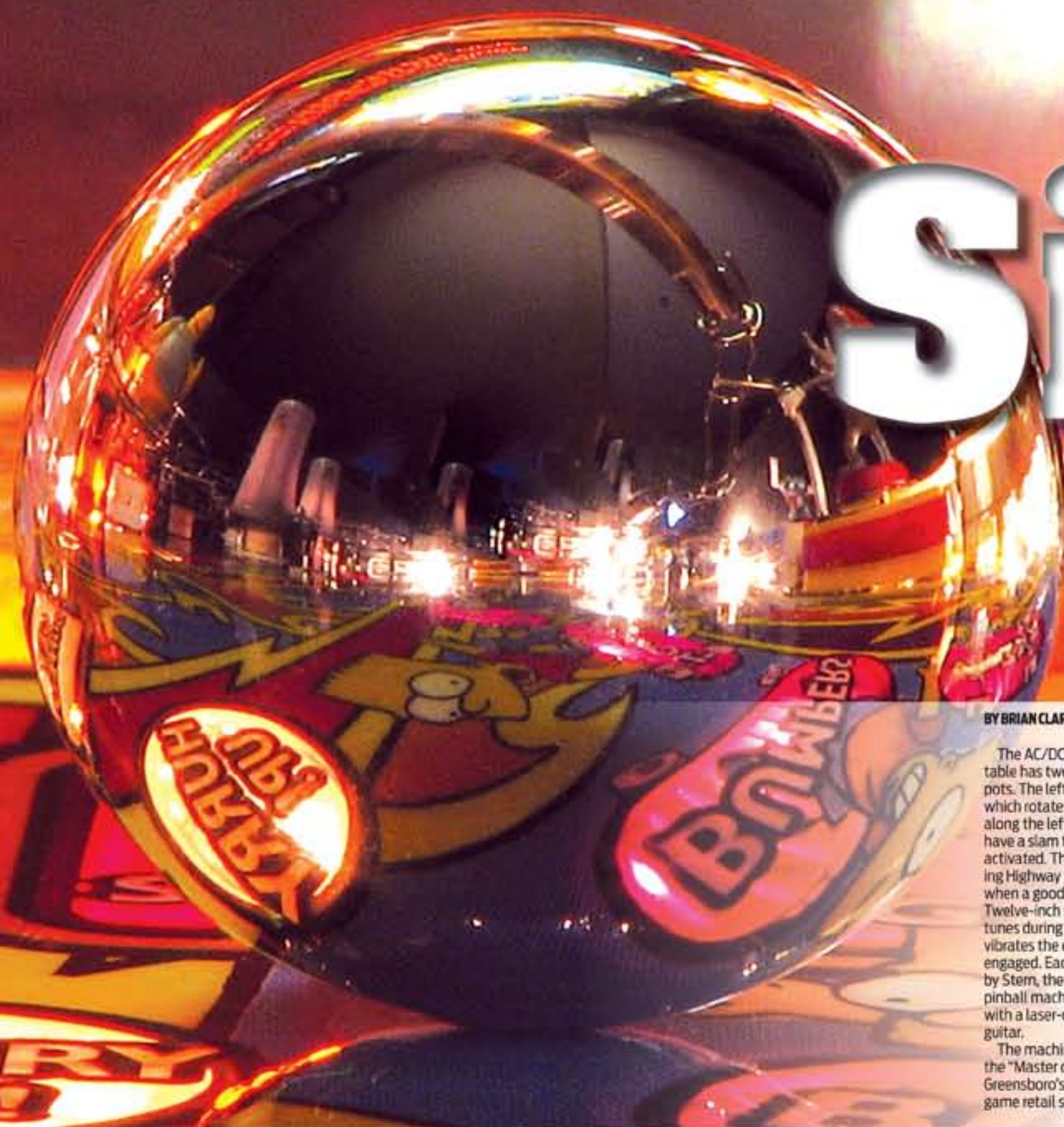


# The Silver Ball



## The Lost Ark is holding its next pinball tournament



Thursday, June 23 at 7:30 p.m., with a \$5 entry fee and prizes for the Top 4 finishers.

7823 Spring Garden St., Greensboro

lostarkvideogames.com 336.422.6342

BY BRIAN CLAREY

The AC/DC Limited Edition Let There Be Rock pinball table has two side ramps that trigger specials and jackpots. The left ramp has a diverter that loads a cannon, which rotates to take aim at the AC/DC drop targets along the left bank. The TNT drop targets on the center have a slam target behind them, that thunders when activated. There's a lower play field that activates during Highway to Hell mode, and a Hell's Bell that swings when a good left flipper shot hits its pendulum ball. Twelve-inch subwoofers blast the band's best-known tunes during gameplay, and a Shake And Quake motor vibrates the entire machine when special features are engaged. Each machine — just 200 were made this year by Stern, the only company in the world that still makes pinball machines — has a unique mirrored backglass, with a laser-cut hinge cut in the shape of Angus Young's guitar.

