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# RINKSIDER

Celebrating our 60th year!

January - February 2013

The RINKSIDER is celebrating 60 years! Join us on Facebook at: <http://www.tinyurl.com/rinksiderFB> to share your stories from years past, post photos of days gone by, or ask a question of fellow roller skating rink operators.

### Laser Tag trends.....p.23

Whether your rink currently includes laser tag or not, you'll want to see what is trending with the latest from the International Laser Tag Association.

### Junior Derby gives back.....p. 13

A Hollister, Calif., junior derby team is fully supported by donations from the community and monies raised through various fundraisers. To show their appreciation, the girls hold events throughout the year to give back to their community.

### Summer memories still linger.....p.23

The days of famous musicians dropping in to play a gig and packed summers of roller skating may be a mere memory, but one Minnesota rink-turned-summer-resort is still a roller skating staple in this small, rural community.



*When you've been around for 60 years, you have a lot of memories to share, and a lot of friends to embarrass! Check out page 24 for our special collage of memorable Rinksider pictures throughout the years, and find the identity of the toddler above who became a successful rink owner! (Pardon the blurriness, but we simply had to run this picture!) Help us celebrate 60 years of the Rinksider!*

## Young rink owners come full circle after eleven years

By Suzy Weinland

For Katie Sessa and Chris Milano, rink ownership is a dream come true. The young couple opened their rink, The Locomo, in Spring Hill, Fla., September 1, 2012, after a few summer renovations. While this may seem like just another rink opening, the story behind how they got to this point is one that Sessa and Milano love to share.

Sessa is a fourth-grade teacher for the Hernando County schools, and fiance Milano owns his own bread route. The Locomo used to be a different name and owned by Sessa's parents from 1995-2000.

"We grew up working at my parent's rink, and didn't even know each other. I was a birthday hostess and he was the pizza

*continued on page 34*

## Three rink operators share how to boldly explore the high-tech universe of laser tag

By Connie Evener

Back in the '70s when skating rinks were attracting disco lovers in droves, "Star Wars" and "Star Trek" were creating an almost cosmic spin-off potential. But the concept of laser tag didn't come from a galaxy far, far away. It came from Texas, where George Carter, III, drew up the schematics for an arena-based laser tag system after watching "Star Wars." Carter opened the world's first laser tag facility in Dallas in 1984.

Is laser tag a viable option for rink owners considering adding attractions? Manufacturers, suppliers and consultants

*continued on page 33*

*(and see related story on page 15)*



*Party-goers suit up for a game of laser tag at The Web in Cincinnati, Ohio.*

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High-tech laser tag (cont'd from page 1)

can provide valuable information. But, said Jerry Weber, who's been in business since 1999, the best go-to guys are other operators. "Go and talk to people who are actually running operations. Find out what's worked, and not worked, for them," he said. So The Rinksider contacted three operators who have been in business since the late '90s.

According to funattheweb.com, "One night Jerry (Weber) was struck by lightning, went insane, and the next day he decided to build a laser tag facility." The real story, Weber noted, was a bit less wacky and a lot more labor intensive. Since 1999, his Cincinnati Laser Web has morphed into The Web, which, in addition to laser tag, features go-karts, mini golf, mini bowling and a full-service restaurant. Weber also owns Laser Web in Dayton.

Lazer Blaze in Louisville, Ky., opened in 1987. Ten years later Jack Turner took over, subsequently bought it, and has expanded three times in the

last seven years, adding mini-golf, an arcade, and a full service restaurant which also houses the ILTA (International Laser Tag Association) Laser Tag Museum. A charter member of the ILTA board, Turner received their Golden Phaser Award for Operator of the Year in 2011.

Karl Ross has owned and operated Laserdome in Manheim, Pa., since 1999. Ross began putting his business plan together when he was 19 and opened when he was 21. Within a year he lost interest in playing. "I went from being a total game enthusiast to being a total business enthusiast and haven't stopped since," Ross said. Laserdome also has an arcade and the Dome Theater, where live music is featured on Saturday nights.

Man does not live by laser tag alone...

"At The Web, we do have multiple attractions under one roof, so there's

something here for everybody," said Weber. With adult groups, like corporate team-building for example, there's resistance to laser tag because they think it's just for kids. "That's one of the reasons I wanted to have something adults would be comfortable with. Our electric go-karts are a big draw with them." That said, though, he noted that once adults loosen up and give it a shot, "laser tag ends up being one of their favorite events."

Weber and Turner have both added full service restaurants, neither serving alcohol. "We wanted to be geared to a family environment, catering to parents as well as kids," said Weber, so the menu at The Winner's Café includes chicken breast, wings, burgers and deli sandwiches, Cincinnati chili, and fries that are baked - thus healthier. Ice cream specialties are available at The Web's Sweet Spot.

