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## BALLY'S CELEBRITY PINBALL

by Tim Ferrante ?2000

**Imagine it.** You're famous! You're popular! You're salable!! And Bally, a major pinball manufacturer, is paying you to be the theme of their next pinball machine! We're not talking about fictional characters like Flash Gordon or Elvira, or groups of people like the Rolling Stones or KISS, or even deceased legends like Mata Hari. We're talking about living, breathing personalities whose modern day presence was (and is) worthy of flipper fame. All right, so none of us qualify but there is three such recipients of this distinction: Evel Knievel, Bobby Orr, and Dolly Parton. We thought there were more and you're probably thinking the same thing, but go ahead and check for yourself anyway. Remember the criteria: a Bally pinball inspired by a living person whose name is also the machine (Capt. Fantastic doesn't qualify). There are three, just three. Yes, there's more by other companies and there were the several custom-produced games for people like Aaron Spelling and Joel Silver (see The Pinball Trader #36, Jan 92). Overall, though, there aren't that many notables who were chosen for commercial backglass immortality. Still, the prospect of collecting all the mass-produced "real people" machines is certainly an achievable goal.

As far as post-1947 pinball is concerned, daredevil cyclist Evel Knievel was the first living celebrity to have a pin game marketed solely on present-day fame. At the time, Knievel was a media phenomenon, synonymous with anything bold, brassy, or risky and milking the moment for everything he could possibly get. And who could blame him? Anyone dull-witted enough to hop onto a motorcycle and jump over umpteen buses certainly deserved some attention!



In the mid-70s, the resourceful Knievel had become as recognizable as Mickey Mouse and Bally swallowed his licensing hook in 1976. By early 1977, a tiny production run (155 units) of electromechanical Evel Knievel (EK) machines were put into the distributor pipeline.

It was designed by staffer Gary Gayton who would later design Bally hits Lost World, Strikes & Spares, and Star Trek.



Gayton's playfield relied on typically popular game features. He placed five in-line drop targets along the left edge of playfield center. Two spinners (adorned with Knievel's stars and stripes #1 logo) were mounted on either side of the alleys leading the ball to the top of the playfield. Add three pop bumpers, a center playfield spot target, three right side spot targets and a

pair of dead bumpers flanking a kickout hole and the result is a comfortably challenging game.

By that summer, the solid state electronic version was ready for consumption. Artist Paul Faris, whose industry credits include Eight Ball, Xenon, and Goldeneye, redesigned his electromechanical backglass flipping Knievel's image from the right side of the glass to the left, adding an attractive gal sporting a #1 tee-shirt.

"Knievel's representatives were involved with the project," Faris recalls. "Evel himself actually visited us at the Chicago factory when he was in town to cycle jump over a tank filled with sharks. He had me change the angle of his cycle that had animated across the top of the glass. I had the front wheel too low and he said, 'I couldn't land the bike the way you have it. The front wheel should be higher in the air.' A few days later he was rehearsing his jump, crashed, and canceled his huge media event!"

"We had to reverse the electromechanical images and change the logo sizes to accommodate the solid state layout," he continues. "If we left Evel on the right side, he would have had a credits and ball in play window for eyes!"

EK was a first in more ways than one. "The first fully electronic commercial game!" hollers the hyperbole-filled four-page sales brochure. Sure, there were electronic hybrids before it and technically, this game wasn't "fully" electronic.

It still relied on a chime box as its sounds source, only now its coils were fired by the new solenoid driver board. Nevertheless, the solid state EK would add still another first in it's already burgeoning ego-driven theme. It was the first Bally electronic game to sell over 10,000 units (14,000). Only Capt. Fantastic and Wizard had reached those heights and they, of course, were electromechanicals.

According to Bally, EK assured buyers that the replacement of "... complex cables, numerous soldered connections and dozens of relays with simple, compact positive-action solid state components by world famous electronics manufacturers ..." was a good thing. And it was! They went on to say that, "... positive inspection methods, adaptable only to electronics, insures delivery of pinball games as perfect as the human



mind can produce."

Later on, after thousands of these wonderful new games were given the real test at the arcade level, Bally realized that they had some design flaws. One chronic ailment was the rectifier board connectors. The pins carrying the higher voltages were heating up due to inadequate connector design. White molex connector blocks were sprouting brown and black burn marks, slowly melting from the resistance build up of poor conductivity. A three-sided trifurcon connector was advised as a replacement but more often than not, operators simply soldered the offending wire directly to the pin or ignored it all together. Yeah, it was a fun time in the early days of electronic pinball.

While Bally was training its masses on this new technology, their famous personality was systematically ruining his career. Knievel verbally (and physically!) began assaulting the very people who helped put him on top. His 15 minutes of fame was about to run out.

