Rollercoasters are so much safer than you think

By EMILY MARQUIS
Associate Sports Editor

On Monday, Oct. 12, a Georgia man fell out of his seat on "Goliath," a rollercoaster at Six Flags Over Georgia. By the following day, the overwhelming consensus was that rollercoasters as a whole are completely unsafe.

Looking at the headlines, who can blame them? Claims that the victim, school teacher Hassan Jihad Ibn Kariem, found himself ejected from his seat due to ride failure, with one testimonial recounting how his niece described "the latch" coming undone. No latch exists on "Goliath's" restraints, so I really don't know what she's talking about.

The media coverage of this tragic situation has shifted toward those accounts, rather than the very limited facts of the case. In my opinion, it's a scare tactic. So let me gently remind you: rollercoasters are safe. Despite the outcry and the recounting of every single rollercoaster death in the last century, rollercoasters are very safe.

In a yearly industry review of all U.S. theme parks, including 20 Six Flags properties, theme parks recorded 1,478 total injuries, with just 8% marked as "serious" in 2024. Of those 118 incidents, just 49 occurred on rollercoasters, with serious injury per million riders sitting at 1.27.



ILLUSTRATION BY RYLEY LEE

However, these stats alone do not tell the whole story. According to that same report, approximately 66% of all accidents in 2024 are considered guest-related — meaning the injury was in relation to guest's behavior that did not conform to safety rules or a known or unknown preexisting medical condition.

Many of the highest-profile rollercoaster deaths fall into that category, or into the 9% of operational mistakes. The lone fatal guest accident at Six Flags' closest park to Quinnipiac University, Six Flags New England in Agawam, Massachusetts, could fit into either of these categories. The victim, Stanley J. Mordarsky, was allowed to board the rollercoaster "Superman: Ride of Steel" in May 2004, despite the Department of Public Safety report noting he was too large to safely fit in the ride vehicle. Along with this, Mordarsky failed to disclose his cerebral palsy to the ride attendant on duty, and had been denied ride access earlier in the day.

The rollercoaster itself and its manufacturer, Intamin, were not to blame in this case. Two separate accidents for similar cases of riders being ejected from their seat because their restraints could not be properly secured due to physical differences occurred at what is now Six Flags Darien Lake on "Ride of Steel." A man was seriously injured in 1999 when he was ejected from his seat because his lap bar could not be properly secured around his body dimensions. A veteran double amputee in 2011 faced a similar situation. Even with updated restraints, the man slipped out of the ride. In all of these cases, riders should have been prevented from riding.

For a cautious rider who checks restraints and regulations before entering the ride, there is nothing to fear. These accidents are operator error anomalies; the thousands of times ride operators appropriately escorted riders who cannot ride due to physical or medical reasons are overlooked.

Another frustrating part of this coverage resides in the unfounded connections major news networks have drawn between Kariem's accident and other coasters in the Six Flags chain, specifically in relation to the recent closure of the roller coaster "X2" at Six Flags Magic Mountain.

While gripes about "X2's" "injury-prone" history are fair to put on the park, citing "X2" as an example as to why rollercoasters are unsafe is like deciding that all boats are dangerous after learning about the Titanic.

It is important to note that roller coasters are made by a variety of designers and manufacturers, and Six Flags does not have an exclusive deal with any particular company. The company that designed and manufactured "Goliath" is Bolliger & Mabillard (B&M), a well-respected firm that remains in business.

Compare that to "X2," which was the final rollercoaster that company Arrow designed before it went bankrupt in 2001. The project as a whole was a complete mess and was one of the final rollercoasters designed without the use of digital models. Six Flags even needed to step in to finish the project before initiating a partial refurbishment in 2007 to limit some of the roughness that characterized the ride because of how the layout was designed.

The comparison between "X2" and "Goliath" that has permeated throughout the coverage of this accident is just fear-mongering around Six Flags and rollercoasters as a whole. As of now, there has been no confirmation of the nature of Kariem's death, but the idea that rollercoasters are not safe is the conclusion to take from this tragedy is such a ridiculous oversimplification.

Military workouts have no place in sports

By REX NAYLOR
Staff Writer

College ice hockey's popularity has increased year by year. Media coverage has grown, and the quality of play has noticeably improved, with top draft prospects from across the globe choosing American universities over junior leagues.

With the influx of talent comes fiercer competition for precious roster spots and tougher training. The trend made its way to the Southwest, where the Arizona State University men's hockey team enlisted the help of a former Green Beret in an offseason workout.

The Green Berets are an elite, specialized branch in the U.S. Army. They are best known for unconventional warfare, as well as training local groups, just like the ASU hockey team.

In the middle of August, the ASU hockey team held what was called a "teambuilding" workout led by former Green Beret Tim Ziesel. Ziesel put the team through a grueling workout inspired by military and Navy SEAL drills.

The workout was taking place in the Arizona morning heat Aug. 20 —around 88 degrees— when sophomore forward and transfer from Clarkson University Matthew Mayich collapsed. The 21-year-old defenseman from Ontario, Canada, was drafted by the St. Louis Blues in the sixth round of the 2023 NHL Draft.

