



LEFT: Ryan Sykes in his game hall, Hooligans.

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—RYAN SYKES

GAME DEFINITELY NOT OVER:

Hooligans Breathes New Life into the Classic Arcade

BY LOYD MCINTOSH PHOTOS BY STEVEN ROSS

“I got a pocket full of quarters, and I’m headed to the arcade.”

If you’re of a “certain age,” you undoubtedly know the opening line by heart to that 1980s novelty song, “Pac Man Fever,” by the one-hit wonder duo Buckner & Garcia. The song paid tribute to the game that ushered in the first wave of classic video games like Galaga, Space Invaders, and Q*Bert, just to name a few.

Of course, the best place to play your favorite video games was the arcade. For kids growing up in the 1980s and 1990s, nothing could beat the noise of the bleeps and blips of the machines, the flashing lights, and the sounds of quarters—one after another—dropping through slots, the frantic pressing of buttons, and the

slamming around of joysticks as new high scores were reached.

While the arcade has almost gone the way of the dodo bird, Alabaster resident Ryan Sykes is breathing new life into the video game hall. For a decade, Hooligans Arcade has not only been a popular location for video game enthusiasts of all ages to play, but a place preserving the art form. “Video games are absolutely works of art,” says Sykes, while walking the floor of Hooligans as a regular crowd starts to roll in. “That’s what draws me to them.”

While the arcade specializes in games from the industry’s golden era, Hooligans is more than an interactive museum. Among the classic games and pinball machines, Hooligans Arcade also offers newer games, mostly from Japan, such as Tekken 7 and Jubeat Ave., Dance

Dance Revolution, and Super Bikes 2, featuring gameplay and graphics unheard of 45 years ago.

Like many video game fans, Sykes discovered video games as a teenager while moving around the country with his family. He was a fan of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and gravitated to the arcade games dedicated to the characters in his youth, his entry-point in the wormhole that eventually became his life’s passion. “My all-time favorite game is Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, and now I have the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Turtles In Time, and even a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles pinball machine,” says Sykes. “I mean I’m a fan!”

Sykes decided to turn his passion into a business in 2015, opening Hooligans while working in management for Publix



Supermarkets. At first, Sykes admits he wrestled with the idea to open an arcade, and he says the first few years were tough, working around the clock at Publix during the day and running the arcade in the evening.

Sykes says, while the idea seemed crazy in the beginning, he believed in his concept, and his hard work has made Hooligans into a smashing success. “I thought, ‘Am I doing the right thing? I know this is what I want to do, but is it the right move for my family,’” Sykes says. “At the end of the day, everybody supported what I wanted to do, but don’t get me wrong. There have been some major ups and some major downs.”

At any time, Hooligans Arcade has around 100 classic and new games on the floor, organized by type, age, etc. The areas that caught the attention of this writer were the classic early 1980s games, like Donkey Kong, Super Mario Brothers, Frogger, Tron, and Mrs. Pac-Man. On the opposite side of the space is an eye-catching Dolly Parton pinball machine.

The machine pictures Dolly in a gold lamé dress with a plunging neckline and wearing a platinum blonde 9-to-5-era wig. This is the second Dolly pinball machine Sykes has owned—after selling his original machine, a decision he instantly regretted.

“As soon as they were driving away with it, I was like ‘I made a mistake. I shouldn’t have done this,’” Sykes says. “I’m a big Dolly Parton fan, so this one will stay with me forever.” Sykes managed to convince a local Alabaster resident to sell the Dolly pinball machine, however, his quest to find vintage games takes him all over the Southeast.

Over time, he has established a network of like-minded people and developed a solid reputation among game collectors. They know that Sykes will carefully restore machines not only to be admired but also to be played. “Over the years, I’ve just tried to do really good business with people, and I find that it leads to more business down the road,” Sykes says.

“Now, I’ll get phone calls from people all over the south who are selling games, and I’ve worked with them in the past, and know it went smoothly, I showed up, and I’ve actually paid for the games. I wasn’t just there kicking the tires.”

These days, you don’t need a pocket full of quarters to enjoy the games at Hooligans. Players can play unlimited games with the purchase of a \$15 day pass or a monthly pass for \$60. However, Sykes says Hooligans has become a popular party destination, not only for kids, but for corporate events, bachelor parties, and even adult birthday parties. “We’ve done a ton of adult birthday parties,” says Sykes. “We had somebody who came in to have their 50th birthday party here because it takes them back to being a kid.” 🍷

Hooligans Arcade is located at 519 1st St. S.W. next to Crunch Fitness and is open varying hours Tuesday through Sunday.



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