At Lazer Blaze, fare at the First Contact Café includes pizza, burgers,

fries and nachos. But the big draw is the big screen plasma TVs. "Kentucky is all about basketball," explained Turner. When the University of Louisville and the University of Kentucky play, parents won't bring their kids in and hang out in the café if they can't watch the games, too. And while they are in the restaurant, thanks to the way the facility is designed, parents can keep half an eye on their kids, too. Turner has nothing against selling alcohol, he said, "but we're in the middle of the Bible Belt, and parents don't go out and drink while their kids play laser tag. It's just a matter of knowing your market."

Rollerdome doesn't have a full service restaurant. Ross has been hearing from other operators who have added restaurants, with alcoholic beverages, to draw more adults. "But I don't have room to expand," said Ross. "Besides, I think families are going to want a place

continued on page 34

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**High-tech laser tag (cont'd from page 33)**

to go where there's no alcohol."

Birthday Parties help laser tag arenas live long and prosper...

Laserdome's first five years were "scary," admitted Ross. "But now we've got a strong position in the community." In Lancaster County newspapers, Roller-dome consistently wins the readers' choice awards as best birthday party venue.

Guests love seeing their own big smiles on Roller-dome's Facebook Timeline, but Ross promotes parties the old fashioned way – snail mail. "We do a postcard that goes out to the birthday people, or their parents, a month to six weeks before their birthday," said Ross. "We spend six to seven thousand dollars a month to send out lots of postcards." Some of the addresses come from the American Student List, but, said Ross, "We supplement that with our own in-

house list, which is thousands of names per month because since 2004, every one of our customers has signed in to play laser tag."

Weber has decided to enlist some professional help to do more online marketing, including Facebook. He runs commercials on cable TV, ads in magazines, participates in coupon books, and may start mailing postcards again. "I'm a firm believer in rotating advertising," he said. He figures that by rotating, he'll eventually reach everyone in his target market, no matter which method most influences them.

When it comes to advertising and promotions, laser tag operators are every bit as opinionated – and diverse – as rink operators. Turner does no advertising at all. He relies on word of mouth. Back in the old days, he did it all, TV commercials, radio ads, the

backs of cash register receipts, and ads between movies at local theaters. "And we never saw anything from any of it," he said. "But when we stopped pouring all that money into marketing and started pouring it back into the business, that's when we saw our numbers going up."

**Buy – and take good care of – the best equipment you can afford...**

Although these three laser tag entrepreneurs have differences of opinion when it comes to marketing, they do agree on the need for equipment that's durable and easy to repair. Much of the appeal of laser tag is its high tech futuristic quality. If customers don't perceive your equipment to be as state of the art and cutting edge as that of your competitors, you're going to get zapped.

As Scottie on "Star Trek" often

bellyached, even dilithium crystals are subject to glitches. "You or someone in your organization has to have half an idea about computers and electronics if you're going to run laser tag," noted Weber. "Laser tag systems, no matter how reliable, need maintenance. You don't need to be an expert with an electrical engineering degree, but you do need to be capable of doing some basic troubleshooting."

Although they do agree on the qualities to look for in equipment, each gets his equipment from a different source: Zone Laser Tag for Turner, Darklight Laser Tag for Weber, and Lasertron for Ross.

For rink operators, laser tag may well be a strange new world, but should they decide to boldly go where they've not gone before, may the Force be with them!

**New rink owners (cont'd from page 1)**

maker," said Sessa. "We started dating in high school. I went to college and came back to work as a teacher, and Chris bought his bread route.

"Then it all came full circle, to buy the place where we met. And we're excited to someday raise our children in this same place."

Sessa explained that a gymnastics company had purchased the rink from her parents in 2000, and were recently looking for a smaller location. She and Milano got wind of it, and decided they had to purchase the rink.

Their main purpose for opening the rink is to provide an area for children and families to come together. "We live in a small area called Spring Hill, about an hour north of Tampa, where we are affected deeply by the economy," shared Sessa. "We wanted to do something to uplift the community. We only have one other skating rink in the area, and it's about 30 minutes away."

The Locomo shares its space with The John Leggio Center for the Performing Arts, an upscale dance studio that prepares young dancers for Broadway, according to Sessa. Both groups are able to utilize the original, 11,000 sq. ft. Maple floor that was underneath all of the gymnastics mats and only had to be refinished.

Named the Locomo, after the 1960's song Locomotion, the rink's theme is carried through. Colors are retro and bright – orange, purple, lime green. They have a roller skating mascot, "Locomo Jack," who caters to the younger crowds.

"What sets us apart," said Sessa, "is our light-up roller skates. We keep rink dark so skates light up." And The Locomo draws in a wide range of audiences.

Monday nights are Christian Skates. On Friday nights families skate from 6-8:45 p.m., then Teen Night begins at 9 p.m. and includes dancing from 9 to midnight. On Monday, Tuesday and Thursday, the rink helps raise money for local schools.

