

Night grooves

Extreme Park is a hoot of a haunt for young night owls

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River Road after midnight is a dark, deserted drive that serves as both reminder and rebuke.

Polite society is in bed, my friend. Why aren't you?

For hundreds of youths, the answer lies beneath the artificial aurora that glows every night at the corner of Clay and Witherspoon streets, just one block south of inky, silent River Road.

Louisville's hottest new nightspot is no tavern full of toreadors, but Ernest Hemingway probably would have loved it nonetheless. Louisville Extreme Park is a clean, well-lighted place for people who hate to go to bed in the dark.

"Nighttime is the best time," said Anthony Heppel, a 20-year-old skateboard enthusiast from Goshen. "No daylight, no sun, no burning up."

At Extreme Park nothing burns after midnight but stadium lights, skateboard wheels and bicycle tires. The latter two hiss and rumble until the night shift disappears at dawn.

Unless it is raining, 100 to 200 night owls flock to the park every weeknight, regulars say. At least 200 kids were rolling or watching at 1 o'clock this recent Thursday morning. At 3:30, 80 or so still remained.

"I'm shocked to see so many people here," said Lamar Smith, a Louisville businessman who was making his first visit.

One of Extreme Park's most appealing extremes is its 24/7 operating schedule, perfect for thrill-seekers who want to spend their nights "ripping" and slaloming through rounded canyons of marblesmooth concrete.

It's an equally fine venue for those who simply want to watch -- or chat or flirt with others who relish the night.

"I call it vampire mode," 20-year-old Calvin Barber said. "Skate all night and sleep all day."



Frank Layman, 26, of Louisville, who served time for selling drugs, said the energy he burns helps him stay out of trouble.

Photos by DAVID R. LUTMAN



Jordon Smith, 17, of Nashville, Tenn., stopped for some night moves on his way to Indianapolis.

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The opportunity to exercise his Draculean inclinations was a big draw for Barber, who trekked from Ventura, Calif., strictly to see if Louisville's new park would live up to its reputation.

"I wouldn't have come without the allnight thing," he said, "but that would have been a mistake because this place is amazing. There's nothing like this is Southern California, that's for sure."

Though only 3 months old, Louisville Extreme Park is a blooming legend already.

After his July 2 exhibition there, Tony Hawk, the Tiger Woods of skateboarding, called the \$2.5 million park "unbelievable."

Skateboarder Jeremy Vessels often says the same thing, for different reasons.

"I don't understand how you can build a \$2.5 million skateboard park and not have a bathroom," said Vessels, 25, bemoaning the bouquet of the sun-baked portable toilets nearby. "And come on. This is Kentucky. You cannot keep people from smoking. This place needs some ashtrays."

Some baby sitters too, said Vessels, one of the few night-shift hotshots who wear a helmet and kneepads. "This is pretty much Louisville's unofficial day care now. It really is. You have parents who come here and just let their kids run free. You're skating along at 25 miles per hour and -- boom! -- there's a little kid. It's a nightmare."

So Extreme Park isn't perfect. And it probably won't be improved or expanded anytime soon. (Louisville aldermen recently made other plans for the \$2 million that had been earmarked for an indoor facility.)

But don't complain to Tony Hawk.

"Most cities don't have one," he said. "I wouldn't be too picky about what's here. . . . Every stop we go to, people are talking about this park."

They are talking about more than the spacious layout and ambitious design. Tongues also are wagging over the round-the-clock operating schedule.

"I was talking to an editor from one of the skateboard magazines the other day," Vessels said. "The guy couldn't believe that the park never closes. It's almost unheard of. He said, 'It's so very European that you can skate all night.'"

Lamar Smith had a bike ride in mind when he left his Douglass Hills home late at night. Not for himself but for his 9-year-old son, Donaven, who did more watching than riding on his first visit.



Clean and well-lighted, Louisville Extreme Park is a hotbed of activity after midnight.



Chris Leary, 26, of Louisville, grabbed his board as he jumped over an upside down garbage can at Louisville's Extreme Park. The park is gaining national attention, in part because it's open all the time.



