

[This transcript has been lightly edited for flow and sentence structure]

Lizzie: Hello everyone, welcome back to another episode of Once Upon A coaster, a podcast that examines those old classic roller coasters of yesterday to find some real hidden gems for all of us to appreciate. I'm Lizzie, your host, and we have a great episode in store for you today. I am honestly so pumped about all the coaster's we're going to talk about today. I feel like a kid in a toy store. When we started to look at what coasters we wanted to include in our Season 3 episodes, we honestly started looking at coasters that just made us happy! As you'll see throughout this season, they made us happy for a bunch of different reasons. Maybe they brought back a great memory for us, maybe they're ridiculously themed, maybe they're just some of the last remaining coaster like that left. As we were going through our selection, all of the coasters we ended up picking out left us so excited to talk about them, and honestly today's episode is no different.

Before we really start to dive into this episode, there's one announcement that I want to make, and that is a reminder that our website is set up to take donations from listeners, should you feel like that is something you would like to do. For as little as \$1 a month you can become a subscriber and help us to create and record these episodes to share with the masses. We're a very small operation here at Once Upon a Coaster. I can count all the staff numbers on half of one hand. [laughs] We exist on a shoestring budget, absolutely. We do this because we're passionate about it, not because it makes us money. It actually loses us money, if you can believe that. I mean, you can, most podcasts lose money, at least for a while, but even though we are not taking home a paycheck we are still losing money. But we keep plugging away, despite our losses, because we simply love exploring old coasters. If you feel the same way, and you feel like we're producing a quality product that you enjoy listening to, we'd love for you to become a subscriber.

This is the only money plug I'm going to be making for the show this season, I promise. But we like to remind you that the option is there, and thank you kindly if you've already become a paid subscriber.

If we get some more paid support this season we actually have a few ideas on how to say thank you to all of you, but I think that's putting the cart before the horse a bit. So we'll wait with our fingers crossed, and hopefully we can announce some good news for paid supporters later in this season.

That's all for announcements, so let's dive right into the Coasterversary of this week's episode. We have a gem of a coaster to talk about today, a sweet old gal who is celebrating 40 years of operation this year. Let's give a huge cheer for Viper at Six Flags Darien Lake, who has been in operation since 1982.

So, let's look at some stats on Viper to begin with. Viper is a steel coaster that opened in May of 1982, and she was manufactured by Arrow Dynamics. Of course she was! I feel like most of the

coasters that we talk about that were made and produced in the 1980s came from Arrow. It's no wonder they were the leader of coasters at that time.

The highest point on Viper is 121 feet, and the highest drop is 75 feet, and Viper hits a max speed of 50MPH. Viper also is the first coaster to feature five inversions on it. At the time, it was the only ride to feature that many inversions, and it was a title that it held until 1987 when Vortex opened at Kings Island, also a coaster built by Arrow Dynamics.

We talk a lot about that record in our Vortex episode in Season 1 if you want to give it a listen. We're big Vortex fans and the record she broke when she opened, and honestly it's one of my favorite episodes that we've done so far. If you have not listened to the Vortex episode back in Season 1, go ahead and make sure you bookmark that for a later listen.

Now back to Viper, at the time this coaster was announced in 1981, this was a *huge* deal for Darien Lake. It was going to be their first major roller coaster, and it was a ride the park desperately needed. You see, Darien Lake was a very small regional park at the time. The 1970s and 1980s were a time of rebranding and revitalization for a lot of smaller regional parks and trolley parks that had managed to hang on and survive through the '60s and '70s and even into the early '80s. Before this time period, these smaller parks could exist on just a handful of rides, mainly family-centric rides, and they were drawing local crowds. They weren't huge, but they didn't have to be, because they just wanted to meet the needs of the local community.

With the popularity of Disneyland and Six Flags, though, these parks became less exciting, especially to younger generations. What teenager wants to spend the day at a park where there might be only six or so rides that are exciting to them? They could drive maybe an hour or two with their friends and hit up a huge park that offered so much more excitement. So these smaller regional parks, they needed to either evolve into something else or risk closure. And a lot of small regional parks did close, they did not make it. But the ones that stayed open, they stayed open because they adapted. They built roller coasters and some more exciting flat rides or water rides that would encourage more guests to visit.

