
Thrill-ride mishaps highlight safety-reg debate; [All Editions]

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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Just across the state line, though, authorities inspect elevators, but not amusement-park rides. Massachusetts requires annual permitting and inspections only for carnivals, circuses and other roving ventures with rides. Amusement-park rides need only be inspected by an insurance company, and the paperwork filed with the Public Safety Office, with no follow-up from the state.

BRACING RIDE: Thrill seekers free fall on the Yankee Cannonball roller coaster at Canobie Lake Park days after an accident occurred. The incident was attributed to an operator who mismanaged the break. Staff photos by Patrick Whittmore; PLAINLY POSTED: Amusement parks such as Canobie Lake put up signs, above, stating ride safety regulations, but injuries continue to occur nationwide. Some parks have gone so far as to limit their liability in the case of an accident where riders do not follow the rules.

Full Text (1178 words)

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Less than a week after a collision that left five people injured, the line for the Yankee Cannonball at Canobie Lake Park in New Hampshire snaked, 100 deep, past the sign warning pregnant women and the weak of heart to beware.

Frankie Cannata, a 16-year-old from Lawrence, fell in line, undeterred, and emerged 20 minutes later, still grinning from the roller coaster's 63-foot drop.

"That's the best part," Cannata said Wednesday with the studied nonchalance of the slogan on his T-shirt: "Only the good die young. I'm gonna live forever."

By most teenagers' standards, the Cannonball is a relic, a 65-year-old wooden dinosaur compared to today's ever-faster, ever more death-defying rides, some with gravitational forces greater than what an astronaut experiences during liftoff.

But excitement can come at a cost.

In the last two weeks alone, at least three dozen people have been injured at amusement parks across the country, part of a rising trend that is likely to continue, critics say, because of the lack of a uniform system to ensure riders' safety.

From 1996 to 1999, the number of injuries reported at amusement parks nationwide nearly doubled, from 3,720 to 7,260, according to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission.

Back in 1981, Congress approved a Reagan initiative to limit the commission's jurisdiction to roving carnivals. Since then, each state has had its own system of oversight, if it's had any system at all.

Today, 14 states, including Massachusetts, and the District of Columbia still have no state-administered inspection program for amusement-park rides, according to the Consumer Product Safety Commission.

And because no one is responsible for regulating the industry nationwide, critics say, the same types of accidents often reoccur, their lessons lost in the gaps between jurisdictions.

"This makes no sense," says U.S. Rep. Edward Markey, a Malden Democrat and senior member of the House Commerce Committee. "Why should huge machines carrying children at speeds of up to 100 mph be the only consumer product exempt from federal . . . law?"

Markey began investigating roller coasters in 1999, after six people died at parks around the nation. Since then, the National Institutes of Health have linked roller coasters with at least 13 brain injuries documented over the last decade.

In one case, a 31-year-old dance teacher suffered a severe headache and vomiting after riding Space Mountain at the Disneyland park outside Paris. She was diagnosed with "dissection," a splitting of the arteries in the brain. In another instance, a 64-year-old man was diagnosed with a subdural hematoma, or a clot inside the brain's lining, after riding a roller coaster with six upside-down loops.

Armed with the institutes' report, Markey reintroduced a bill this year that would return amusement-park oversight to the safety commission, an idea that Canobie Lake Park Vice President Wayne Ulaky says "on the surface sounds appropriate," but won't necessarily reverse the rise in injuries.

Many of those injuries, Ulaky notes, are caused by riders themselves, enough to prompt some states to include "rider responsibility" provisions in their laws, limiting a park owner's liability for accidents caused by a rider who hasn't followed the park's rules.

In the case of the Yankee Cannonball accident, however, the fault lay elsewhere. The ride's operator was holding the brake partly in the open position, causing one train of cars to bump another, Ulaky says. Four men and a 10-year-old boy suffered minor injuries.

To ensure that it doesn't happen again, park officials have agreed to run only one train for the rest of the season, and plan to install a fail-safe system as a backup in case of operator error.

"People who own and run amusement parks have a deeply vested interest in ensuring the public stays safe," Ulaky says.

Ulaky points to industry statistics, which show that the chances of being injured on an amusement-park ride are one in 25 million; the odds of dying on one are one in 450 million.

"On any given day, the number of people at most amusement parks is greater than the population of many cities," Ulaky says. "In light of that, the number of injuries is extremely low."

David Barrett, who heads the New Hampshire Department of Safety's Division of Safety Services, says amusement parks typically are more organized than roving carnivals. But federal oversight, he adds, wouldn't hurt.

"Obviously, the more eyes you have looking at something, the safer it's likely to be."

New Hampshire requires rides at both carnivals and amusement parks to be registered and examined annually by both a state inspector and an independent inspector approved by the safety commissioner.

Just across the state line, though, authorities inspect elevators, but not amusement-park rides. Massachusetts requires annual permitting and inspections only for carnivals, circuses and other roving ventures with rides. Amusement-park rides need only be inspected by an insurance company, and the paperwork filed with the Public Safety Office, with no follow-up from the state.

The law, Public Safety Commissioner Joseph Lalli concedes, is "pretty antiquated," but could be improved by a state measure calling for annual inspections of amusement-park rides by approved examiners, as well as operator-kept logs of accidents, repairs and injuries.

The bill was filed by state Rep. Paul Caron, a Springfield Democrat who was seriously injured at an Eastern

States Exposition in 1974, when he fell nearly seven stories after a Ferris-wheel car broke from its support rails.

Since then, stories of harrowing experiences on rides have only grown more common. Three days after the Canobie Lake Park accident, for example, a giant spinning wheel on a Michigan amusement-park ride called Chaos dislodged from its axis and plunged to the ground, injuring 31 people.

"When it hit the ground . . . pieces were flying everywhere like missiles," says Mike McFarland, who was waiting for his 13-year-old daughter to get off the ride, when the accident happened.

Rescuers had to wait three hours to remove passengers because authorities feared the wheel would fall over.

Days later, officials at Six Flags in Agawam shut down their own version of the ride indefinitely.

In 1999, eight people, including two children and a pregnant woman, were injured at the same park when a Blizzard River raft capsized, submerging them in rushing water.

"I don't think anybody can give a rational reason why amusement parks should be exempt from regulation when the safety of our children is at stake," says Ted Bassett, a Boston attorney representing some of the people injured in Agawam. "It's too bad it takes a series of accidents to bring it to the public's attention."

Herald wire services contributed to this report.

[Illustration]

Caption: BRACING RIDE: Thrill seekers free fall on the Yankee Cannonball roller coaster at Canobie Lake Park days after an accident occurred. The incident was attributed to an operator who mismanaged the break. Staff photos by Patrick Whittmore; PLAINLY POSTED: Amusement parks such as Canobie Lake put up signs, above, stating ride safety regulations, but injuries continue to occur nationwide. Some parks have gone so far as to limit their liability in the case of an accident where riders do not follow the rules.

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