit and watch.

Skee-Ball's status as a cultural icon makes it invaluable to arcade owners. It even helps sell other alley games like Scat Cats and Hoops. "You're still rolling the ball, it's still coming back to you, you're still scoring, but now you're not putting it into rings—you're putting it into basketball hoops, you're knocking down punk cats," Sladek says. "It gives the (park or arcade) owner a little more versatility." His factory also produces a line of redemption games that have nothing to do with alleys, including the hugely popular Super Shot basketball cages, and his company has won industry awards for some of its latest innovations. His biggest seller? "Oh, Skee-Ball," Sladek says without hesitation. He won't reveal sales figures.

His headquarters factory—an over-size woodshop employing 25 to 35 workers depending on demand (Sladek also built two Skee-Ball factories in Phoenix, Arizona)—sits in a fairly new industrial park north of Philadelphia. Here, the scenery is reminiscent of a Currier & Ives print—deciduous trees mingle with evergreens on an undulating landscape. The tidy brick houses with painted shutters might have been standing when General Washington marched through. It is a fitting neighborhood for the

headquarters of Skee-Ball. In moving there from another Philadelphia suburb six years ago, Sladek says "We are going back to our roots."

What roots? For such a nostalgia-laden activity, Skee-Ball's history is sparse at best. Ask the game's purveyor, Sladek, how Skee-Ball came about. "I don't know," he answers with an honest expression of his own puzzlement regarding the game's lack of record. "One guy invented the

Holiday World park manager Paula Werne has started her son (right) on what may be a life long obsession with Skee-ball.

game in 1909 and it was very, very popular then. I think they were trying to develop a game that would closely rival bowling." Though Estes invented the game, Maurice Piesen sold the first alleys for the outdoor market in 1914. In 1935 Piesen sold the Skee-Ball rights to Wurlitzer Company, and 10 years later the famous roller coaster and carousel manufacturers Philadelphia Toboggan Company acquired exclusive manufacturing rights to the game. PTC spun the game off in 1977.

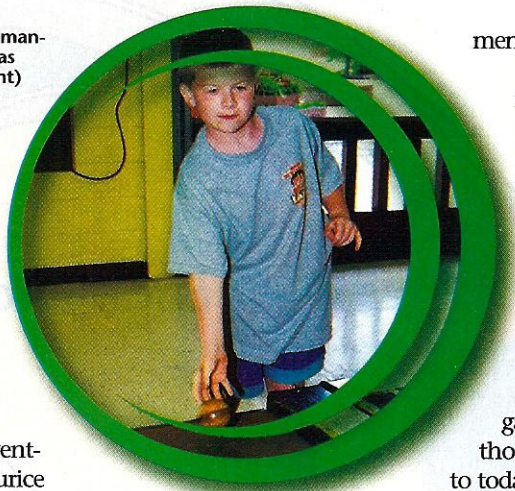
The original game featured a 36-foot-long alley. In 1928 that changed to 14 feet, thereby creating the diverse player base the game has since enjoyed. The newest lanes measure 10 feet. In 1967 Skee-Ball added an automatic ticket dispenser, giving it status not only as a redemption game for arcades, but also as a skill game on amusement midways. Skee-ball entered the electronic age in 1974 and the digital age in 1988. But the game has long been a public favorite, ever since the first national Skee-Ball tournament in Atlantic City in 1932, which for a time was a regular event in that Boardwalk town.

Skee-Ball's hey-day? Sladek thinks for a moment.

"Now?" After all, he has the sales records to back up his opinion. To older generations who claim that Skee-Ball peaked in pre-World War II Atlantic City, he

counters that his company is currently associated with a Skee-Ball

tournament involving the nationwide chain Dave & Buster's, with each center linked via the Internet. "That's a current-day Atlantic City kind of tourna-



ment," Sladek says.

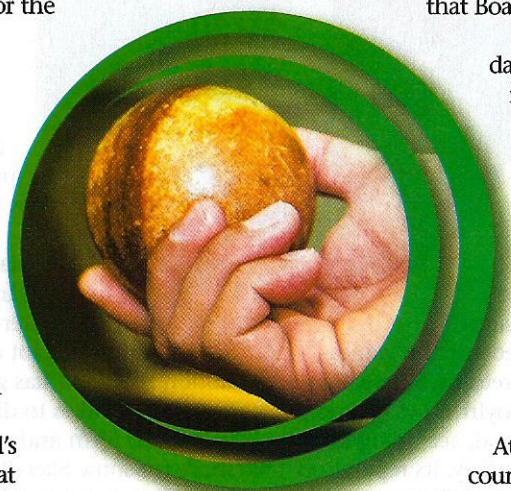
Robert Bennett, owner of Casino Pier in Seaside Heights and a fixture there since 1948, reveals that from the time he began his career as an amusement and games operator in those post-war years

to today, "If you were

looking to invest in something that gets you the greatest amount of return, it would be Skee-Ball."

