



For the

thrill

of it

Riding roller coasters is a way of life for self-described adrenaline junkie **Tom Nickerson**.

“I rode my first roller coaster probably when I was 5 or 6,” the Hopkins, MN Branch 2942 member said. “It’s a release. You get an adrenaline rush without bodily harm. It’s almost a drug for me.”

If he doesn’t ride for a while, he added, he “gets grumpy.”

Though most amusement parks currently are closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Nickerson said that under normal circumstances he goes to his local park, Valleyfair in Shakopee, at least once a week and usually as much as two to three times weekly.

After finishing his route, he’d head just down the road from the Eden Prairie post office to get his roller coaster fix. In addition, he added, “I spend almost every one of my non-scheduled days at an amusement park.”

The two-year letter carrier said that some of his co-workers are aware of his hobby. “They don’t understand it, but a big hunk of ‘em know,” he said. “I’ve tried to get them to call me ‘Coaster’ around the office. It’s stuck a little bit.”

Nickerson has ridden 405 unique

coasters. “I keep very good track of them,” he said. He notes that some of the rides are cloned in parks (such as at all of the Six Flags theme parks) around the country, but each roller coaster counts. He’s been to more than 70 amusement parks in all.

The carrier is a member of the American Coaster Enthusiasts (ACE), the world’s largest organized club of roller coaster lovers with more than 6,000 members. The group organizes events all over the world, including in Japan and the United Kingdom.

Nickerson serves as an ACE North Central regional representative for Minnesota, Iowa, Nebraska and the Dakotas. He usually helps to put on at least two events in the region a year. “We don’t have a ton of coasters around us,” he said.

The region has 100 members, with 15 regularly going to the Minnesota events. “You get to know them really well,” he said. He added that the next closest region, in the Chicago area, has about 300 members, and he tries to attend events there as well.

When Nickerson goes outside of his chapter, he is able to go to as many as four big events a year, usually including ACE’s flagship events such



Top: ACE’s Coaster Con
Above: Nickerson (front) and his dad ride a roller coaster.

as Coaster Con (which is one week long, with 18-hour days) and three-day weekend events such as Preservation Con, along with a seasonal spring or summer con. The locations for these flagship events rotate. In 2019, ACE held events 48 weeks out of the year.

The carrier says the members generally get a good deal at parks, with special perks such as private ride times

Right: Nickerson on a tunnel walk tour of the Voyage at Holiday World in Santa Claus, IN

Below: The carrier's tattoo



and a catered meal.

Nickerson always looks forward to trips with ACE; so far, he has attended parks all over the United States, and in Toronto, with fellow members.

Before the pandemic hit, he was excited about a planned ACE vacation to Italy to ride roller coasters. When the trip gets rescheduled, "I will be on it," he said.

Nickerson loves the sense of community of ACE. "It's like-minded people doing something similar to you," he said. "The knowledge of everyone in ACE is fantastic."

While the carrier says that he is not a "stats guy," he adds that many members can compare notes about rides' speeds, heights and other factors. And though his 400-plus coasters milestone sounds impressive, he says some members have thousands under their belts.

Nickerson finds that when there is a large get-together, instead of riding coasters continuously, you'll see a lot of people "riding the bench" because they want to catch up with their coaster enthusiast friends.

"The only time you get to see them is these events," he said. "We enjoy each other's company. I've got friends all over—Massachusetts, Texas, Chicago and all the enthusiasts in the Minnesota area. It's an escape for many people."

The carrier also wears a constant reminder of his love of the group. "I've got an ACE logo tattooed on one arm," he says.

Nickerson explained that many people plan vacations around something in particular, like a cruise or beach. "I plan my vacations around amusement parks," the carrier said. He added, "The roller coaster gets me there," and then other attractions lead him to stay and round out his itinerary, with side trips such as brewery and winery tours.

The carrier also says that the beauty of these trips is that you can return to a

park years later because you will have a new experience there. "The hobby never stops," he said. "They're always building more."

Nickerson says that he has "hit 80 to 90 percent of the big parks in the U.S.," but that there will always more to ride. The rest that he has not been to—yet—are smaller family amusement parks, he explained.

A big debating point for enthusiasts when it comes to roller coasters is whether wooden or steel coasters are better. "I'm a steel enthusiast, but wood is coming along nicely," Nickerson said. "I really like woods, but the problem is they are rickety."

Up until the last decade, wood coasters were generic, the carrier says—up, down, a few turns. There are now hybrids of wood and steel, in which steel is added to older wooden rides. "They're really starting to modernize them, which makes them more fun," Nickerson said.

But does he have a favorite roller coaster?

"When you've been on over 400, it's hard to pick a favorite," he said, adding that Iron Rattler in Six Flags Fiesta Texas in San Antonio is a candidate. The park is built in a former quarry, so the coaster plummets down an actual cliff. "That's real close to my top tops," he said.

His other favorite parks are Dollywood in Tennessee, Silver Dollar City in Missouri, Kennywood in Pennsylvania and Canada's Wonderland in Toronto.

Though his hobby is on hold, virtual events are taking place. "All the parks are trying to stay top of mind for people," he says. That has included providing coloring pages and releasing park food recipes, such as the Disney parks' famous Dole whips.

"I have partaken [of] some of those



activities," Nickerson said, adding that he planned to participate in the virtual "Coaster Con at Home."

But mainly, he's looking at his calendar, planning dates and hoping for the best. He has booked two trips to amusement parks in Oklahoma and Indiana this summer.

The carrier monitors his news feeds for any information about reopenings. "I'm waiting anxiously for any news," he said, adding that ACE's publication, *RollerCoaster!*, is an important source for him. "I'm reading through that to keep my jitters at bay," he said.

Nickerson says that with high-adrenaline activities like skydiving and bungee jumping, the high is short-lived. When you go to an amusement park and ride roller coasters, the adrenaline rush lasts all day.

"There are very few thrills that can compare," he said. **PR**