

BUMPER BOATS FOR FUN AND PROFIT

By Peter F. Olesen, P.E.

When your guests walk up to your bumper boat pond and see others riding in your battery powered bumper boats on a crystal clear pond, chasing each other around an island, squirting each other with boat mounted squirt guns, they will want to join the fun. This has become a great impulse attraction when combined with miniature golf and go-karts. Note that we refer to boats as an impulse attraction rather than a destination or anchor attraction. The success of stand-alone bumper boat attractions has not been notable. However, when added as impulse attractions alongside miniature golf courses, we've seen boats bring revenues of 50% or more of what adjacent miniature golf courses that cost twice as much or often much more, to construct and occupy more than twice the ground area on the physical site. Similar results also occur when placed alongside go-kart tracks.

The advantage of bumper boats includes the provision of a ride attraction for parents with smaller children that do not want to bring them on go-karts. With the provision of chase channels and the inclusion of squirt guns on the battery powered boats, the attraction also becomes more entertaining, both as a participant and as a spectator event, thus further improving the total visit experience. For larger ponds we now add "Battle Zones" where coin operated shore mounted squirt guns can include spectators in the action as well. These areas are located so that more timid boaters can avoid the added soakings that may occur in the "zones."

A great warm weather companion is the addition of a WaterWars (water filled balloon catapult attraction) unit adjacent to the pond area to increase the warm weather entertainment experience at a moderate cost and small footprint...

Modern bumper boat pond design, coupled with the battery-powered boats now on the market has taken the industry to newfound success. They are no longer the dirty and unappealing oil slick covered boats and ponds of the 90s. Gasoline powered bumper boats had turned into a lagging industry due to unimaginative square pond design and the ever-present oil slick on the water, pond sides and on the boats themselves. Many early bumper boat ponds were actually natural ponds with no filtration of the water. Worse yet, visibility in many ponds was very poor and some had extreme depths which introduced serious potentials for drowning. The lack of good filtration systems and creative pond design did nothing to encourage people to ride in the boats. In the past it wasn't unusual to see bumper boats and pond edges covered with oil. , it was common to see oil slicks on the water and algae growing on the surface. As a result bumper boats were not a success in terms of revenues and many facilities filled them in and constructed alternate attractions in their place.

Electric bumper boats can operate in a depth of 3 feet, so there is no reason to have ponds deeper than approximately 3 to 3 1/2 feet with a freeboard of one foot. Battery powered bumper boats can operate in clear, swimming pool quality water, as they do not generate oil slicks. It is therefore easy to design relatively inexpensive water filtering and treatment packages that provide clear safe water in the ponds. Common approaches today include utilizing either a salt water system or a chlorine treatment systems. This ability to operate in clear water has allowed boat manufacturers to incorporate squirt guns on the boats as well as establishing shore based firing points to increase the entertainment value of the attraction.

By eliminating the combustion engined boats of yesteryear, guests can now ride in bumper boats without worrying about oil stains on clothing and being sprayed with less than sanitary water has brought the attraction back into favor at many facilities.

Beginning in 1993, Peter F. Olesen and Associates, Inc. (now Entertainment Concepts, Inc. ECI) created a new pond configuration that incorporated flexible fiberglass pond liners into a free form shaped pond with islands that created chase channels for increased entertainment value. The introduction of a flexible fiberglass pond wall allowed ECI to design individual docking pockets to make loading and unloading of the boats easier and a lot safer, with the boats being held against a curved pocket to eliminate boats from swinging out and possibly dunking guests.

By incorporating the new battery powered boats and charging systems into their free form bumper boat pond designs, ECI turned the bumper boat pond into a very successful attraction at many of the family entertainment center facilities (FECs) designed by the firm. With the combination of chasing each other around the islands and shooting water streams at each other, the bumper boat pond has been elevated to an attraction that has a strong entertainment value for both children and adults.

In 2013 as result of requests for larger fleets of bumper boats we expanded the concept of chase channels to include a separate “combat zone” where boats could compete with land based water cannons operated by friends and others. This concept was added to ponds in operation in Vietnam and Iowa and will soon be included at other FECs.

As an attraction, bumper boats have a high through-put, coupled with a lower staff to guest requirement, require a small footprint and have reasonable costs when compared with other attractions with similar through put. It is not however a good stand alone attraction. Its power is in providing a strong impulse attraction when placed adjacent to miniature golf and go-karts in an outdoor environment. People drawn to the facility by these attractions become impulse riders.

Most bumper boats can seat one adult and one or two toddlers, making it an ideal attraction next to a go-kart track, enabling parents to take toddlers on a ride other than go-karts. Bumper boats serve as a good birthday party and group package attraction and should be marketed to groups as well as single riders.

Properly designed bumper boat ponds are safe facilities when staffed properly. The water is in the range of 33 to 36 inches deep and filtered. This means that staff can be in the water immediately if anyone should fall out of a boat. To facilitate faster emergency response, ECI designed ponds have a safety walk all around the pond to facilitate the attendant getting to the far side much faster than wading across. With the clear water, you can see a dime on the bottom. Our ponds are illuminated at 20-foot candles on the water surface to provide a safe night time environment.

For both safety and security, the entire pond is protected by a four-foot high chain link or childproof fence with the only access being through entrance and exit gates controlled by the pond attendant. Depending on the volume of people in line a typical pond can be operated by one to three staff members.

As with any outdoor attraction, the placement of a bumper boat pond within the overall master plan of a facility takes careful consideration to assure it is exposed for maximum guest usage. Failure to do so will result in lost revenues.

If you are planning a new facility or considering the addition of a new attraction to an existing facility you should definitely consider the addition of battery powered bumper boats in a well-designed pond. If you have further questions, you can contact the author at 847-561-7013 or by e-mail at peteolesen@yahoo.com. Visit our web page at fecdesigners.com

May all of your experiences in the family entertainment industry be enjoyable and profitable.

Peter is president of Entertainment Concepts, Inc. (formerly Peter F. Olesen and Associates, Inc.). He is a licensed professional engineer in numerous states. He founded the firm in 1984 and in the ensuing years has been responsible for the development of more than 490 separate family entertainment industry projects located in 43 States, Angola, Brunei, Canada (Alberta, British Columbia, Ontario and Quebec), Cuba (Guantanamo Bay), Kazakhstan, Mexico. Puerto Rico, Saudi Arabia and Vietnam. These projects have spanned initial concepts, feasibility studies, assistance in developing business plans, final design and preparation of contract plans and specifications, construction layout and related services for both new projects and existing facility renovations and modifications.

He has made presentations at a wide range of industry seminars, including the annual International Associations of Amusement Parks and Attractions annual Attractions Expo, Fun Expo, Leisure Expo, Kart Expo, The State of Ohio bi-annual Kart Safety Seminars and 42 sessions of Foundations Entertainment University Seminars. He also has been a member and active participant in many professional engineering and entertainment industry associations.

Copyright 2017 Entertainment Concepts, Inc.