I didn't do a ton of research into all of the regional trolley parks in the USA for this episode, but I did pull a few small regional parks that added coasters in the 1970s and 1980s, and survived the theme park changes of that period. So for example, Geauga Lake in Ohio added the Wildcat in 1976 and the Double Loop in 1977. I know younger people will think of Geauga Lake - if you know of Geauga Lake - as a huge monstrosity of a park, but back then it was still a fairly mid sized regional park. Quassy Amusement Park in Connecticut added Mad Mouse in 1982. Knoebels in Pennsylvania added Phoenix in 1985, and Lakeside Amusement Park in Colorado added Dragon in 1986.

So Darien Lake adding Viper to their line up - a record breaking coaster at the time, I might remind you - was a huge win for western New York. Forty years ago, if podcasts had existed, we would all be gushing about what an amazing ride Viper was going to be when it opened.

Now, looking at Viper today, she has definitely seen some better days. The girl is riding a bit rough these days, but I've ridden her and I have to say she is one of the better rides in that park, in my opinion. That's not saying much, because two of my top five worst roller coaster rides have been at Darien Lake. It is not a park I'm overly fond of, and in my opinion it needs a complete and total overhaul. I'm sorry, to the Buffalo and Rochester NY area, because I feel like you deserve such a better theme park than what Darien Lake is giving you.

That being said, if you know how to ride an Arrow coaster with its oversized shoulder restraints, then you should probably enjoy Viper. She has quite a few tricks up her sleeve still, even though she's quickly aging into that "Really Really Old Roller Coaster" category. The good thing for Viper, though, is I don't think there are any plans for her to be torn down in the near future. Her track layout dominates quite a bit of land in the park, and Darien Lake seems to be a park that Six Flags has forgotten about when it comes to new and exciting rides. If she's still riding ok and maintenance costs haven't gone too crazy, I could definitely see Viper hitting her 50th anniversary in 2032.

So happy birthday, old gal! Happy to have the chance to ride you and add you to my coaster list, and happy you're still here teaching younger generations how to ride old Arrow looping coasters. You are such a rare breed these days. I hope you see your 50th birthday, and I hope that Six Flags seriously considers redoing your train cars to give a better harness for guests to have a better ride experience.

With that, we're all tapped out on our Coasterversary for this week, and heading into our break in just a moment. When we get back we're going to take a look at another Arrow coaster at another Six Flags park, but this ride is one of the best out there in my opinion, and I cannot wait to talk about her with you. We will be right back!

[AD BREAK]

And, we are back! Can I just say to start out: I am low-key obsessed with our ride this episode. And by low-key obsessed, let's be honest, I just mean that I have been talking about this ride non-stop to my friends and family for the past four days as I've been researching this episode. I'm sorry to all of you who have had to listen to me!

But let's back up for a second, I think I'm getting ahead of myself. Today we are looking at Demon, a looping steel coaster located at Six Flags Great America in Illinois. But back to my obsession with this coaster. Chicago listeners, you have no idea what a gem of a coaster you have at your local Six Flags park. Demon has *everything* you could ever want in an old coaster: amazing architecture features that add a little bit of uniqueness to the ride; a killer soundtrack that is blasted in rider's faces as they leave the station; a themed car and track that's just a little kitschy, but it makes you love it that much more because it is kitschy. Demon has all of this and more, I am now extremely determined to add Demon to my "Must-Ride" list.

Some basic stats about Demon before we get too far down this rabbit hole of fangirling over the ride: Demon opened in May 1976 and it was originally named Turn of the Century, because it opened during the Bicentennial. Turn of the Century is probably the worst name a roller coaster has ever been named, but at least they realized their mistake and they changed it to Demon a few years later. The manufacturer of the ride was Arrow Dynamics. Boy, is this an Arrow-centric episode or what? I'm sorry for the four of you listening who really hate Arrow rides. I know they've probably burned you in the past, but I just can't quit them. They're so good. I love all the Arrow rides, even the ones that are incredibly painful in 2022.

The highest point on Demon is 104 feet and the highest drop is 90 feet. She has four inversions on her, though I should add that originally, she only had two corkscrew inversions on the ride. Two vertical loops were added to the ride in 1980 when it was renamed to Demon, thank goodness. [laughs]

So what is so great about this ride? I'm sure there are some of you listening thinking, "Why is this the ride that you're low-key obsessed with? What is so great about her?" And basically everything - everything about this ride is wonderful and fantastic, especially if you are an old coaster enthusiast like I am. To be fair, if you've ever watched a POV ride through of this ride on Youtube, almost all of the top comments will be something along the lines of, "Oh my God! This is the roughest ride at the park!" And fair, random Youtube commenter. I have no doubt that given its age, Demon is a *very* rough ride nowadays. But if you can get past the roughness, and you can handle maybe a light headache in the afternoon, this ride has so many amazing details that you just don't find on other roller coasters anymore.

