

# The Sanctity of the Game

*Want to Maximize Laser Tag Fun for Players — and Profits for You? There are Basic Steps to Take to Create a Great Experience*



**By Erik Guthrie**  
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Erik Guthrie has nearly 25 years in the laser tag industry serving in many capacities. Starting out as a part-time game marshall in 1993, for the past 14 years, Guthrie has been Vice President of Zone Laser Tag, a global leader in laser tag manufacturing. (The company says it has 40 percent of the world market.) In addition, he was the Executive Director of the International Laser Tag Association for seven years and is also an owner/investor in several laser tag facilities. Guthrie has been quoted in the *Wall Street Journal, Inc. Magazine, Fast Company*, as well as numerous trade publications. He serves as the curator of the Laser Tag Museum and was recently featured on the hit television show *Storage Wars*. He owns and chairs the annual Laser Tag Convention. Guthrie is also involved in the R&D of the laser tag experience now enjoyed by millions of players every month around the world.

**A**n operator should have a belief system in place when it comes to running laser tag, an attraction that's unique among others in the amusement industry. Consider this: Laser tag is the one attraction that can house many people and in which they all interact with each other. Since this interaction actually determines the enjoyment value of each game played, an operator should protect the sanctity of the game, meaning that nothing should interfere with the game once it starts.

Avoiding game interference seems straightforward enough, and yet I see it all the time.

This interference comes in many forms. It might be that an arena device or target isn't working right...or that a player's vest or phaser isn't performing as it should and has to be swapped out...or it might be that a guest is late to the laser tag party and gets to enter the game once it's already started.

Let's start with this last, late-arrival problem. I can't think of a single attraction in the amusement industry that would hold up the rest of the guests' enjoyment for the sake of one late arriver. For example, have you ever seen a go-kart track operator start the cars racing and then stop them and make them all come back in while they add another kid to a cart? I'm sure not. Have you ever seen attendees stop a roller coaster so someone can get on halfway through? Of course not.

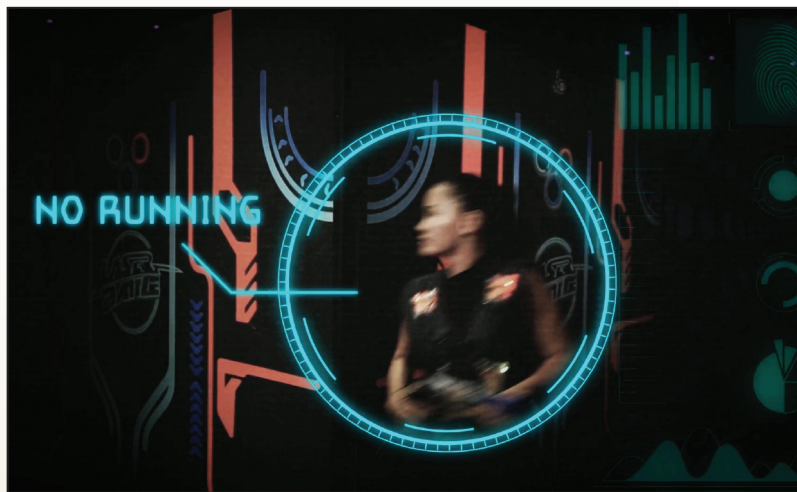
So, there's precedence in the industry that once the attraction starts — in this case, a game of laser tag — it starts! And by the way, there are other ways to accommodate guest that are late (such as a free game pass).

Some laser tag operators think, "Oh, we'll just throw them in." But, there's a lot wrong with that thinking. First, the teams have been

picked. The players on the opposing team don't know about the late arriver. All of a sudden, they just see another person show up in the game. Also, that player was never in the pre-game planning sessions. They missed the briefing. They missed the vesting. They didn't hear the safety instructions and more.

From the moment you call (start) the game, the experience has begun. Period.

If someone comes into a briefing halfway through, they interrupt or throw off the game marshal (the laser tag attendee/employee). Even if you're in the video briefing stage, that



late player has still been disruptive because everyone takes their eyes off the video to see who just came in. So, one major factor in protecting the sanctity of the game is to not let this happen. The players are entitled to have the greatest game experience possible.

Now, let's talk about arena devices and equipment. We've addressed this before in this Briefing Room column, but the point can't be hammered home enough: All equipment should be in good working order.

The trend in laser tag today is to run a more interactive environment than ever before. As such, the operator owes it to his investment and customers to make sure every

bit of it is functioning properly. This means the fog machine or hazer, targets, mines, the reloads or energizers or whatever each manufacturer calls it — in the case of Laserforce, for example, it's "warbots" — all operate properly.

For the sanctity of the game, the center staff needs to perform weekly, preventative maintenance on everything because when that equipment fails in the middle of a game, the guest has a negative experience. It also affects the game play in an adverse way, too. Imagine a player having to leave the arena to go put a different vest on because his quit working. Making sure the operational parts of the game are fully functional is important!

Now let's talk about scoring. At the recent LaserTAG360, I interacted with buyers who wanted to know if it was okay to give the birthday player bonus points — say 5,000 points — ahead of time. (Another thing they suggested was to not let the special guest go into negative points if that scoring feature was turned on.) On the face of it, that seems like a good thing. "Oh, we're going to make sure the birthday kid wins. Nice." But, if you're one of the other 30 or more players in that game, it's not so nice — or fun — for you.

