**Ride shut permanently**

State investigation continues at Action Park

By MARY ANN HARVEY

There were no wiring problems found at the ride. The system worked per design,” the park’s statement Office of Safety Compliance of action-type rides, but it is difficult to control what a

**Teen drowns**

VERNON — A 15-year-old New York City youth drowned in the wave pool at Vernon Valley Action Park Saturday, police said this morning. He was not

by Joanne Austin

Last summer, this tidbit made the email rounds and showed up in blogs and on websites: a list of things you may have experienced if you are from New Jersey. Among the entries, which included knowing all the sites in the opening credits of The Sopranos and that a “piney” isn’t a tree, was one in particular: “You have been seriously injured at Action Park.” Disturbingly yet amusingly accurate, this statement brought about fond reminiscings and scar comparisons among many New Jersey residents. From those reminiscences, this story is born. Break out the first-aid kit and put a lawyer on retainer: we’re going in search of mass injuries in the mountains of northwestern New Jersey.

**The Action Never Stops ...At Action Park...**

So went the jingle, played endlessly on TV and radio stations in the ‘80s and ‘90s. The commercials for Action Park, located in Vernon, NJ, marketed it as an essential summer experience for reckless youths. From its first opening in 1978 to its last official season in 1998, people came from all over to slide, swing, and drive themselves to adrenaline-induced distraction. Some also came to inadvertently experience serious injuries. The park earned its nickname, “Traction Park,” on the one hand, and “the safest ride there is,” noting that a 90-year-old grandmother and mothers with kids supposedly snuck into the park one night to ride the Alpine Slide in the dark. One kid headed down first and just disappeared into the night. His friends could not find his twisted body in the darkness for “more accidents, the majority of which still exist at Mountain Creek Waterpark — The Alpine Slide. From those reminiscences and scar comparisons among many New Jersey residents. From those reminiscences, this story is born. Break out the first-aid kit and put a lawyer on retainer: we’re going in search of mass injuries in the mountains of northwestern New Jersey.

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** Losing Skin On The Alpine Slide**

The Alpine Slide was called Action Park’s most popular ride in a 1986 New Jersey Herald article — one that a park official declared “the safest ride there is,” noting that a 90-year-old grandmother and mothers with babies on their laps had taken a ride on it. The same article said that the slide was responsible for “more accidents, the majority of which still exist at Mountain Creek Waterpark — The Alpine Slide. From those reminiscences and scar comparisons among many New Jersey residents. From those reminiscences, this story is born. Break out the first-aid kit and put a lawyer on retainer: we’re going in search of mass injuries in the mountains of northwestern New Jersey.

**You’ll Be Shocked On The Kayak Ride**

The Kayak Ride, which allowed people to paddle tiny boats through white water, was never very successful because it was short and the kayaks would get stuck in their own tracks. It was particularly unlucky for one 27-year-old man from Long Island during the summer of 1982. He fell or got out of his kayak, and in the process of trying to get it back, stepped near an exposed wire that was under water. He was taken to a nearby hospital in New York State, where he was pronounced dead. Two of his family members were also electrocuted, but lived.

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The incident is especially eerie because another man, caught (what was believed to be) the victim on film right before the incident occurred, as well as images of him being pulled from the water immediately after. Unlike park officials’ denials, the coroner’s report proved that the man died from cardiac arrest due to electrical shock. Action Park was quick to point out that the victim didn’t have any burns, but the coroner said, “You don’t have burns when you are in the water like that... When you’re wet, you’re a dead ringer for a good electrical shock.” A wiring defect, described as either a “nick” or a seven-inch “gash,” depending on whose account of the findings you read, was later determined to be the cause of the electrocution.

The ride, drained for investigation, was never opened again, because as a park official told the
New Jersey Herald at the time, “people will always be intimidated by it.”

The “Grave Pool”

The Tidal Wave Pool was a huge freshwater pool – 100 by 250 feet long and eight feet deep – that could hold 500 to 1,000 people. Four large fans forced air into the pool and created waves, which could reach a height of 40 inches. The waves were generated for 20 minutes at a time, with 10-minute breaks in between. Two people drowned in the “Grave Pool”: a 15-year-old boy in 1982, and an 18-year-old man in 1987. Many more have come close, despite the fact that 12 Red Cross-certified lifeguards were stationed at the pool at all times.