Dwight Brooks taught his 2-year-old son, Aaron, how to skateboard at the park, which is at Clay and Witherspoon streets.

"I can't believe all these people," said Smith, 32, owner of LJ Personnel Service. "Big boys, too, and they are all moving fast. I'm disappointed for Donaven. One of the reasons I brought him so late at night is because I thought it wouldn't be too crowded for him to get a feel of the place."

Something else surprised Smith. There wasn't a police officer or another parent in sight. None was needed, either.

Nocturnal leanings aside, Extreme Park's late-night denizens are more Count Chocula than Count Dracula -- a friendly, orderly, racially diverse crowd of mostly 14- to 24-year-olds who have capably policed themselves so far.

"It has been a very safe venue from a crime perspective," Louisville police spokesman Helene Kramer said. "We haven't even seen a string of minor incidents."

Which doesn't mean the park is completely trouble-free. Fighting and drinking are uncommon though not unheard of, but in general regulars say Extreme Park pre-empts more mischief than it invites.

"This is a healthy environment for kids, I think," said Gabriel Harrett, 27, a former youth choir director who recently moved to Louisville from Jacksonville, Fla. "It gets them off the streets and gives them a place to go if their relationships at home are strained or if they live in an unhealthy habitat."

More than a few parents apparently consider Extreme Park superior to their own homes and neighborhoods as a place for young teen-agers to while away the wee hours.

When the clock struck 3 a.m., Rick Gideons, 16, Garrett Marino, 15, and Tyrone Parker, 14, were still "chilling" in the park -- with parental permission, each said.

"My momma says there are a whole lot worse places for a kid to hang out," Tyrone said, "and not many better."

On the whole, Extreme Park seems to be a benign hangout, even at 3 a.m. If this Thursday morning was typical, as the regulars all insisted, park denizens do little but talk and "rip," skate-park slang for performing fancy tricks.

The males are mostly focused on testing their nerves and balance on the 40,000 square feet of slick, hard concrete slopes. The females are mostly focused on the males.

It's a target-rich environment. Guys outnumber gals 10-to-1 or more. Shoko Nakatsuji, a Japanese psychology major at Hanover College in Indiana, thinks she knows why.

"You can get hurt very easily," said Nakatsuji, the only woman seen on a skateboard this night.

The other young women had come to embrace the risk-takers, not the risk.

"It's not like we're on a manhunt or anything," 19-year-old Stephanie Robinson said of herself and roommate Angela Vaughn, 18. "We just like watching the guys skate. But, absolutely, if I was to meet one I really liked, that would be a big plus."

Some come to Extreme Park looking for thrills, others come looking for love. Frank Layman, 26, is just looking for a way to keep his nose clean.



Two Louisvillians -- Brian Boone, 19, and Amber Robins, 16 -- watched a bike rider perform some stunts.

"I was in prison for 3 1/2 years," Layman said. "I don't want to ever go back."

Layman, a 1994 graduate of Southern High School, was convicted in 1995 for facilitation of armed robbery. He drove the getaway car, a distinction that earned him five years probation -- a mixed blessing, he says now.

"I didn't get any jail time, so I didn't know what (prison) was all about," Layman said. "So I started selling weed (marijuana), and they got me for trafficking over 5 pounds.

"I was in prison from 1998 to 2001. That --- gave me gray hairs, man. Stressed me out good."

You'd never know it. Layman has the fleshy face and friendly bearing of a 4-H Club president. But mere months after getting out of prison, he was on the verge of going right back in.

Shortly after resuming old habits with old friends, Layman said, he failed two urine tests.

"I was going nowhere fast. But then I got a little lucky. One day my little brother asked me to bring him down here, so I borrowed a buddy's skateboard. Hadn't been on one since ninth grade. It felt really good."

Layman owns his own board now. He says he comes to Extreme Park almost every night and often stays until 6 a.m., when he punches in at his job on a small assembly line. He gets off at 2 p.m., goes home, pulls the shades and sleeps until the sun is long gone.

When the sky turns black again, Layman returns to the clean, well-lighted place with no doors, no walls, no locks and no guards.

"Man, I love it out here," Layman said, mostly to himself. "I'm never gonna go back in."

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