

Autopsy reveals 14-year-old died of blunt force trauma, other injuries after fatal fall from Orlando, Florida ride

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24 June 2022

Earlier this month the final autopsy report into the death of 14-year-old Tyre Sampson was publicized and confirmed the teen's cause of death after taking a fatal plunge from the Orlando, Florida FreeFall amusement park ride on March 24. The autopsy came from the Orange County Medical Examiner's Office, affirming that Sampson died of blunt force trauma to his head and body.

The chief medical examiner determined the teen suffered facial fractures, internal and external abrasions, lacerations and numerous other injuries. The most notable part of the report was the conclusion that Tyre was almost 100 pounds over the ride's suggested weight limit. The manufacturer's manual for the ride suggested an upper limit of around 290 pounds, but Sampson stood more than six feet tall and weighed 383 pounds.

The autopsy examination substantiates a forensic report conducted in April by Quest Engineering and Failure Analysis, an engineering firm that was hired to investigate the accident at ICON Park, which found that the ride operator had manually manipulated Sampson's seat, causing a severe error in the seat's safety sensors.

Sampson's death, according to the forensic report, was caused by a manual mis-adjustment of the ride's seat harness that altered the seat's sensor, which both improperly satisfied the ride's safety mechanism and widened the opening between Sampson's seat and safety harness, thus allowing Sampson to slip through.

Although the autopsy investigation ruled the death was an accident, an attorney for Tyre's mother, Nekia Dodd, told the *Washington Post* "no one could have survived this preventable fall from over a hundred feet in the air at that speed." The ride operator, Florida-based LLC Slingshot Group and its subsidiary Orlando Eagle Drop Slingshot LLC, have faced wide public condemnation and calls for criminal accountability for recklessly abandoning safety protocols and endangering the lives of passengers. Dodd's attorney, Michael Haggard, said in his statement, "the negligence in this case is un rebuttable."

The engineering firm's report was a part of an ongoing state investigation being overseen by the Florida Department of

Agriculture and Consumer Services. The FDACS and state authorities have not publicly revealed who precisely it was that directed the manual adjustment of Sampson's seat.

Orlando FreeFall's operations were immediately suspended after Sampson's death. The ride was previously advertised as the "world's tallest free-standing drop tower, raising passengers more than 400 feet above the ground and then drop[ing] them." Sampson, a gifted athlete with plans to begin high school in the fall, was visiting the Orlando area from Missouri over spring break and traveled to ICON Park with friends. Protests emerged after the teen's death along with an outpouring of sympathy online.

Dodd, along with Tyre's father, Yarnell Sampson, joined the chorus over demands that Orlando FreeFall be permanently torn down. Personal injury attorney and lawyer for Yarnell, Benjamin Crump, told reporters at a press conference that the autopsy "confirmed everything we suspected." Yarnell said he expected there would be a permanent memorial for Sampson at ICON Park but found none when he traveled there. Crump also noted that the Park was expected to erect a memorial but that there was "no evidence [Yarnell's] son ever died there."

Upon visiting ICON Park, Yarnell wrote the words "Tyre Sampson" and "Death Trap" on a barrier surrounding the Orlando FreeFall at the Park. He spoke on Monday following the release last week of his autopsy reports and denounced the ride companies for their gross negligence and profit-seeking. Responding to the removal of the memorial honoring his son, Yarnell said, "I just wanted to know, did the people know that a young man actually died right here? It blew my mind that 8 out of 10 I asked did not know. They had no clue."

"The reason why we're here," Yarnell noted at the press conference, "is to make sure this same situation doesn't happen later down the road. A \$22.00 seatbelt could have saved my son's life. They let him die, it sounds like a suicide trap. That's why I wrote on the wall a 'death trap.'" Condemning the executives who run both companies, Yarnell said, "I just want to know these CEOs, they have kids as well, would they want their kids to be treated like this? Me and my son's mother deserve a public apology and I have gotten none of that." He

continued, “I feel like they’re trying to sweep it under the rug, to make it seem like this thing is business as usual, profit over safety, let’s get some money and let’s get another kid to get on this ride again so he can die next time.”

