

# Thornton pinball wizard wins 2017 Women's World Pinball Championship

Helena Walter Higgins swept the newly minted international women's pinball league March 16 in Dallas



Helena Walter Higgins plays pinball in the basement of her home in Thornton. Higgins won the Women's World Pinball Championships in Texas last month. Higgins is from Sweden originally, and has been competing in the international pinball circuit for 10 years.

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Walk into Helena Walter Higgins's home in Thornton and it's like walking into an arcade.

There are about a dozen full-size pinball machines lining the walls of the living room, and just as many in the basement, paneling the perimeter of the room. When the machines are all turned on at the same time, they blink and scintillate and honk and jingle from all directions in a chorus of nostalgia.

On a recent day, Walter Higgins leaned over one of her favorite games upstairs, "Dracula," and swept her long black hair behind her shoulders before taking her

position over the game, eyes fixed on the glittering obstacle course between her hands.

“I’ve been playing pinball almost every day for 27 years, but I’ve only competed since 2002,” Walter Higgins, 41, said. “It’s really nice to have access to all the games at home, to practice and arrange tournaments with friends or just between me and (my husband). Though, I play better out on location and when I play big tournaments.”

On March 16, Walter Higgins, a native of Sweden, won the Women’s World Pinball Championship held by the [International Flipper Pinball Association](#) in Dallas. She competed against the top 16 ranked female pinball players in the world and swept the competition.

“She kind of destroyed everyone. She’s really good,” said Josh Sharpe, president of the International Flipper Pinball Association, based in Chicago.

This was only the second year for the women’s tournament. It’s a new staple for the organization, which was started in 1991 as an industry association, but became defunct four years later before its revival in 2006, when Sharpe took over as president.

Sharpe said the women’s tournament was created last year to bolster interest from more women in the pinball community.

“Pinball is very heavily male dominated,” Sharpe said. “We’ve seen a resurgence of women’s-only events that have been happening ... and we saw a group of people who were underrepresented. So, as a way for us to focus on the growth of that subgroup, we’ve created the women’s ranking and the championship to support it.”

Haley Gabbard, 38, is the founder of [Belles & Chimes](#) Denver, a women’s-only pinball league that meets twice a month in Denver and Lakewood. Gabbard started the local chapter last February to help women learning how to play pinball climb the ranks faster and get qualified for co-ed tournaments.

“We have so many women in Denver and the Denver area that are interested in pinball, but maybe not necessarily as competitive as some of the men who have been the main part of the scene for 20 years here,” Gabbard said. “We didn’t really have our own league or any of our own tournaments ... and we just wanted something that wasn’t going to be super competitive.

“That said though,” Gabbard said, “we have some of the best female players in the world — like Helena. Helena doesn’t need a league for (novices), she doesn’t need a slower pace.”

Walter Higgins is a serious pinball buff — she’s been competing on the international circuit for more than 10 years, starting back home in Sweden where she first discovered her love for pinball.

"I went to a bar/cafe, to study with my friend sometime in 1989. It was (a hole in the wall), but there was this game, 'Black Knights 2000' in the corner," she said. "It had just came out. It was beautiful and made those sounds and had all of those blinking lights. I was transfixed. We got on the high scoreboards and we were just totally hooked. We went to other places around town and played and got our names on all of the high scoreboards. I had a talent for it right away."

They called her The Pinball Queen in her hometown of Gävle in Sweden. She and her husband, Adam, met at the International Flipper Pinball Association World Championships — a co-ed tournament for the top 64 players in the world — in Vårgårda, Sweden, in 2011. They were married last fall at the Denver arcade The 1up-LoDo on Blake Street.

"I arranged annual tournaments in my hometown, and monthly tournaments in to get more people to play," Walter Higgins said. "I've always been interested in getting people to play."

When she moved to Thornton five months ago, she immediately started organizing monthly tournaments at the The 2Up on Colfax Avenue. The next tournament there is 1 p.m., April 16.

Getting more people involved in pinball is what prompted Sharpe to launch the women's ranking system last year, too.

"It's really about nurturing the growth of this demographic," he said. "The player growth that we've seen since we started tracking growth in 2006 has been insane," Sharpe said. In 2006, we started with 500 internationally ranked pinball players. Today we have 48,000 — we've been averaging a complete doubling every two years or so. It's been a really constant rate of growth. We hope for the day when we won't need the women's ranking anymore."

Of those 48,000 pinball players, Walter Higgins is rated No. 109 in the world. She's No. 2 in the new women's rankings. Her highest score on a pinball game is a nearly immeasurable number somewhere in the hundreds of billions.

"I was ranked top female in the world for 10 years up until a few months ago when this girl in California took it," Walter Higgins said. "I love that. I want to see more women doing this. That's my goal."