"Shortly after the release of the solid state game, Knievel began getting into all kinds of trouble," Faris remembers. "Suddenly, this hero was beating people up and creating a lot of negative publicity. At the time, we were readying a scaled down home model for distribution through a retail chain, Montgomery Ward, I believe. I don't remember any actually getting into stores because they pulled the plug due to Knievel's behavior. They weren't going to sell this machine! We very quickly created Galaxy Ranger which was Kevin O'Connor's very first game (artist O'Connor's work includes KISS and Monster Bash). We had to do it very quickly because this was our shot at entering the home market. There were EK home model prototypes built and if any did get out, it was very few." (A photo of this scarce machine appears on page 170 of Arcade Treasures by Bill Kurtz).

Bad press, lawsuits, canceled performances ... it didn't mater. There was barely an arcade standing that didn't have an EK machine. It was a whopper hit sending Bally on an unprecedented run of eight more titles whose sales would top five figures.



The folks in Chicago probably felt a little more comfortable with their Bobby Orr license, dubbing the hockey theme release, Bobby Orr Powerplay. They couldn't have asked for a more wholesome product representative. Orr's exemplary career with the Boston Bruins had reached its peak during the 69-70 season when the 22-year old player scored over 100 points as a defenseman, an unheard of accomplishment. It was an incredible season for Orr, leading his team to the Stanley Cup (something they hadn't done for 29 seasons) and scoring one of the most memorable goals in NHL history during the fourth game's overtime play.

By 1977, when Bally secured Orr's likeness and name, the hockey great had battered his knees so badly that he rarely saw the ice.

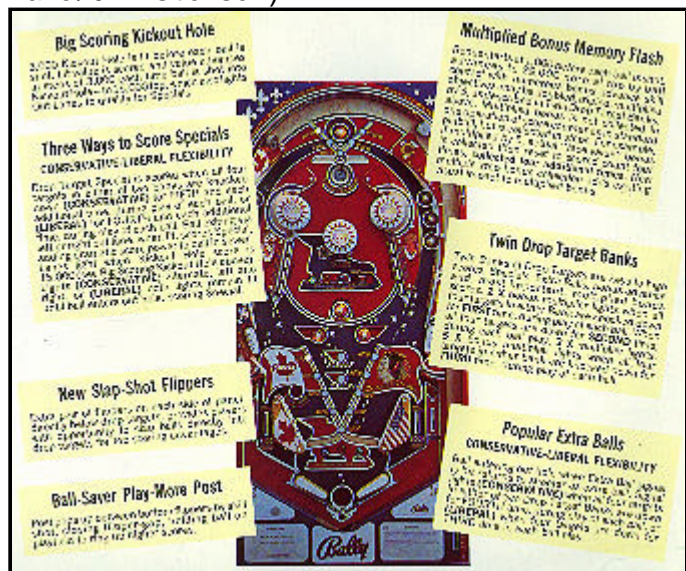


The year prior, the Canadian-born Orr had become one of Chicago's own, joining the Blackhawks as a free agent so this was an especially fortuitous license. The athlete's ice record was so profound that even at this advanced stage of his career, Bally need do little else than announce the machine in marketing it.

Who better to realize the superstar's playfield and artwork than pinball's then reigning superstars, Greg Kmiec and Dave Christensen? The handsome Kmiec was one of the industry's best designers and sometime partner Christensen had 1972s Fireball listed amongst his accomplishments. By this time, the duo already added the aforementioned, Capt. Fantastic and Wizard to their resumes.

Was it the recognizable themes that made their games so successful or the dynamic appearance and challenging play? We tend to believe the latter as pre-Bobby Orr Powerplay Kmiec and/or Christensen machines that had no pre-sold recognition factor were still excellent sellers such as Old Chicago (Kmiec/Christensen), Night Rider (Kmiec/Faris), Mata Hari (Jim Patla/Christensen) and Fireball (Ted Zale/Christensen).

At first glance, Bobby Orr Powerplay doesn't seem to have much of a playfield at all, the major attraction being a pair of four in-line drop target banks with small left and right center playfield flippers (called Slap Shot Flippers) aimed directly at them. To be a bit more accurate, it appears they're aimed directly at them! This is part of the ingenious design. What looks to be shooting fish in a barrel simplicity is really a frustrating course in timing and understanding shot vectors. The upper kickout hole, while an excellent source of quick high scoring, is almost incidental in comparison to repeatedly completing the drop targets. Decorated in a striking red, white and blue color motif, it's an attractive pinball package.



Bally was still using a chime box for sounds and if you're looking for games that are remarkably easy to work on, these early electronic examples are it. I once resurrected a Bobby Orr Powerplay whose power supply module had caught fire, completely destroying it and melting its connectors and wires into a mass of solid, albeit colorful, goo. Tedious wire separation and connector replacement was time-consuming, but the rest of the game was intact. The below playfield gadgetry is wide-open making servicing of assemblies a breeze. These are a joy to work on allowing easy access, minimal parts availability concerns (not to be confused with game-specific parts like backglasses, playfields and butyrate light shield sets) and rewarding to play.

