

COASTER CRAWLERS



Title: Coaster Crawlers

Logline: A crew of wild guys race across the country, painting one towering Roller Coaster after another, under massive pressure to finish each job on time and under budget.

Relative info: There are 702 Roller Coasters in the United States. Every 5-8 years each one needs to be repainted in the off season (September to March). This highly specialized task is done by independent teams. Time frames to prepare & paint range from 4 weeks to 3 months for a coaster like “The Beast” in Ohio. The companies doing this demanding work compete against each other to win the jobs and then against the clock to finish painting before the park season starts.

Basic premise: Not afraid of climbing hundreds of feet in the air, the crew race to get one roller coaster after another painted before the season starts. Hard work leads to hard play and with pressure mounting as the deadline approaches, the drinking, personal problems, girls, long hours and late nights take their toll.



Each crew owner (sub contractor) is responsible for bidding on jobs and making paint decisions. But his work starts long before a coat of paint is applied. He must estimate the cost and time involved just by looking at the size, current condition and type of coaster to be painted.

Any miscalculation can result in bankruptcy for his company, so there is no margin for error. The terrain surrounding the coaster is also a huge factor and in many cases, the coaster has been positioned near water, dense foliage or in the most inaccessible area of the park.

The crew owner must then consider the coating to be used for that type of structure. Epoxies, polyurethanes, acrylic latexes, oils, transparent and semi-transparent stains and silicon alkyds are commonly used. Wooden coasters need to be sealed to prevent cracks, and insect infestations, while steel coasters require more equipment. Each coaster truly is a different beast with it's own set of unique challenges.

The crew leader is responsible for getting the actual job done, determining what size lifts are needed, how many guys are needed to perform the gruelling work, and how best to

deal with uncertain weather conditions.

For one crew member, Ronnie, fresh from Louisiana and never having seen snow before, his first coaster painting job was Firehawk at Kings Island, OH. While up 90 feet in the air sanding the coaster in 20 degree weather with wind and snow increasing, Ronnie yelled out "is this a blizzard!?" to the men below. After the laughing had subsided, he was told to keep sanding.

"I can't tell you the times we have pressure washed hundreds of feet in the air, hauling hundreds of feet of hose around in 20 degrees or below weather with snow and rain. They make paint that can be applied in as low as 20 degree weather and you better believe they would have us do it."

Before any actual painting begins, the crew must prepare the structure by degreasing the track then sandblasting, high pressure cleaning, scraping, and priming the structure. It takes a long time to get to the high and unusual spots and special equipment must be used. Walk boards, boom lifts, electronic scaffolding and a cage attached by a cable called 'the spider,' are all used.

All parks have in-house maintenance and painting teams, but big jobs like coasters need outside help to decrease costs and meet off season deadlines. Only a small crew travel to each park, the rest of the men are hired locally and depending on their location they may or may not be used to working under such pressure. There's always issues with the hiring, training and firing of the local workers. Some have to be let go for various reasons and personality conflicts often arise.

Safety and OSHA is of the utmost importance and the painting company requires special insurance for large structures as well as workers compensation and general liability. Every man is connected to the structure by a safety harness and a life line.

But things don't always go to plan. While painting Invertigo at Kings Island, OH, one of the crew was painting from an 85ft boom when one of the axles broke. He was shaken around the basket and everything had to be put on hold. It was a bad day for the bosses.

There have been also guys not paying attention and not tied off to the basket of the boom who have walked right off and suffered injuries. An ex crew leader, Robby was in a spider when the spider fell out from under him. Luckily he was tied off.

Ronnie also had a close call at the Vortex at Kings Island, OH. He was climbing around the chain hill, stood on a big glob of grease and started to slip off. Luckily his friend Whoop was right there and caught him before he fell off head first.

The color must convey fun and speed and the techniques used to paint include brushing, rolling and spraying and each job specifies a certain mil thickness of paint. Only when this has been measured by a gauge, can the quality of the job be verified.

To top it all off, finding the work in the first place is just as difficult as the actual task, with word of mouth referrals being paramount. All it takes is one positive or negative comment and the fortunes of both the company, the crew and their families back home can change dramatically.

With every aspect of being a Coaster Crawler on display, this is one wild ride.

WGAE Reg.
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