One problem with the pool was that many of its users were not good swimmers. “Action Park attracts many people from urban areas who have few chances to swim and frequently must be rescued from the water,” said one park official in 1987, “They don’t know how to swim and jump right into the water.” Even good swimmers would forget that the fresh water waves were not buoyant like waves in the ocean, so they would have to work harder to stay afloat. Crowded swimming conditions meant that people would bash into each other, the sides of the pool, or the ladders as they tried to get out of the water while the waves were on. Some people would simply sink to the bottom, seemingly unaware that the pool’s depth dropped down in level as you moved from one end to the other. Think about it this way: former employees claim that lifeguards at the Tidal Wave Pool could often claim 30 “saves” a day.

An interesting fact: back in 1987, the Wave Pool was not classified as a pool and didn’t get the same inspection treatment that other rides, even water slides, received from the state Department of Labor. It was classified as a pool, which meant that the state and township just needed to make sure that the water was clean and that the lifeguards were certified.

A version of the Tidal Wave Pool exists at Mountain Creek today.

Other Ways To Hurt Yourself In Waterworld

There were other water rides to be conquered in Action Park, which is good because right after the double tragedies of 1982 occurred, the Herald reported that water slides accounted for more than half the amusement industry accidents in 1981. In New Jersey, the state Department of Labor regulates amusement park ride safety. An official with the department told the New Jersey Herald that “The biggest ride with accidents is the water slide.” Another official backed this up, saying that riders were often to blame for their own injuries: “They hang on to the sides and wait for their buddies to come down and then ride down together.” Sitting on a mat, he said, reduced the risk of injury, but “that takes the joy away from the ride.” Joy such as the “freshwater enemas” that one could get on the Super Speed Water slides. Or, Lane #7 of Surf Hill, which was known as the “back breaker.” Surf Hill was also a hotspot for park employees, who knew they could see some serious injuries or lost bikini tops as they lurched at the nearby snack bar.

Action Park’s Waterworld was also home to nonslide rides like Roaring Rapids – involving several people riding a “whitewater” raft – and the Tarzan Swing, which allowed you to swing over an icy-cold body of water and throw yourself into it. Roaring Rapids, according to accident reports filed by Action Park in 1984, caused injuries such as fractured femurs, collar bones, and noses and dislocated shoulder and knees – kind of like “Delivery” without the baby. The Tarzan Swing was known for scraped toe knuckles and also the shock that people would experience when their bodies were immersed in the icy cold water below. The water was so cold that people would forget how to swim once they hit it. A 1984 death at the park was unofficially attributed to the victim not being able to take the shock of the cold, resulting in a heart attack.

The Legend Of The Loop

It is a ride of legend and fantasy, a waterslide that never totally was. Its 360-degree loop loomed over park-goers as they entered Waterworld, taunting them with both its inaccessibility and improbability. It supposedly dismembered test dummies and maybe even a few park employees in trial runs. It was the Cannonball Loop slide, and it was actually open for about a month in 1983 before being closed by the Advisory Board on Carnival Amusement Ride Safety – an act the Herald called “highly unusual.”

Employees who tested the ride reported that if you entered it going feet first, you’d come out of it head first, and vice versa. One person got stuck in the loop, necessitating the construction of a hatch that could be opened to extract people from that part of the ride. According to one employee who spoke with the Herald, “There were too many bloody noses and back problems” that resulted from riding the Cannonball Loop. It has long since been dismantled.

Driving Danger Across Route 84

Motorworld, located across the street from Waterworld, was also capable of injurious fun. Patrons treated the Super Go-Karts like bumper cars, which caused serious head-on collisions. One employee recalls hearing the sick snap of a patron’s arm breaking as a result of a crash. While the carts didn’t go too fast due to built-in governors that controlled the speed, park employees knew how to override them with tennis balls, which
would allow the carts to go up to 50 miles an hour. LOLA cars, which were miniature Indy race cars, cost additional money to ride and could also be adjusted for speed. The Tank Ride, while perhaps not the most dangerous ride for park attendees, was certainly the worst assignment for park employees— not because of the people driving the tanks, but because of the tennis-ball shooting guns that surrounded the ride. Patrons had the fun-filled opportunity to shoot tennis balls at the people in the tanks —so, should a park employee need to go down into the tank “pit” on the occasion of a crash or stuck tank, park attendees could happily fire away at them.