"We give back \$1.50 for each child that comes through the door. The most we raised was \$569 in one night for one school," shared Sessa.

Sessa said they have also forayed into All Night Skates. Their first event hosted 275 kids overnight, and while tiring, Sessa said they'll be doing more. When school is out, they invite parents to drop off their kids for a day of skating,

Of course birthday parties are a staple as well. There is one designated glow-in-the-dark room where the birthday group gets light up necklaces, bracelets and cups. Groups can also utilize the snack bar area for birthdays and other group gatherings. "This keeps us busy on the weekend," said Sessa.

While the snack bar does offer some of the standard "kid-approved"

baked pizza and fruit.

There are speed skate classes, roller derby and skate lessons for all ages as well as a D.J. and an 80-inch projector screen where movies, music videos or live video of skaters streams during each session.

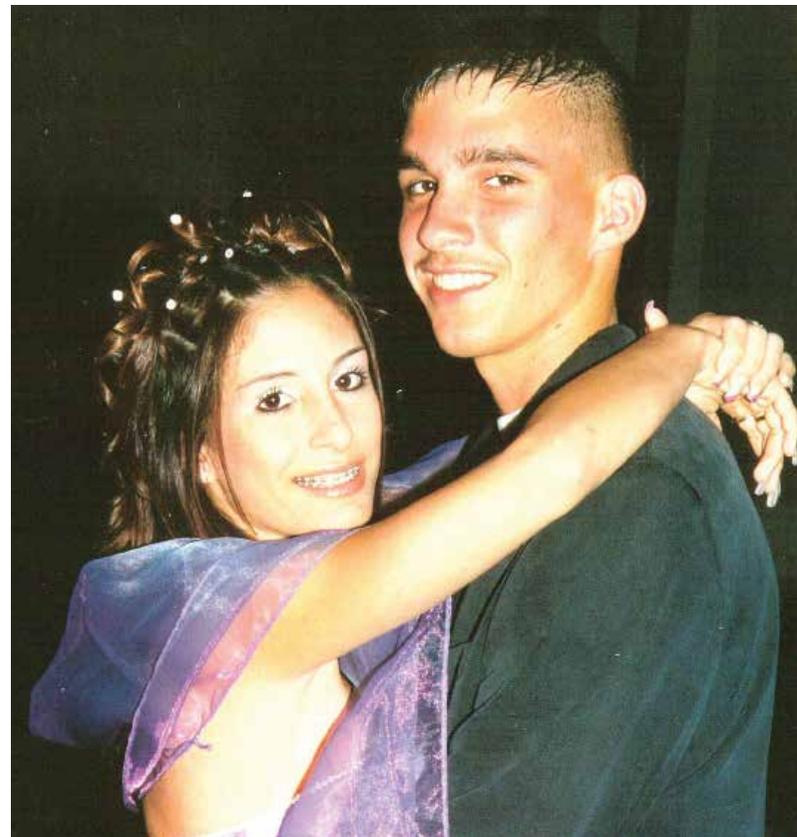
Sessions run from 1-5 p.m. on the weekends and cost \$5 for admission plus \$2 for skates. "We did this because things are so expensive nowadays. If you have a family of three, and you go to the movies, it's \$52 just to get in. And of course you want to devour all the great food at the same time. And parents just can't afford it. So when we were planning, we had to figure out how we were going to get them there every weekend, and the way we decided to do that was to have a low rate so everyone can enjoy it. Even the families who struggle can have some time to enjoy each other," said Sessa.

According to Sessa, response has been overwhelming. "Everybody is enjoying themselves and trying us out. We have received great compliments. Everyone seems pleased, and we're happy.

"I think the best experience for me is reliving my memories from childhood there. You kind of forget your worries," remarked Sessa. "We've made it so fun and inviting, you kind of forget everything on the outside. And you're able to get some really great exercise and have fun."

Keeping it all in the family, in addition to Sessa and Milano working their after their other jobs, The Locomo is staffed by Milano's parents and sister and Sessa's two sisters. "We both just have a passion for roller skating and helping people. We've had it instilled in us by our parents. They've inspired us to help others."

Sessa commented that owning and running The Locomo is a "labor of love." Sessa and Milano will be married in March, and plan to hold their rehearsal dinner at the rink.



**New rink owners Katie Sessa and Chris Milano, pictured at Homecoming 2001, after meeting at Katie's parents' rink.**

which they promote via Facebook and their website.

Sessa added that she knows fewer people read newspapers nowadays, and that to reach their audience they need to go digital. They are building up a database for emailing and texting their digital-savvy skaters.

junk food like funnel cakes, churros, ice-cream and candy, Sessa said they also wanted to cater to adults. To that end, they have a Wi-Fi area, complete with a TV and coffee bar, separate from the snack area noise. The menu includes healthier options such as grilled chicken sandwiches, tuna sandwiches, fresh-