

A Tribute to Ted Zale, by Greg Kmiec

Ted Zale was a paradox: working for Ted Zale was one thing, - having him as a mentor was quite another.

Many players of pinball have not even heard of Ted Zale. Zale's career of designing games for Bally spanned the years from around 1963 (Cue Tease, his first original design) to 1973 (Nip-It). Perhaps Zale's most innovative games were Capersville (1966) and Fireball (1972).

Now herein lies the paradox: take one part "General Patton" and one part "Wall Disney" and you get Ted Zale. Zale was a crusty old man when I first met him, and he aged after that. He demanded perfection from himself and his stall. There were many times that his playfield drawings resembled Swiss cheese through multiple erasures (remember this was before AutoCad). His playfield adjustments sometimes consisted of moving entire sections of a playfield just one-eighth of an inch to effect proper ball action.

Let me tell you a famous Story about Zale. Pinball playfields usually had two distinct Sets of plastics (or butyrates), one up-per and one lower. The upper set usually displayed the artwork, and the lower set was usually clear and steered the pinball to different areas on the playfield. The technology was such at that time, that technicians would copy and paste the designer's plastic drawing onto a larger blank piece of plastic, then cut and hand file/sand the piece to the outline of the drawing. Well this is where the fun began: when presented a finished" piece by either a rookie or veteran technician, Zale would first visually inspect it, then close his eyes and run a Fingertip over the outlined edge of the piece to feel for bumps or nicks. The most minuscule hint of a bump or nick sent the piece flying into the nearest waste container. His instructions to the then speechless techni

cian were to try again, from the beginning. This has happened to me and I have seen it happen to others.

I have established that Zale was a demanding "General Patton" type of boss. Yet, he was a terrific "Walt Disney" type of mentor. He was an inventor and an innovator, and as such, embraced a futuristic "newness" way of designing and thinking, which he passed on to his workers. His "newness" way of thinking led to several of his great designs of asymmetrical playfields (which were not common at the time), which incorporated many innovative features (Capersville's Zipper Flippers, Fireball's spinning disks and captive Multi-Ball adPance). I remember one day, how Zale was showing his technicians how to design a quick game: he pasted copies of the top third of one playfield, the middle third of another, and the bottom third of yet another onto a hanging metallic blank playfield frame. With the addition and/or movement of a few pieces (targets and posts with magnets), he had designed Capersville.

Zale's mentoring went beyond playfield design. Zale designed at a prolific pace. When a new whitewood game was to be reviewed for a production run at Bally, Zale sometimes would present Bill O'Donnell Sr. with literally five to TEN whitewood games to choose from. I remember several times when Zale and O'Donnell Sr. judged the live of possible whitewood games. They either "passed" into production or "killed" into waste all of the presented whitewood games at that time. Zale then set about designing even more whitewood games for the next evaluation.

Ted Zale taught me a lot. He taught me the basics of pinball design. He taught me to be creative and think into the future. Yet, he taught me never to lose the sight and feel of what makes a good, simple, fun pinball design. He taught me to be demanding of myself. For all of this, I will euer be grateful.

Later, several other pinball companies tried to patent "Zipper Flippers" and "Multi-Ball" many years after Zale designed them

--Greg Kmiec

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