

Summer of Deadly Amusement Park Accidents Raises Safety Questions



(Christopher Furlong/Getty Images)

By **Bill Hoffmann** | Friday, 27 August 2021 06:34 AM



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✘ They're supposed to provide fun seekers with thrills and chills — but in recent months, several high-profile rides offered by America's amusement parks have delivered something else: danger.

There have already been eight accidents at parks across the country this summer, three of which resulted in death and two in critical injuries, leaving safety officials trying to figure out why the mishaps are happening so frequently.

One theory is that park staffers, who were out of work last year because of the coronavirus pandemic, have been a bit rusty getting back on the job, and reports of worker shortages have been rampant across the country. Other speculation centers on the potential need for more onsite safety inspectors.

“Everything was closed for so long during the pandemic and companies are always looking for ways to cut corners — putting profits before people,” New York City personal injury lawyer Matthew Haicken told Newsmax. “There are also a lot of antiquated safety laws that were written a very long time ago and are still on the books. They really haven’t kept up with the times.”

Additionally, Haicken said, many states have strict caps on compensation for victims of park ride accidents.

Still, amusement parks remain wildly popular, from huge attractions, like Disney World and Universal Orlando Resort, to tiny mom-and-pop carnivals that zigzag the country, stopping in small towns.

According to a March 2021 poll conducted by consumer data company Cardify, 72% of respondents were excited to return to the parks this summer.

But nobody could have foreseen the horrific accidents that have occurred during the past three months:

On Aug. 15 at the Cedar Point amusement park in Sandusky, Ohio, a 44-year-old woman standing in line was seriously injured when she was hit on the head by what was recently identified as an L-shaped metal bracket about the size of a hand that flew off a car on the Top Thrill Dragster, a 420-foot-tall roller coaster that's billed as the second-tallest in the world and which boasts speeds of up to 120 mph. Disturbing law enforcement bodycam footage shows the victim screaming in agony as she's rushed to an ambulance by emergency workers.

A day earlier, at the Lagoon Amusement Park in Farmington, Utah, a 32-year-old man fell from 50 feet up off the Sky Ride, which carries riders over the park. The tragedy, captured on video, was witnessed by a crowd of adults and kids. The victim died from his injuries two days later.

On July 2 at the Adventureland Park in Altoona, Iowa, an 11-year-old boy was killed when his family's raft overturned in the swirling current of the Raging River water ride. The boy's 16-year-old brother was critically injured in the incident.

"When it flipped over, all of us were trapped in the safety seat belts," David Jaramillo, the boys' father, told "Good Morning America." I see the silhouettes of my sons trying to grab each other, grab us. They want us to help them. We couldn't do it."

The boys' mom, Sabrina, said: "I feel like Adventureland robbed me of my baby. I will never get a chance to see him grow up."

On June 20 at the Branson Coaster in Branson, Missouri, an 11-year-old boy sustained serious injuries to his legs and right arm when he fell while exiting the coaster and was trapped underneath the ride's rails for nearly 90 minutes.

On June 13 at Six Flags Great Adventure in Jackson, New Jersey, two people were injured on the Saw Mill Log Flume when the boat, which

is supposed to climb four stories before plunging into water, nearly tipped over.

On June 4 at the Holiday World & Splashin' Safari in Santa Claus, Indiana, a 47-year-old woman died from internal bleeding after sustaining an injury while riding The Voyage roller coaster. The force of the ride caused her right internal thoracic artery to tear, resulting in rapid blood loss, officials said.

On May 29 at Six Flags Fiesta in San Antonio, Texas, 20 people were rescued from the 2,700-foot-long Poltergeist roller coaster after the ride – which takes passengers from zero to 60 mph in less than four seconds – stalled mid-ride.

On May 15 at Castles N' Coasters in Phoenix, Arizona, firefighters rescued 22 people from the Desert Storm roller coaster after it stalled in midair. The group hung suspended sideways, 20 feet above the ground, for about two hours before being plucked to safety.

The parks involved have all launched their own internal investigations of the incidents and none have been accused of wrongdoing.

The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission monitors safety in America's amusement park attractions, including mechanical rides, go-kart raceways and water attractions with inflatable boats and rafts.

But regulations are inconsistent because the federal government gives each state the discretion to create rules for its own parks.

Ken Martin, an amusement park safety analyst who works with parks, fairs, government entities, insurance companies, and attorneys, told The Asbury Park Press that when it comes to safety, some companies read "from the same old script: 'Safety is our first priority,'" but he questioned if they follow through.

"If safety is their first priority, why don't they come out with their team of people responsible for that ride, and let them field questions?"

Martin said. "They're not going to do that, because it'll show they're

weak or be construed as admitting liability – but the public, we need to know what causes these things.”

Haicken said he doesn't expect a lag in park attendance as a result of the accidents.

“People just think it won't happen to them,” he said. “The chances of getting hurt are very slim, but it could happen to anyone.”

The month of August marks the fifth anniversary of the death of 10-year-old Caleb Schwab. Caleb, whose father, Scott Schwab, is Kansas' Secretary of State, perished in arguably the most gruesome park accident ever, at the Schlitterbahn Water Park in Kansas City, Kansas. As Caleb barreled down a 168-foot-high water slide called the Verrückt (German for “insane”), his raft became airborne and he slammed into metal netting, decapitating the boy.

The designer of the ride and a man who co-owned it originally faced involuntary manslaughter charges and were accused of lacking the “technical expertise to design a properly functioning water slide.”

But the case was dropped because of "improper evidence and testimony" displayed to the grand jury. Parents who've had their kids injured or killed by rides want the nation's parks under tighter control, but regulation often comes too late.

Said Haicken: "It usually takes a horrific accident before people want to enact regulations.

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