The machine, designed by Steve Ritchie, known as the "Master of Flow" in pinball circles, is the newest at Greensboro's Lost Ark, the throwback arcade and video-game retail space that opened last year. It's been on

the floor for a week, and whoever logs the highest score before Friday is promised a prize.

Keith Brown feels he has a fighting chance. His three-letter high-score tag, UNC, flashes on several of the Lost Ark's pinball screens today, and he was champion of Lost Ark's February pinball tournament — they hold one every month.

Now, poised at the foot of the AC/DC machine, he uses the left flipper to coerce the shiny chrome pinball up the left ramp — once, twice, thrice, sending the ball to the cannon and triggering multiball. He hangs on for a good minute, slapping the three balls back into play, and pops the machine for a free replay before losing all three. He logs a solid score, 47 million or so, but it's a far cry from the week's high, which stands at just over 146 million.

"We're still trying to figure this one out," he admits. "This thing is a freakin' beast."

Agreed. And because, after watching Brown go for the high score for just a couple minutes, I've got a bit of a pinball jones myself, I slide a Lincoln into the change machine and plug some quarters into the coin slot.

It's on, baby.



I'm no slouch. I've been knocking pinball's around since I was a kid growing up in New York. The 1970s and '80s were something of a Golden Age for pinball, when microprocessors were incorporated into gameplay, allowing for better sound effects, higher-quality displays and more sophisticated features. Ironically, it was the microprocessor, which made video games like Space Invaders, Pac-Man and Asteroids possible, that also sounded the death knell for pinball.

But pinball actually harkens back hundreds of years, to the 15<sup>th</sup> century, a time when gamers were adapting popular outdoor sports for the indoors. Bowling and billiards came out of this movement, as well as a French game played on a machine called "bagatelle."

Bagatelle involved a small, narrow table with fixed pins demarcating scoring zones. A cue, much like a pool cue, was used to shoot balls onto the field, where they would ricochet off the pins and drop into scoring holes.

After King Louis XIV became a die-hard pinhead, the game became enormously popular in France, and was introduced to the Americas by French soldiers on loan for the Revolutionary War.

Almost a hundred years later, in 1871, an American of French descent, Montague Redgrave, obtained US Patent No. 115,357 for "improvements in bagatelle," specifically a spring-loaded launcher that shot the balls into play. The same basic design is still in use in pinball machines today.

Fast-forward to 1931, the year Automatic Industries' Whiffle Board, the first coin-operated pinball machine, came on the market, followed soon after by Baffle Ball, made by David Gottlieb. Gottlieb, would soon become one of the fathers of the modern game, and the company he founded would last until the 1990s. One of Gottlieb's disgruntled distributors, Raymond Maloney, came up with his own table, named Ballyhoo, after being unable to secure enough Baffle Ball machines for his Chicago amusement concern. Ballyhoo outsold Baffle Ball, and Maloney would go on to start his own company, Bally's, which endured until 1988, when its assets merged with Williams.

Williams Manufacturing, the other big player in the industry, came about in the 1940s, founded by Harry E. Williams on the strength of a game he designed for another company, Pacific Amusements. Contact, which debuted in 1933. While at Pacific, Williams also invented the tilt mechanism, which prevented players from lifting the tables off the ground to direct the balls — essentially cheating. In 1946, Williams issued its first pinball table, Suspense.

But then, in 1947, Gottlieb made Humpty Dumpty, the very first pinball machine with flippers. Not only did it improve gameplay significantly, it changed pinball from a game of luck to a game of skill. Things would never be the same.

Back then, pinball had something of a seedy reputation, viewed as a form of gambling favored by gangsters and rebellious toughs. A movement grew to ban the game, and it was successful even in the cities where it was most popular.

Noteworthy was New York City Mayor Fiorella LaGuardia's 1942 pinball ban. The charismatic mayor claimed that the machines robbed schoolchildren of their lunch money, and when the ban enacted in 1942, LaGuardia launched Prohibition-style raids on pinball parlors across the city, confiscating thousands of machines, arresting their owners and then publicly

destroying the tables for press photographers before dumping the remains into the East River. The ban in NYC lasted, astonishingly, until 1976, which was roughly the time I began playing.

The Lost Ark in Greensboro is a trove of pinball tables, both new and retro. Alongside old-school favorites like Indiana Jones and Banzai Run, which features a vertical playing board on its backglass, stand brand-new tables like the AC/DC machine and an Iron Man game, both made by Stern.

Stern is the last surviving pinball manufacturer in the world. Gary Stern was the son of Sam Stern, who co-founded Williams. Stern the younger — who had a pinball company of his own, Stern Electronics — brought his property over to Data East in 1985. Data East sold the pinball division to Sega in 1994. Gottlieb tanked in 1996, leaving Williams and Sega as the only two pinball companies in existence.