Trevor Arnold, a representative of Orlando Slingshot, told WFLA on the removal of the community made memorial, “We have been coordinating with representative of Tyre’s family to return items from the memorial area to them, and we will continue to do so in the future.” Thus far, Sampson’s parents have filed wrongful death lawsuits against both the operator and manufacturer, Funtime Thrill Rides. However, no other action has been taken against the amusement ride corporations besides the pending state investigation.

The noticeable indifference of part of park authorities to the harrowing incident and Sampson’s grieving family is one element of the profit-driven and corrupt nature of the amusement industry nationwide which rakes in billions of dollars annually at the expense of ride safety. The most popular amusement parks and thrill rides are virtually exempt from any serious enforcement of regulatory standards on their operations, while whatever punishment is doled out, if they are given at all, amount to wrist-slap fines for the most egregious safety violations and accidents.

This has resulted in thousands of riders falling victim each year to dangerously constructed rides and negligent safety measures. The US Consumer Product Safety Commission, which collects data on incidents involving amusement park rides but does not regulate them, said in March that the most recent numbers showed an annual average of 34,700 injuries associated with amusement attractions, including waterslides, from 2017 to 2019.

In 2020, 12,400 injuries associated with amusement rides were reported by hospital emergency departments. The staggering number for 2020 came despite the widescale closures of amusement parks because of the coronavirus pandemic. Since 2018, at least 15 deaths have been associated with amusement park attractions, according to the agency.

It’s entirely possible that any outcome from the state investigation will heavily water-down or whitewash the culpability of the ride companies, which already received uncritical approval from authorities last year when Orlando FreeFall was first unveiled. The thrill ride had reportedly passed an initial inspection performed by the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS) in December 2021. The three-page report noted no deficiencies had been found in the ride and no further details were given on the ride’s mechanics or recommendations for operation.

The fact that Orlando Slingshot was rubber stamped with such ease at its initial inspection exposes the efforts of FDACS officials and various Democratic Party politicians to place all accountability for Sampson’s tragic death on the ride companies and points to inadequate testing and inspection protocols.

According to the FDACS website, state officials are only required to inspect permanent amusement rides once a year. The website states that “the owner/operator is responsible for inspecting the amusement ride prior to opening each day of operation,” but does not make clear if daily inspections are even required. There is no mentioning of guidelines or rules in place to ensure sufficient training for each employee authorized to operate, assemble and conduct maintenance on rides or ensure that ride operations fall in accordance with manufacturer’s standards.

To date, no measures have been implemented to place restrictions or adopt renewed inspections on other amusement rides associated with either Slingshot Group of Companies or Funtime Thrill Rides. The Australian-based Funtime Thrill Rides has at least a dozen amusement rides in Florida. All the rides are owned, operated or advertised by the Slingshot Group.

At Monday’s press conference, Democratic State Representative Geraldine Thompson announced a bill to be introduced in the state’s next legislative session to “take into account the safety record of any company that wants the operate a ride of this nature” before a permit is issued for the ride’s operation. The likelihood of such a bill placing real limitations on dangerous rides are marginal, since “taking into account” a company’s safety record does not guarantee that the company’s proposal will be rejected.

Moreover, it is more likely that any laws or statutes introduced will be saturated with exceptions and loopholes that tailor to the profit-driven motives of the companies in an environment where the amusement industry is already notoriously unregulated. Agriculture Commissioner and Democrat Nikki Fried has flatly rejected all calls for the Orlando Freefall to be torn down until the FDACS investigation is finished. She told reporters Wednesday, “[Based on the results], we’ll have to make a determination based on what I have the power to do.”

Although Fried indicated that authorities could not commit to action of any kind until her agency completes its investigation, a signal that Orlando Slingshot Group could resume Orlando FreeFall’s operations came from the company’s attorney, Trevor Arnold, who expressed the corporation’s intentions to reopen the Slingshot ride. “We do hope to reopen the Slingshot ride, once we have all the necessary approvals from the Department of Agriculture,” Arnold said.



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