And then there were the boats. There were tiny, gas-powered boats that your toddler could drive in circles around an equally tiny pool. The bumper boats sometimes leaked gas. On at least one occasion, gas soaked a park attendee’s swim trunks badly enough to require medical treatment. There was nothing for the attendee to change into after treatment, so he left wearing the same trunks he came in wearing.

The Super Speedboats could go up to 35-40 miles an hour and were treated like bumper boats by park attendees. They were also set up in a swamp, in the middle of which was a small, rocky island populated by an uneasy alliance of water snakes and lifeguards. One day, two park attendees were driving their boats into each other and they crashed. One of the boats flipped over, its driver strapped in and stuck underneath the water. The lifeguard on duty had to dive into the swamp, where he reports that he was followed by all of the snakes that were keeping him company that day. He flipped the boat over and promptly ripped the wristband off the soggy driver, who may have been too drunk or high on crack to even realize what had just happened to him, never mind the presence of many water snakes all around.

A Word About the Employees

You may have noticed a certain youthful quality to the many people on staff at Action Park. Maybe a slight resemblance to the cast of the movie Logan’s Run or the characters in Lord of the Flies. You would be right: it was hard to find an employee over the age of 30 in the park. It was truly a teen-run show, and it manifested itself in many ways, from ride attendants willfully ripping the entrance wristbands from park attendees who misbehaved to staff knowing all of the places that one could get stoned and/or drunk and hide from supervisors. Action Park got into trouble for letting underage employees run rides, too, so chances are your personal safety may have once been in the hands of a fourteen-year old tripping on acid.

That'll Leave A Scar

If you were injured, know that you were in good company. In 1986, the Herald reported the previous year’s reported accident toll at Action Park: more than 110, including 45 head injuries and 10 fractures. And it is important to stress “reported,” because the park got into a lot of trouble with the state for not reporting accidents.
Despite this, Action Park, unlike other amusement parks in the state at the time, was fined just once between 1979 and 1986 for not following procedure. The Herald said this was not the case for other amusement parks, which would be fined for first offenses. Did Action Park get special treatment?

What made Action Park different from other amusement parks was the control that patrons had over their ride experience. Part of the thrill was the danger involved. People, park officials would note over and over again, were often responsible for their own injuries, and park attendees tended to agree with them. Interviewed by the Herald about a week after the 1982 kayak ride electrocution, one person said that he had more concerns about driving on the L.I.E. to get to the park than about going on any of the rides. People continued to use the Wave Pool, too. "You know," said a park attendee, "if somebody jumps in and can't swim, that's their problem."

Park officials were always quick to point out that the park had over a million visitors each year – maybe 12,000 on a busy weekend – which makes the actual injury rate statistically small. Regardless, enough injuries occurred that Action Park eventually bought the town of Vernon new ambulances to keep up with the injury volume. In 1987, the Herald also spoke with the director of the ER at a nearby hospital, who said five to 10 people were brought there daily from the park. Injuries included "ankle sprains, cuts and contusions, and...a few broken bones," with injuries most often occurring "from slipping at swimming pools or cuts from water slides." He also noted that many of the injured came into the ER with alcohol on their breath – not surprising, as beer kiosks were more plentiful than ice cream stands at Action Park.

Action Park closed rides as the lawsuits stacked up and liability insurance became more and more expensive. Motorworld took the biggest hit, but rides on the Waterworld side suffered, too. It didn’t help when a bus crashed on its way to the park in 1992, killing five would-be park attendees. By the time Action Park was bought by Intrawest in 1997, it was doing badly in attendance. Intrawest morphed it into Mountain Creek Waterpark and reopened it in 2000, putting a "family fun" spin on the place by eliminating alcohol, asking patrons to cover up offensive tattoos, and building expensive condos in the swamps of Motorworld. Intrawest isn’t technically in charge of it any more: they leased it to a company called Palace Amusements that specializes in waterparks.

We asked the staff at Mountain Creek Waterpark for an official take on the incidents recounted here, but none of them worked there when it was Action Park and they declined to comment. They did send us a letter that stated that Action Park underwent some significant "cultural, operational and physical" transformations in the process of becoming the Mountain Creek Waterpark. They’ve won industry safety and customer satisfaction rewards since these transformations occurred and wanted to make it clear that this new waterpark is not the death trap you so fondly remember. In short, Mountain Creek is no longer worthy of inclusion on a list of unique-yet-painful Jersey experiences you survived and can get nostalgic about years later. You’ll have to get your scars elsewhere.