Nostalgia can carry a game only so far past its prime. People pine for pinball, for example, yet Cimorelli has only one pinball machine in his arcade. However, he has 12 brand-new Skee-Ball X-treme alleys. These hot-pink-and-teal 10-foot lanes feature two small 100-point holes in the upper corners to supplement the 10-20-30-40-50 circles down the middle of the target area. Arcade owners like to put smiles on customers' faces, but they also like to put money in their own wallets, so they tend to stock games that do both. Consequently, Coin Castle is one of five arcades in Seaside Heights installing new Skee-Ball alleys this year, a testament to the game's continuing earning power.

This income-generating potential is made all the more remarkable for the fact that even a 10-foot lane occupies space that could be replaced by three smaller video or redemption games, each, like Skee-Ball, earning 25 cents or more per play. "Our Skee-Ball money is probably the most consistent money we've ever seen," Cimorelli says. Today, with the video-game market flat-lining and the redemption explosion having peaked, Skee-Ball has maintained its position among the arcade industry's best earners—on the East Coast, the West Coast, the South Coast, the Great Lakes coasts, and all points between. ☐



Eric Minton is a veteran journalist who has covered the amusement industry for national magazines the past eight years. He publishes THE LOOP, an online trade newsletter and is a correspondent for *Amusement Today*. His articles on amusement facilities have also appeared in *Psychology Today*, *Midwest Living*, and *Off Duty* magazines, and he was featured in The Learning Channel program "Top Ten Ultimate Thrill Rides." His highest score in Skee-Ball is 190.

TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

Ed Hutton is a banker. Not by profession, but in terms of his style of Skee-Ball play. A resident of San Jose, California, Hutton has spent the bulk of his 40-plus adult years working in or operating amusement venues. One of his notable ventures was an arcade concession at San Jose's now-defunct Frontier Village Theme Park, an arcade that prominently featured Skee-Ball. His own playing days go back to when he was a 9-year-old boy, visiting his grandfather's cabin in the San Bernardino Mountains and playing Skee-Ball in a small arcade in the nearby town's bowling alley. "I sure looked forward to that every summer."

Hutton says he usually scores the top ring of 50 points by banking the ball off the side of the alley. This is the established "book" on high-scoring play—finding the sweet spot along that alley wall, where your ball will ricochet and, upon hitting the lip at the top of the alley, go airborne and arc into the 50 hole. "My wife picked up the nuances of Skee-Ball," says Joseph Sladek, president of Skee-Ball Amusement Games, who used to play the game on high-school dates with his future wife at the New Jersey shore. "She banked the ball. I always went straight in, and I never understood why she scored more than me."

At the Holiday World & Splashin' Safari in Santa Claus, Indiana, Mr. Claus himself (pictured below) explains the trick of turning your wrist over as you release the ball so that it gets backspin. Without the backspin, the ball will be drawn away from the hole when it hits the rubber. Santa, who aims to hit the side of the alley about two-thirds of the way up the lane, demonstrated his spinning technique for this writer by scoring 210.

Darren Wainwright (pictured above), a skilled practitioner of the game at arcades in Seaside Heights, New Jersey, and the nearby Six Flags Great Adventure theme park, acknowledges that the preferred method of racking up a high score is banking, but more often than not he sends his balls straight down the center of the alley with a spinning motion that somehow lands them in the 40 hole. Concentrating his aim on that fourth-tier ring, Wainwright can hit 40 after 40 in unbelievable streaks, a practice built on the strategic premise that nine 40s, with their larger rings, are easier to make than seven 50s, and still get you the top prize at most arcades.

The arcade where Wainwright honed his method, Coin Castle in Seaside Heights, once had a practitioner with an even more unorthodox style. The man would roll the ball so hard it bounced up at the lip, slammed against the net overhang and straight into 50. "He was amazing. We had to stop

him from playing because his method of scoring these high scores was ripping our nets apart," remembers Coin Castle owner Wayne Cimorelli. "We put a piece of wire in the middle of the net to throw him off a bit, and it helped because he wasn't getting perfect scores anymore, but he was still getting high scores, and he was still doing damage to the nets." Cimorelli finally had to make a deal with the guy. "Any time he came to the Boardwalk I gave him a big stuffed animal so he would leave our Skee-Ball alleys alone. As the years went by we became pretty friendly, and he always makes me tell his kids the stories about what their dad used to be able to do on a Skee-Ball alley."

