

# State investigation reveals new details about death of 14-year-old boy who fell from amusement park ride in Orlando, Florida

**Alex Johnson**  
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New details have come to light in the death of Tyre Sampson, the 14-year-old boy who fell to his death last Thursday night at the ICON Park in Orlando, Florida, while riding the Orlando FreeFall drop tower. The harrowing incident was captured on cell phone video and has since gone viral, triggering an outpouring of outrage and demands for answers into how such a tragedy could have ever happened.

On Tuesday, a preliminary accident report filed by the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services' (FDACS) Fair Rides division described the mechanics of the 430-foot tower. The report confirmed that the seat restraint was locked in place and that the ride did not malfunction. However, it is not clear if Sampson fit the contours of the seat or if the bracket had fit properly.

The FDACS report reads: "When the magnets engaged [to slow the ride], the patron came out of the seat. Harness was still in a down and locked position when the ride stopped." Three employees at the park are listed in the report as witnesses.

A significant portion of the department's preliminary investigation includes information drawn from the manual of the manufacturer of FreeFall, Funtime Thrill Rides. According to the company's manual, which was posted online by the FDACS, the maximum weight allowed for riding on the Orlando FreeFall is listed as 286 pounds. Sampson's football coach, Brandon Gregory, said the teen weighed 320 pounds, far above the recommended weight for boarding the drop tower.

The specifications in the ride's Operations & Maintenance Manual highlights the limitations for "large guests" riding the attraction. "Be careful when seeing if large guests fit into the seats," the manual

reads. "Check that they fit within the contours of the seat and the bracket fits properly. If this is not so, do not let this person ride."

The revelations from the FDACS report confirms suspicions taken from testimonials and photos from the incident highlighting how Sampson was too large to remain in his seat. A photo taken moments before the ride took off into the air showed Sampson's seat harness not being locked all the way down like the riders adjacent to him.

Tyre's grieving father, Yarnell Sampson, said that his son began to panic as the ride began to operate as he instantly sensed something was wrong with his seat restraint. The younger Sampson shared an apprehensive message with his friends seated next to him. "When the ride took off, that's when he was feeling uncomfortable," Yarnell said.

"He was like 'this thing is moving,' you know what I'm saying. And he was like 'what's going on?'" Yarnell told WOFL-TV. Yarnell explained that his son told his friends, "I don't know, man, if I don't make it down, safely, can you please tell my momma and daddy that I love them."

The elder Sampson detailed further, "For him to say something like that, he must have felt something." Pointing to possible recklessness of the ride's operator and park owner, who allowed the teen to enter FreeFall despite his size, Yarnell declared, "This particular ride decided: 'Yeah, we can take you, get on,' when nobody else would allow him to get on the ride." He continued, "I wish I was there to tell him I love him, that I'm sorry. For him to lose his life. So young, and I wish it was me."

An 8th grade middle schooler and aspiring pro athlete

attending City Garden Montessori from Berkeley, Missouri, Tyre Sampson was visiting Orlando to train with his football team and coaches. The training was taking place through STL Bad Boyz Football, a nationally ranked youth program. Nicknamed “Big Tick”—short for “Big Ticket”—by family and friends, Tyre was well known as a promising football prospect as many believed he would achieve an NFL career.

“He was 6’5”, 325 pounds at 14 years old, playing left tackle, so that’s a prime position. Plus, he had an NFL mentor, so he was definitely on the right path,” Yarnell said in an interview with KMOV4. According to Coach Gregory, Tyre was seen as a gifted athlete with the potential to earn a scholarship to a Division 1 football program. This fall after leaving middle school the teen was set to play football at East St. Louis High School, one of the best programs in Illinois.

Demanding that those culpable in the death of his son be held responsible, Yarnell Sampson added, “I want to know what happened to my son. I want to know why my son is in a white bag, having to get shipped back home. He walked there. Why can’t he walk back? I want answers from everybody. Who all was involved in that?”

Officials at ICON Park said both the FreeFall amusement ride and Orlando Slingshot, another attraction designed by Funtime Thrill Rides, have been indefinitely shut down. Tyre’s cousin Shay Johnson launched a petition on Monday, March 28, calling for the ride to be permanently closed. Johnson told Fox3, “My cousin lost his life over this ride. I don’t feel it’s safe and feel it should be shut down before someone else’s family has to go through what we are going through.”

Since Thursday night’s tragedy, there has been a developing effort to scapegoat the attendants and other employees manning the ride while absolving Funtime Thrill Rides and the operator of its amusement rides, the Slingshot Group of Companies, of any criminal liability. Representatives of the companies have seized on the FDACS report to prove no deficiency was found in the design and operation involved in FreeFall.

John Stine, the director of marketing and sales for the Slingshot Group of Companies, the owner and operator of Funtime Thrill Rides in Florida, told News 6 there was a height requirement for Orlando FreeFall. Stine admitted, however, that there “really is no weight

restriction unless you cannot fit in the seat.”

In the viral video of Sampson’s death, attendants can be heard asking whether or not a light on the seat was on to indicate the seat was secure. According to the manufacturer’s manual, green lights on the seat’s panel indicate the restraints were closed, no lights indicate the restraints were open, and a red light indicates the restraints are faulty.



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