Mayich suffered an exertional heat stroke, which reduced oxygen to his brain and led to his hospitalization. Right now, Mayich remains on life support, and his attorney says he is unlikely to recover from the heat stroke, putting an end to his hockey career and his future in jeopardy.

The reports coming from the school were suspicious to begin with, as Mayich was reported to collapse during the wind-down exercise with coaches and trainers all present.

It seemed the collapse was purely an accident, with no negligence involved whatsoever. Players started to speak up anonymously through interviews with the university's investigation team, and discrepancies showed up.

The university stated the workout lasted only 45 minutes, when the workout actually lasted a half-hour longer. The university claimed water breaks happened 20 minutes into the workout, when in reality only one was given halfway through, which lasted mere seconds, allowing only eight players to get water. Mayich was not one of them.

The university claimed coaches and staffers reacted immediately when Mayich collapsed by getting him into shade with cold towels and calling 911. Players reported the staff present were untrained when dealing with heat stroke, and alleged emergency equipment was absent, such as cold-water immersion tubs, and emergency ice sheets. The absence of the equipment was a clear violation of ASU's severe weather training policies.

ASU Head coach Greg Powers and the school have parted ways over the incident, and questions have been raised over the presence of intense workouts in collegiate sports overall.

For me, the most I've ever had to do is some extra cardio and push-ups if I mess up a pass or a save when I played soccer. In reality, these players did not sign up for this workout; they signed up to play hockey.

The university did not get clearance to have Ziesel command the workout, and the program failed the players and family.

In this day and age, sports and militaristic training do not go hand in hand, and tough standards don't mean ignoring players' emergencies. If ASU were to invite Ziesel to talk about his time in the armed forces regarding teamwork, leadership and other transferable skills, the crossover would make complete sense.

Even if Ziesel had the team walk through what he did in better conditions and with adequate care, the team could've benefited by strengthening their team bond and their mentalities.

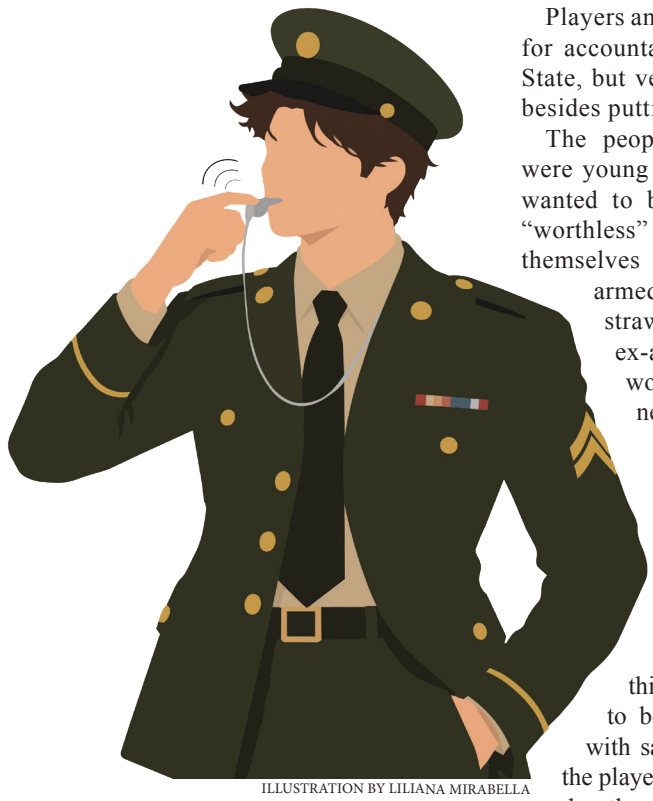
ILLUSTRATION BY LILIANA MIRABELLA

Putting the team through a grueling workout and endangering their lives isn't what sports are about. Sports are about holding everyone accountable for their mistakes and building from them.

It's hard to wrap my head around why a college team would do this without the approval of the school, thinking the team would turn into a bunch of Captain Americas overnight. It's likely the workout did nothing to help the team; instead, the players lost trust in their coach, the school and likely gained some trauma from seeing their teammate collapse.

Players and Mayich's family have pushed for accountability to be taken by Arizona State, but very little action has been taken besides putting the coaching staff on leave.

The people put through the workouts were young college hockey players.If they wanted to be screamed at and be called "worthless" when they couldn't pick themselves up, they would've joined the armed forces. I hope this is the last straw and teams no longer enlist ex-armed forces members to lead workouts, because the line has never been clearer than now.

Again, if a team brought someone in to talk about teamwork, motivation, leadership and other transferable skills, that would benefit the team and strengthen the bond between teammates, players and coaches.

Putting college athletes through this kind of workout is a bad idea to begin with; then cutting corners with safety precautions when many of the players aren't used to the Arizona heat makes the situation significantly worse.

Standards in college hockey and sports need to be higher; coaches should push players to the best of their ability, but treating them the way Powers did is unacceptable.