Williams led the field at the time. Though it also had a significant video-game division — Williams brought us Defender, Joust and Robotron, among other noteworthy games, in the 1980s — it remained committed to solid-state pinball, releasing classic tables like Black Knight, Pin\*Bot and Cyclone. Then, in 1992, it struck gold with Addams Family, the most popular pinball table in history.

The Addams Family table features a 12-room mansion, each with a feature that must be completed: the grave, the staircase ramp, the mechanical Thing hand that reaches out of a box and grabs the ball for multiball.

Daniel McMillan, who owns Lost Ark with partner Asa Cooney, says he used to have an Addams Family machine, but he recently sold it to a collector, an offer he couldn't refuse.

McMillan, 32, is an infant by pinball standards. He got into the scene after collecting old-school video-game consoles and, eventually, pinball tables while going after his PhD in English literature at UNCG until he had amassed more than 20 machines in his home.

One night, while playing the games with his friends, he had the idea: "Wouldn't something like this be great?" But how to do it?

"The reason you don't find awesome arcades anymore is because it's hard to pay the bills at a quarter a pop," he says. So he drew on a background in retail to make the Lost Ark more than an arcade: It's a full-service video-game store, trading in new and used games, and he also sells retro consoles like the Atari 2600, Intellivision, ColecoVision, all the old Sega and Xbox units. He even has a Vectrex, the vector-graphics home console that first came out in 1982.

"Video games is what got me into this," he says, "but pinball is what determined me to start this place. I love working on [the machines], playing them. You couldn't find them anywhere, maybe a random machine in a bar, and half the time it didn't work right.

"If you have a pinball machine," he adds, "it will break. It needs service. There's no such thing as a maintenance-free pinball machine."

He has even tinkered with the AC/DC machine, he says, which he bought brand new and pulled from the box himself earlier this month.

"Within a week I was resoldering wires to flipper coils," he says. "It's such a high-vibration environment."

Pinball, unlike video games, is a physical activity.

In my first game against Brown, he's working the left ramp, backing the ball up with the left flipper, five in a row, each time lifting his shoulders and lurching his body to the left, like he's imparting his body's energy into the ball. He leans over the machine when his ball bounces around the spinners, in the upper field of play, leans with it as it trundles down the course, emphasizes each flipper shot with a tilt of his frame.

It's my first time on the machine, but in some sense, all pinball machines are alike. They have various challenges — hit all the drop targets, complete each ramp and loop, explore every zone and hit the specials when they light up. There is a lot more to it than just keeping the ball in play, but that is the most essential skill. And you can't do that unless you understand how to work the flippers.

Only a piker uses both flippers at once. When used one at a time, as needed, the space between them is smaller than when both are triggered.

You can use the flippers to trap the ball, freezing play so you can get your bearings, or pass the ball from one flipper to the other, or take aim at the targets. Sometimes, when you flip them one after the other, you can save the ball from going down the drain, known as a slap save.

Also, because pinball involves physics, the tables are designed to be nudged, shifted and jammed to influence the motion of the ball — though not too much, or else the machine will tilt and the ball will end. One of the more controversial saves, the death save, involves giving the machine's right leg a kick when the ball goes down the right outlane. The kick will cause the ball to bounce against a post near the drain. Keep the right flipper engaged, and you may save your ball.

Against Brown, I use every trick in my book, nailing the skill shot of the plunger, rotating the lit lanes with my flipper to get bonus multipliers, backhanding the ball into side ramps and taking careful aim at the Hell's Bell. On my second ball I hit multiball, and use a strategy I devised years ago in a barroom where I spent dozens of hours mastering the Monster Bash machine: focusing on the field just in front of the flippers, concentrating more on keeping the balls in play than taking down targets. I rack up 15 million or so before the balls drain, but Brown, on his third play, sends the ball up through the left ramp eight times in a row, amassing almost 20 million for the effort, taking the game — but not the high score of the week.

Brown tells me that, back in the day, he honed his skills at the Putt Putt places on High Point Road and Battleground Avenue, and that he hit the machines at College Hill Sundries and New York Pizza before Lost Ark opened last year. He's put his high-score tag, UNC, on many of the machines here, including Banzai Run, Williams' 1988 groundbreaker, where he maxed out the scoreboard at 999,999.

But he hasn't hit yet on the machine in the corner, Arabian Knights, where the Grand Champion goes by the tag BRI, with a score of 65,195,890. That's me — I hit it almost a year ago, and the record still stands.

#### Postscript:

As I was writing this story on Friday afternoon, got a phone call in the office. It was Keith Brown. He wanted me to know he hit the AC/DC machine for 170 million, shattering the high-score of the week and taking the prize.