As for Bobby Orr himself, it would be less than a year after the release of his silverball namesake before he retired his professional skates forever, playing his last game on Nov. 1, 1978 at the age of 30. If you're looking for

a singular pinball machine that represents legendary greatness in all of its features (design, art, theme), then Bobby Orr Powerplay would be a prime candidate.

Bally's last living license was Dolly Parton, a performer whose show business career was about to soar. Had they waited another year or two, they might never have had the opportunity.



The lovely Parton was one of 12 children raised on a small farm in Locust Ridge, TN. She loved to sing and by age 12 had already appeared on local television channels. She completed high school and by 1967 had a minor hit single called Dumb Blonde. That got her a seven year gig with Porter Wagoner before launching her solo career in 1974. Around the time of signing the Bally license (1978) she was a nationally-known celebrity with regular media appearances and hit records. She was on the cusp of a successful acting career ("9 to 5") and her pinball machine was simply one of several fast-happening

successes.

Her penchant for pinks and lavenders (her live show equipment was once packed in pink cases!) is rampant throughout the game. It is a standout as is her natural endowment. It must have been the ultimate illustration assignment for Dave Christensen whose fondness for buxom women was hardly a secret. Here was his opportunity to draw that reality, not exaggerate it!

At the time, Faris (then Bally's art director) and licensing exec Tom Nieman visited the entertainer at her Beverly Hills Hotel suite for her creative input.

"She had been recording all day and was probably very tired," Faris explains. "She was very nice, petite, and very beautiful. She was down-to-earth and plain-spoken, forthright and matter-of-fact about her physical attributes. Her main concern about the art was the removal of the nipples Dave had drawn and asked that we make her hands a bit larger and fingers a little longer. Her opinion was that this was artwork and not reality so we could make the modifications.

"She rejected Dave's first concept," he reveals. "He had her in typical country singer clothes, denim, rhinestones and the rest. She was very cognizant of what her schedule and career would be portraying in the months ahead and adapted those things to the look she wanted on the glass."

Christensen's second attempt pulled all the stops. His depiction of Parton is marvelous, a detailed rendering of the artist full of her glamour, beauty and professional style.

When they weren't employing their new four-color process (i.e. Supersonic, Lost World, etc.), the company was using mirrored glass for their backglasses (these types of backglasses begin as normal mirrors and the

artwork areas are etched away, revealing the clear glass to permit application of inks). It gave artists yet another design element to work with and Christensen used it here with delicate flourish. Even the Dolly Parton 4-page sales brochure utilized silver embossing on its interior pages.

The game was designed by George Christian. His earlier titles included Eight Ball (a behemoth of a hit—20,330 units[!]), Nitro Groundshaker, and Freedom. Dolly Parton featured one of the earliest uses of a playfield drop target configuration where the targets act as soldier-like obstacles. Players are forced to "remove" four drop targets standing in queue to gain access to a reward-filled spot target (see illustration). It's an effective and challenging concept amid its almost obligatory pop bumpers, kickout hole and spinner target. Christian later used this drop target configuration on Eight Ball Deluxe, a pinball classic.

It wasn't uncommon for these targets to snap off a bit more quickly than usual and operators oft times used replacements featuring the wrong graphics. Fortunately for today's restorationists the proper replacements are in ample supply, they being reproduced from original tooling.

Dolly Parton was fitted with the relatively new Bally sound card. Gone were the chime boxes. The card was equipped with a ROM programmed to play a musical phrase from her gold record hit, Here You Come Again, the finishing touch to an exquisite silverball homage to a talented and deserving entertainer.

Her game hasn't reached collectibility status amongst coin-op enthusiasts and is one of those odd conflicts that defy explanation. It was a moderate success at the time with a production run of 7350 units so they're not in short supply. Collectors are more inclined to choose close production line relatives like Silverball Mania or Paragon over Dolly Parton. Too feminine perhaps, or is it that pink and pinball just don't go together? Possibly a less than challenging game design? It's all conjecture but we do predict it will one day achieve its full potential in the mass collector market.



A recent visit to a Parton web site revealed a fan offering their prized pinball for sale due to their imminent move. They caringly spoke about this machine, as if it were Dolly herself that was being uprooted, proving the game has a dedicated following beyond the coin-op hobby.

Bally wasn't alone in their star quest. Over at 1725 Diversey Parkway, Stern Electronics had signed Ted Nugent and Muhammad (Cassius Marcellus Clay, Jr.) Ali, their only two "real people" machines. Game Plan would have Hockey Hall of Famer Mike Bossy and Gottlieb's Frank Thomas Big Hurt recently paid tribute to the Chicago White Sox first baseman.

Companies also reached into history for real people pins. There was Attila the

Hun (Game Plan), Buffalo Bill, Captain Kidd, and Cleopatra (Gottlieb), Mata Hari (Bally) and more perhaps. But these are topics for another time.

"It was incredible during those days," Faris concludes of his Bally stint. "Pinball sales figures went crazy and every few months we were on a new project. I remember when we were choosing between the Tron license and some new movie with a character named Indiana Jones. We picked Tron ... we should have picked Indiana Jones!"

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