To start with, there's a fun soundtrack that the park made that really gets you in the mood for this ride. And gets you in the mood maybe also for the pain associated with the ride that you're about to experience. They've also really landscaped this ride well. You're going to tunnel through and loop around rock formations, and it makes you feel like you're in new lands. I'm not saying this theme is at that top tier level of a Disney or a Universal park. It's not, it's Six Flags. But considering Six Flags *never* themes a ride like this, *ever*, any kind of tunnel or rock formation for them is a *huge* win. There's also my absolute favorite kitschy element in a roller coaster, which is a tunnel of lights. Imagine big bright lights flashing in patterns through the one tunnel you ride through, music blasting as you Demonize eastern Illinois. Again, who could not be obsessed with this ride? Who doesn't like fun, music, lights, dark tunnels? Demon really has it all!

Ok, real talk, I know that Demon isn't perfect, I wasn't born yesterday. Old Arrow rides like this basically beg you to prebook a chiropractor appointment before you even climb aboard. But, my argument is that a lot of these issues can be solved with some small redesigns. New harnesses in the car would be a great place to start. Harnesses like the vest harness that you're beginning to see on a lot of the old Vekoma roller coasters, for example, that would be a great solution to the constant thrashing about that you're going to experience while riding this ride.

What's great about this solution is that you don't have to break the budget to fix this problem. Ordering new cars for a ride that's approaching fifty years old would have every bean counter in the Six Flags head office laughing for days. That's just not something they're going to do. The cost would send them into a tailspin. But if you could keep the cars that are currently on the track and just install new harnesses, that's a win-win situation here. You get to keep the cars, you get to keep the track, you get to keep the super outdated but really fun theming, and all you have to do to really get riders to love this ride again is replace the over-the-shoulder restraints to something that is a lot more comfortable for today's riders to wear.

What I *love* about this coaster, what's something that you can't replace and can't fix no matter what, is the uniqueness that exists outside of the actual ride issues. Am I about to get a little emotional talking about roller coasters? Oh my gosh. Perhaps, but hear me out.

Today's coasters, in my opinion, have lost all of the charm and all of the one-of-a-kind elements that make older coasters so unique and so much fun. Take a look at most Arrow coasters from the '60s through the early 1980s, including Viper. We just talked about her earlier in this episode. Think about these old coasters - their track layouts are a mess. They look like you just threw spaghetti on the floor and decided to go with that as your roller coaster layout. Or, if you're a Millennial, it probably looks like you designed this ride in the sandbox mode of Roller Coaster Tycoon, where money and space were never an object. Look at the rides designed by Schwartzkopf in the '70s and '80s too. The layout was - again - often all over the place, but that's what made them so special, every single coaster was unique and one-of-a-kind. They were literal gems. I love riding the SooperDooperLooper, a looping coaster at Hersheypark designed by Schwartzkopf, because there's no other coaster like it at all in the world. Not only does it have some incredibly old-fashioned elements that you're not going to find elsewhere like, again, a really fun tunnel, but they use the terrain of Hersheypark, which is a little hilly, to make a custom coaster that you wouldn't and couldn't build anywhere else. What other park is as hilly as Hersheypark? I'm not really sure if there is one. But SooperDooperLooper is a custom gem that works for that park so well.

The problem is, today's coasters are mass produced. You can tell they're mass produced. Sure, they're still amazing. I'm not in *any way* trying to knock the feats that modern engineering is producing. They gave us rides like Pantheon, and Candymonium, and Ice Breaker all within the last twelve to eighteen months. All three of these coasters are *epic* coasters, and they're going to thrill riders for years to come. But my mom, who has no real interest in learning about coaster manufacturers or modern day engineering, can get off of Candymonium at Hersheypark and tell me that it reminds her of Gatekeeper at Cedar Point.

(I know guys, I know if you're listening you're probably thinking, "Candymonium and Gatekeeper are not the same ride!" I get what you're saying. But to my mom, what she's trying to say is that it's not the same ride design, she means it has the same ebb and flow to it. And she says that without even realizing they were both designed by the same company, and they were both designed within a few years of each other.)

I mean, I get why companies like B&M and Rocky Mountain Coaster do this. Massive coasters like this that will bring mass appeal to tens of thousands of riders who wait in line for hours during those hot summer days to ride - this is what parks want. This is what riders want. Riders don't want a ride that they'll only maybe like, riders want a ride that they know they're going to love. And park management is not willing to invest in any rides anymore that aren't going to be a complete slam dunk.