Keep in mind that a lot of the time, birthday party

guests don't always play exclusively with themselves. You could have casual members of the public playing in the same game as those with the party. The regular customers don't want another player to have an advantage. They're playing top dollar and want a fair chance to win.

If you want to do something nice for the guest of honor, there are plenty of other ways to do so.



You can have the birthday kid model the equipment. The game marshal can escort the birthday boy or girl through the arena, making sure they tag the bases and interact with all those (working!) arena devices. There are ways to *influence* a game without actually *altering* the game. Make a hard-and-fast rule that you never, *ever* alter or adjust the points just for the guest of honor.

You also don't want to score games differently in the broader sense. Players love to compare scores and if you are constantly changing the point values for bases and targets game to

game, they can't do this. Standardized point values should be used on the equipment at all times unless you are running a specialty game, tournament game or other special circumstance.

Your laser tag marshal or referee should ensure the game play options suit the group. To protect the sanctity of the game, this staff member has to say no to pressure from hardcore laser

"bunny hunting." In the laser tag industry, this is when an experienced player goes after a new or novice player, continuously lighting that player up, tagging him repeatedly and getting a lot of points. When this happens, the novice doesn't get to experience the game format or fun because he's always down. The marshal should be in the arena actively discouraging bunny hunting, making sure

everyone is having a good time and encouraging players by looking at the team scores as the game progresses.

For example, the marshal can say, "Red

tag gamers to make the game more difficult. While the experienced player might think this is awesome, the novice thinks it's awful. In some locations, we witness experienced players having a blast while the casual players are completely lost... and not having fun! That's not good for the sanctity of the game.

The marshal should make the decisions for the game and make those based on the skillset of all players involved. Simply put: **The fun for the many, not for the few.**

## No Bunny Hunting

The marshal's role is to be part of the game just like the players, encouraging gameplay and ensuring no

team is in the lead! Green team, try harder!" Or, "Green team, attack the red team's base!" They can actually go talk with people on the green team and say, "Hey you guys are losing. Let's get you guys over to the red base." This can make the game more challenging. **And, the better games are the ones that are more equal in score.**

If one laser tag team gets 27,000 points and the other just 7,000, you can imagine the team got the lower score feels they're horrible. And if they feel that they're horrible, they're not coming back!

So, the marshal has a duty to the sanctity of the game to create a great game experience. And a great game experience is a close game. Think about it in sports, we don't like blowouts, right?





We get bored. Even NFL owners don't want a blow out because people leave the stadium early, which means they also stop buying beer, sodas and hot dogs. While we don't have that problem directly, if you come out of a game and see such a horrible score, you're less likely to want to buy into the next one.

Again, one of the marshal's roles is to encourage game play (get the targets, gates, stations or whatever the peripheral devices are that are particular to that manufacturer's laser tag system). They should encourage the team that's losing to rally and to try to beat the other teams. When this happens, the scores end up being a lot closer and when the players exit the arena, they're more likely to want to play again.

## Failure is Not an Option

One place where our industry is failing miserably is in the post-game experience. The end should be as exciting as the beginning! Players should be excited

and hyped. Today, most players come out, look at their scores and stand around. We're missing a tremendous opportunity every time the staff member doesn't talk to them.

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Here's something they could do. Since it's becoming a bit of a standard across the systems to score a base with a value ending in the number one, the marshal could look at the player's score and know in an instant if they tagged even one base. (As an example, tagging one base would result in a score that might be 7,201 points, or if they tagged two bases, 7,202.) So, for the staff member engaging properly with the guests, they'd immediately have a tip to share so the player can do better in the next game: Tag

a base! They could also ask, “Did you know we had this special weapon in there?” or “Did you know that if you went to this device you could pick rapid fire?”

That's the secret. The

marshal should be excited about the game and be encouraging the players to buy another game by giving them tips. They should be coming out and saying, “Oh, look at that! Gosh, green team, if you'd just gotten two more bases you would've won.” Because remember, we want it to be a close game, right?

So how do we actively coach the guest experience at the end of the event? Simple: by connecting with them! Today, that is not happening. In more and more of the laser tag attractions I visit,

the marshal literally walks out, wanders off somewhere else or gets ready for the next game. They do not interact with the customer at the end.

And that is part of the game, the “game being defined as briefing, vesting, playing and scores.” If we're not interacting at scores, we are not honoring the sanctity of the game.

Where's that encouragement to prompt repeat play? Where's the, “Hey, did you know we have an all-you-can-play on Friday night?” or “Did you know that we do a \$20 Thursday, where you can get bowling, laser tag and a \$10 arcade card for only 20 bucks?” There is a huge, active upsell opportunity and it's being missed.

And, even worse, we're missing it at the worst time because the consumer, in theory, just had an adrenalizing experience. And their endorphins are raging, they're feeling positive about our business, our facility, the offerings we're providing to them. That's the time to suggestively sell a repeat visit. I believe, we fail to do that as an industry today.

Operating on the sanctity of the game premise creates an *experience*. If one operates their laser tag with this “sanctity of the game” mindset — setting out to provide a pure and enjoyable experience that encourages the consumer to get the most out of the game — players are undoubtedly going to come back over and over and over again. That lets the owner know they've provided the absolute best experience for the player and one that is the most profitable for their investment. **R**