

Every skating Center has its own personality

By Steve Early

My name is Steve Earley. I travel this great country representing Sure Grip International and championing the sport of roller-skating. On behalf of Sure Grip, I have visited more than 400 rinks, and I've have met hundreds of staff and operators, each having their own story. At times, the rinks are the stars of the show, including two of the most architecturally unique rinks in America.

The first, Star Castle, is located in one of the jewels of the south, Savannah, Georgia. The only thing that I had heard about the rink is that "it looks kind of like a castle." Driving under the low-hanging Spanish Moss in the Grey Gripper (my traveling Sure-Grip van) on a Thursday night, I was looking forward to seeing Star Castle. Building a rink around a "theme" can be risky and difficult.

Immediately upon arrival at the parking lot, I saw that the building was indeed a castle. I walked over a draw bridge and remarked to a customer leaving the rink, "This is quite something." He responded with a smile, "Wait until you see inside."

The doors to the lobby are large detailed castle-like doors with huge wrought iron hinges that continue the theme and welcome you to this wondrous place. Entering the lobby, it was clear that the interior is as breathtaking as the facade. The lighting was golden and the dark wood enhances the medieval theme. To the right, stands a full-sized and real suit of armor. The attention to detail, the decor, and design in the Star Castle lobby makes you a believer. You can hear the music thumping from behind wooden doors. The skating floor is not visible from the lobby, game room, restaurant, or pro-shop area. I like it and the layout draws you into this special place, the Star Castle.

The General Manager, John Povanda was there to meet me. He's young, smiling, and has an unmistakable enthusiasm for his Star Castle. I realized that the reason this facility works is the continuity and attention to detail. Star Castle, like Disney, understands that a theme needs to be carried out completely to be effective. Each turn reveals another noteworthy aspect: a professionally sculpted dragon perched above the game room, iron sconces along the walls, even inlaid swords in the party tables. No corner is left un-themed and the flow is seamless.

John leads me through double doors into the separated rink area. It is as immaculate, as the rest of Star Castle. There are faux stone arches around the floor with their own suits of armor every 15 feet. To keep it modernized, they designed a strip of LED lights around the base of the exterior wall that compliments

the maple floor. The DJ booth is elevated on a stone turret. The centerpiece of the rink area is the large green dragon that oversees the skaters. This fanciful dragon is as good as, or better, than any theme park.

This unique facility, with all of the touches and impressive decor, would not be as success if it wasn't for the outstanding systems, programming, and commitment of the employees. The Skate Castle in Savannah should be on your list of places to visit.

Skate Castle's personality could not be more different from the second facility.

Miles off the highway, through the windy mountain roads of West Virginia, hides Ansted Roller Rink. I had heard rumors of this hideaway a year earlier. The only small facts I could attain are that the Ansted Rink has open sides, is

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only open in the summer, and it's at the "bottom of a hill". The Google search turned up fewer clues. A couple of grainy photos hinted of its possible existence. We planned our Sure-Grip trip though West Virginia specifically to try to uncover the mystery of this mythical hidden gem.

The Grey Gripper wound its way through the legendary West Virginia Mountains. The tall green cliffs cut with long streams carrying coal barges guided our way. As I traveled further into the hills and away from the highway, I wondered if a rink could actually survive in a small mountain town. Originally, the address I found brought me to a nature camp. When I walked to the zip-line area I asked if there was a roller rink at the facility. The young employee looked around at the zip lines, repellers and rope obstacles to prove how ridiculous my question was.

I drove to the center of Ansted and scoured the very small town for any sign of a roller rink. After several passes, I reluctantly admitted defeat and went into the local pharmacy to inquire about the rink and location. The very friendly West Virginian told me that I had passed it several times and that it was easy to miss.

It was "easy to miss." The Ansted Roller Rink has no parking lot or entrance. The very small sign for the facility is parallel to the street. To view it, you have to



The entrance to the Anstead Roller Rink in Anstead, West Virginia.

be looking out your side windows when passing. There was no structure visible. I pulled over the Sure-Grip van to the side of the road to explore further.

Walking the dirt roadside and making my way to the small sign, I first saw a wooden stairway. Standing atop the stairs it is an amazing view downward. The wooden staircase is approximately three stories high and descends into a wooded valley. At the floor of this valley is the Ansted Roller Rink. I was in awe. There are no driveways or utilitarian paths down to the red metal-roofed structure, just the log railings and stairs.

I made my way down the long stairway and into the valley to discover a locked door. This was expected since I wasn't able to make contact with the facility prior to my arrival. From the doorway, I could see the exposed rink through the chicken wire enclosure. I could barely make out the wooden structure inside. I had come this far, I had to see the interior of this wondrous rink.

In my starched white Sure-Grip button down shirt and dress pants, I decided to climb the railings and scale the overgrown side of the hill to look directly through the openings of the building. The ground was slanted and covered in underbrush and foliage. I had to slide my way down the length of the facility using my arms as a rudder. I could barely see into the skating floor area through the wire barrier.

In the quiet woods, what I saw inside was breathtaking. The Ansted Roller Rink is the closest we have in the industry to a rink suspended in time. The floor is wood, like most skating centers. The structure is of logs, real logs. The tin roof is held aloft by more logs. It's easy to imagine our

great-grandparents rolling in this rustic rink, spinning and turning with fedoras and dresses to the sounds of blue grass music.

I shuffled my way further down the side of this rink, at this point giving up on my clothing and cleanliness and focusing on this sight. At the end of the building, I was several feet off the ground and could only see inside with the help of my camera screen. The length exposed even more classic wooden logs surrounding the skating floor. Hanging from the roof are two large American flags standing silent vigil over this classic piece of Americana.

Another skating center, like the Ansted Roller Rink, may not have survived in America.

I finally had the good fortune to meet the owners at a Sure-Grip distributor's trade show. I recounted my adventure at their open-sided rink to Allen and Terry Hurley. They purchased the abandoned rink a few years ago. Local youths had taken it over and made it their skateboarding hideaway. The rink was built, as far as they could tell, in 1947 after the war. There is a local legend that the rink was moved over the mountain to the current location. The Hurley's run skating only in the warmer months for a few hours on select days. Amazing.

The uniqueness of these two skating centers, the Star Castle and Ansted Roller Rink, exemplifies the diversity of our industry.

I look forward to introducing you to more notable skating centers thanks to Sure-Grip in coming issues of Rinksider.

To see more photos and videos of these and other skating centers, please check out our Facebook page at facebook.com/SureGripTravelingRoadshow