I can't think of a lot of roller coasters in the past 5 years that have been met with only a ho-hum experience. Now, don't get me wrong, there have definitely been rides that have opened where there are a lot of people in the coaster community who don't like it. You could have lots of debates over whether a coaster is good or not. But we're talking about the average fan who maybe goes to one or two parks a year. There aren't a lot of coasters that have been built that the average fan walks away really hating it. And that's what parks want. They want you coming back for more, they want to build safe coasters that they know will appeal to the *broadest spectrum* of park goers.

But Demon and all of these other older rides offer something that none of the modern rides can really offer - they can offer riders a unique ride experience. Sure, modern coasters can offer new and different tricks from ride to ride to separate them from others that are just like them. But, I'd say the argument could be made that if you have ridden one floorless coaster, you have an idea of what every floorless coaster in the world is like. Find me another Demon, though. Find me another Viper. You can't, because they're so unique.

When we lose an old ride like this, we can't just head to another park and find a suitable replacement all the time. Sometimes we can, don't get me wrong, but a lot of times when they're gone, that's it. There's nothing left for us to remember it by or compare it to, it's just gone.

I know, trust me, Demon is *far* from perfect. I'm not even sure how long it will remain operating, to be honest. It takes up a lot of space in the park, at least as far as modern rides go, and no one is really beelining straight to Demon when the park opens. Even though I would tell you that you should. I know most of you are listening to this going, "She's out of her mind". So I get it. But what Demon has going for it comes from a pure entertainment factor. It might be painful to ride, but you're going to have a lot of fun riding it! It will put a smile on your face, at least before it destroys your neck and back. And honestly, at the core of a roller coaster, the simple goal is to bring you happiness. You want to get off of the ride smiling and laughing. I would argue Demon does that. Maybe not in a way you would think, compared to today's coasters that impress you with their height and their speed and their tricks, but Demon has so many other kitschy things going for it that you can't help but laugh as you ride through it. It brings happiness, and honestly to me, that is such a big win in the coaster world.

I am *determined* to ride Demon soon. I don't know when I'll be out to the Chicago area next, but this has been added to my "Ride Before It's Too Late" list. I cannot wait to buckle in and know that I'm going to experience two minutes of absolute entertainment as well as two minutes of

very painful whiplash. Rides like this don't come around often anymore, and I really just want to soak it in and enjoy what once was the greatest ride in this park.

Well, there you have it. I rambled a bit about why old coasters are great, but honestly what episode of Once Upon a Coaster do I not ramble about about why old coasters are great. And honestly, Demon deserves that kind of admiration. It was at one point an amazing coaster, a top-of-the-line ride, and it's just been overshadowed a bit by newer and faster models that have come along after it. It shouldn't take away from all the features of the ride that still make it so much fun to experience.

Deep down, we all have a coaster like Demon, maybe not Demon itself, but like Demon that we secretly love, even though the rest of the world seems to hate it. For me, one of the rides that I secretly love, even though, apparently, a lot of you hate it, is Lightning Racer at Hersheypark. It is an older coaster, not super old, but, you know, 20 plus years old. It has become rickety. It has definitely seen better days. And I didn't know until a few years ago how many people really don't like to ride that ride, and I get it, maybe it's too rough for you. Maybe you walk off of it with a giant headache, just like a lot of other people I know do, but that's my ride. That's my girl. That's the one I love!

I love Lightning Racer. I always ride on the thunder side. I don't always win, but I always ride the thunder side. And I just love everything about her. Yes, I get it. A lot of you don't have the history with the ride like I do. You don't love her because you haven't grown up with her, but I love Lightning Racer, and I love again, the uniqueness. They don't make coasters like that anymore. Lightning Racer, Demon- we all have that coaster that we simply adore for no other reason than because we can!

So, next episode, we will be heading back east again to Pennsylvania and to a trolley park that a lot of people seem to have forgotten about, and a ride that is near and dear to my heart. I don't want to spoil it too much more than that, but let me just say next episode, I am all in on and I *cannot wait* for you to listen to it.

Just a reminder, our next episode will probably not be dropping next week, it'll be dropping a little late, as will all episodes in this season. We talked about what's going on in our first episode of the season, and if you haven't given it a listen yet, I'd love it if you could. Consider it a favor to me- your favorite podcast ranter. [laughs]

But until then, I'm Lizzie, and this has been another episode of Once Upon A Coaster. Stay healthy, be safe, and I'll talk to you real soon. Bye!