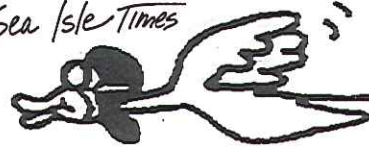




Sea Isle Times



Excellence is not a skill. It is an attitude.
~ Ralph Marston

Swashbuckling Adventures at By Ashley Mateo



Miniature golf is about more than eighteen holes at Pirate Island Adventure Golf. It's about entertainment, building family connections and creating lasting memories.

"We want everybody to have fun," says owner Mark Benevento. "It's really that simple. It's family fun."

With hanging rope bridges and waterfalls, animated pirates and a nearly life-size wooden ship, Pirate Island is all about the full

experience. Designed to entertain customers from toddlers to grandparents – especially when they're playing together – the miniature golf course's fun yet challenging layout features a universal theme that brings out the kid in everyone.

Founded in 1994 by Benevento and partner Pat Croce, who also own Greate Bay Golf Club in Somers Point, Pirate Island has become one of the summer's main attractions.

Pirate Island, which now has locations in Sea Isle City, Ocean City and Avalon, Benevento—who says he has spent years exploring

miniature golf courses in his search to have Pirate Island become "the best adventure golf in the country" – has created an environment where people can let their imaginations roam free.

"When it comes to golf, [Benevento]'s the expert," says partner Pat Croce. "He knows the holes, the layout, he could see in a blank slate what 18 holes would look like."

Benevento's love of golf dates back to when he was a child, experiencing the courses from a customer's point of view. As an adult, he left North Jersey to become a blackjack dealer in Atlantic City. Soon after, he began a small real estate business, which led him to buy a spot on the Ocean City boardwalk for his first business – the Cannoli Corner.

"From that, I had the opportunity to open up a restaurant," he says. "Then I realized the labor and the food cost of a restaurant – it's a tough business. I decided to tear it down and put up those large rocks and waterfalls: the ultimate adventure golf course."

That first effort on the Ocean City boardwalk was followed by Congo Falls, three miniature golf courses that feature the early stages of what Benevento was capable of building.

When Croce moved next door to Benevento sixteen years ago, Benevento

finally found a partner who could help bring his love of golf closer to home. A friendship quickly developed between the two and Croce expressed his fascination with Benevento's miniature golf courses in Ocean City. He told him to count him in if Benevento ever decided to open a course in Avalon.

"Pat [Croce] and I have been friends for a long time," Benevento remembers. "We were taking a ride one day and we started discussing his passion for pirates and my passion for adventure or anything having to do with golf. I told him about a site I saw down in Avalon and back in the summer of 1994, that became Pirate Island."

"Mark was very adamant and specific about the golf experience," says Croce. "I was more leaning towards the creative experience, and together it created one dynamite miniature



Alyxus Good of Vincentown, NJ eyes up a putt at Pirate Island while mom, Janice and dad, Scott and Janice look on.

Conservation is the state of harmony
between man and land. ~ Aldo Leopold

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Swashbuckling Adventures at

golf family experience.”

Croce may have been new to the golf business, but he is the expert when it comes to pirates.

“That’s been since I was a little kid.” He recalls, “always carving the skull and crossbones into my rulers in grade school.”

Eventually, Croce amassed one of the largest piratical collections of 17th century artifacts in the world and decided to put it all under one roof – leading to the creation of the Pirate Soul Museum in Key West, Florida in January 2005. Next door is his restaurant, the Rum Barrel, which opened a year later.

“Pirates, they’ll live forever,” he says of his obsession. “The swashbuckling nature, the adventure – everyone has a pirate soul. They want to be adventurous, bold and daring.”

At Pirate Island, Benevento and Croce cater to the hidden pirate in each of their customers. Everything at Pirate Island is designed to enhance the customer’s experience, from the waterfalls to the footprints on the walkway, even the authentic-looking locks on the doors.

“We want it to be a memory, not just a golf experience,” says Croce. “You go to the shore and you want to experience memories. Everything is just little tricks along the way that make you remember ‘I’ve got to go back there again.’ We want it to be in Avalon. Sea

Isle and Ocean City a place where every summer, families come down and that’s got to be something on their To Do list.”

Each year, Benevento and Croce continue to add to each location of Pirate Island in order to create the best experience possible for their customers. The use of animatronics has also become an integral part of the miniature golf experience. The final hole at the Pirate Island in Avalon is a perfect example – over the course of five years, Benevento developed and obtained a patent for the free game machine that either spits out a free ticket or squirts the customer with water, depending on how they putt the ball.

“I was always fascinated by Disney-like animatronics,” explains Croce, “so I turned him on to a friend who was good at creating them. That was the start. We put together a little scene – first one scene, then another scene, then it expanded.”

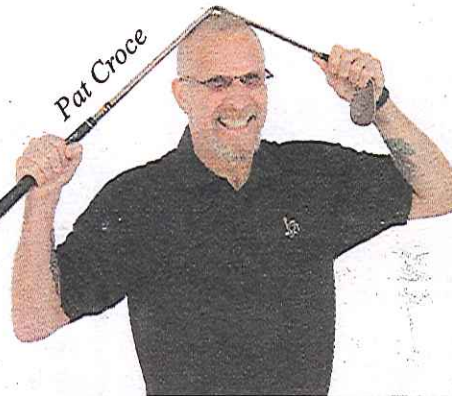
“We put fog, then we put animation, then we have talking, then interaction,” says Benevento. “It’s awesome going there and experiencing the fun our customers are having and thinking about how to make that experience better each year.”

Benevento and Croce also stress the importance of making each location look brand new every day. In the past thirteen years, the courses have won awards from

Cape May County’s Annual Beautification Award in 1995 to the Beachcomber’s Best of the Shore Award in 2000 to the Press of Atlantic City’s Best of the Press Award for Miniature Golf since 2004.

“We stress customer service all the time,” says Croce. “The quality of construction and attention to detail, the service-oriented staff – that’s vitally important to us.”

“Miniature golf is a chance for families to play and enjoy together,” he continues. “Some people are here for a weekend, a week, a month – Pirate Island gives them a chance to do something with their families that they don’t usually do. Life is short, so why not make memories?”



IF YOU GO:

33rd Street & Landis Avenue, Sea Isle City
(609) 263-8344

9th & Haven Ave, Ocean City
(609) 398-9938

<http://www.pirateislandgolf.com>

Sea Isle City Hours:

9 a.m. - 11:30 p.m. (in season)

Hours in the fall:

Labor Day Monday 9 a.m. – 11 p.m.
Friday Sep 7 5 p.m. – 10 p.m.
Saturday Sep 8 10 a.m. – 10 p.m.
Sunday Sep 9 10 a.m. – 10 p.m.



1132 Boardwalk, Ocean City
(609) 398-1211

Mon-Sun (Sep 3-9) 9am-11pm
Mon-Sun (Sep 10-16) 10am-10pm
Mon-Fri (Sep 17-21) 12pm- 8pm
Sat-Sun (Sep 22-23) 10am- 9pm
Weekends thru October