

Coaster was a thrill. Then came injuries

By Fedor Zarkhin

Six Flags Magic Mountain has long considered itself "The Thrill Capital of the World," a competitive title in a world of extreme amusement parks vying to be the biggest, baddest and most intense.

And the X2 ride has for years been the Valencia park's crown jewel, the first roller coaster in the world that spun riders 360 degrees in their seats.

"There's no other coaster quite like it," said Derek Perry, a spokesperson for the American Coaster Enthusiasts organization. "X2 is the one that people run to."

But X2 has come under close inspection after several lawsuits allege people were injured on the ride. Six Flags shut down X2 in July amid a state investigation into the coaster. The state agency that inspects amusement parks, Cal/OSHA, did not respond to questions about the investigation or when it might be complete because it's ongoing.

One mother who has been living with the grief of losing her son was "sickened" to hear that more injuries occurred this year, four years after her son died shortly after riding X2.

"It's so beyond anything that should ever happen," Anne Hawley said.

Hawley's son Christopher was 22 on June 23, 2022, when he and his brother rode X2, billed by the park as "a [rite] of passage for the ultimate daredevil." He had trouble walking immediately after getting off, then quickly lost consciousness. Doctors found severe brain bleeding. He died the next day, attributable to head trauma from a "park ride accident," according to the complaint, which cited a coroner's report.

The company that manufactured the trains for the ride said in court filings that the ride was tested after the incident and was found to be operating as intended.

The Hawley family sued Magic Mountain in 2023 and settled for an undisclosed amount last month.

Other lawsuits have claimed injuries similar to the one Hawley suffered.

Hilda Farias was 28 when she rode X2 in 2010 and developed a brain bleed that led to her death, according to court records.

Sheila Katerelos claimed in another suit she suffered a traumatic brain injury in 2020 after riding X2.

Lucy Alvarez claimed in a third suit she sustained a traumatic brain injury in 2021 after riding X2, causing her "great physical, mental and nervous pain and suffering."

Lawyers for the company that manufactured X2's trains cited a biomechanical engineering expert who concluded it couldn't have produced the kind of forces that would have caused any traumatic brain injury to Katerelos, according to a 2024 court filing.

The company also claimed the headrest padding was enough to protect her from brain injury. The trials in Katerelos' and Alvarez's cases are scheduled for next year.

CNN reported last month that X2 has been linked to more than a dozen reports of serious injuries and hospitalizations over the last two decades, including the deaths of Hawley and Farias.

The report said two people suffered brain hemorrhages in July after riding X2, requiring surgical intervention.

Six Flags did not respond to questions about the lawsuits or the history of reported injuries.

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A daring design

What made the ride unique when it opened was its design: The seats are on the side of the track, allowing riders' feet to dangle below or above them as their seat spins forward or backward. At the beginning, riders are taken up a slope while facing backward and, at the peak, their seats spin forward as they hurtle toward the ground headfirst.

The ride was supposed to be a public relations coup for its manufacturer, Arrow Dynamics. But it opened about six months late, according to a trade publication, and the costs bankrupted the company. Months after the ride opened in 2002, it had to be closed to repair design flaws. Then, in 2007, it was closed again to replace the trains with lighter ones.

Roller coaster aficionados stress that reported injuries need to be weighed against the thousands of riders who have been on X2 without incident. Perry said he has been on it several hundred times and believes it to be perfectly safe.

"I hope it reopens soon and we get to ride it again," Perry said. "I'll be first in line."

A coaster enthusiast who said he has ridden more than 2,600 coasters around the world, Martin Lewison said he wouldn't hesitate to ride X2 again despite the report of recent injuries.

But Lewison, an associate professor at Farmingdale State College and a Six Flags shareholder, acknowledged it is an "extreme" and "aggressive" roller coaster. As a seasoned rider, he said he has learned to ride "defensively," which on X2 means being careful to avoid hitting your head against the headrest as the seats spin forward and backward.

Anne Hawley has a different perspective.

"If a ride injures somebody, close it down and find out why," she said.

"If a ride kills somebody, don't start it up again."

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A history of thrills

Magic Mountain has a long history of innovation in the world of roller coasters. While Disneyland and Knott's Berry Farm played to families, Magic Mountain billed itself as the theme park for true thrills.

In the 1970s, it was the iconic Revolution, which thrilled riders with its full vertical loop. Then came Colossus, whose 100-foot drop and 60-mph speed was cutting-edge at the time. The 1990s brought the Viper, which officials described as "the tallest, fastest-looping steel roller coaster in the world" with vertical loops, corkscrews and a boomerang loop. Then came Batman and Riddler themed rides and a coaster named Goliath that featured a 235-foot free fall.

But the roller coaster world is competitive, and theme parks need to keep up with the latest technology.

By the 2000s, there were growing concerns about the potential health effects of all those thrills across the industry. A report by The Times in 2001 noted several studies suggested specific brain injuries were linked to thrill rides but noted the data were limited and inconclusive. That year, a Goliath rider died of a brain aneurysm. The Los Angeles County coroner concluded the ride did not cause the aneurysm "but only caused a rupture of a preexisting, severe and fragile aneurysm." Her family sued.

The company recently announced a new ride at Magic Mountain: the Thrill Glider.

Times theme park critic Todd Martens said it "combines a motorbike-like seating arrangement with suspended coaster technologies. Riders will board what the park is referring to 'hoverbikes,' essentially bike vehicles designed to simulate a flying sensation by being suspended from the track. Riders will be seated in a prone, face-forward position that will hang from the track above."

It's set to open in 2027.

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