

Zipline Injuries on the Rise



The number of commercial zip lines in the U.S. rose from 10 in 2001 to more than 200 in 2012, according to a 16 year study released in 2015 by researchers at the Consumer Product Safety Commission. Thousands more are operating in non-commercial venues such as backyards, summer camps and schools.

With increasing popularity has come increasing injury. According to an article in the August 2015 issue of the American Journal of Emergency Medicine (AJEM) the annual injury rate per one million increased by 52.3% from 7.64 injuries in 2009 to 11.64 injuries in 2012.

It is easy to see how injuries can occur as zipline riders often travel at speeds of 14 mph or more and any rider traveling over 15 miles per hour who is stopped abruptly may impact the cable with potentially harmful consequences to his body.

NEED FOR STANDARDS

With the dramatic increase in zipline usage and the corresponding increase in injuries it is clear that standards are needed to insure that safety is emphasized in zipline operations. Industry experts believe that if zipline owners and builders would read and follow applicable industry standards many accidents could be prevented. And, when standards are not followed and injuries occur, lawyers for the injured persons will want to know which standards were violated as they seek to protect the rights of the injured persons and their families.

The AJEM study concluded that commercial zip lines and publicly accessible non-commercial zip lines should be subject to uniform safety standards in all states and jurisdictions throughout the US.

ZIPLINE STANDARD ACCREDITATION ORGANIZATIONS

Two organizations which have begun to develop zip line industry standards are the Association for Challenge Course Technology (ACCT), and the Professional Ropes Course Association (PRCA). Michael Barker, President of the PRCA reports that memberships in his organization have not expanded with the rate of zip line installations. According to Shawn Tierney, Executive Director of the ACCT "membership has stayed relatively flat." This suggests that injuries due to lack of knowledge will continue to escalate until an outside influence demands standard recognition and

implementation.

In 2005 the PRCA became the first ANSI (American National Standards Institute) accredited standards developer for the zip line industry. PRCA's zipline industry standards support the development and regulation of zip lines and aerial adventure parks.

STANDARDS DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

Standards require countless hours to develop, improve, vote on, and implement. And current standards may still need to be improved. For example, the current standards fall short in mandates that compel builders and installers to comply and build safety into their products by reviewing the standards.

ZIPLINE INDUSTRY STANDARDS

The standard to which most ziplines are held is "Challenge Courses And Canopy/Zipline Tours Standards." (ANSI/ACCT 03/2016). Some of the zipline details covered by this standard include design, performance, inspection, operations, training and practitioner certification standards for zipline operators.

WHERE THE STANDARDS COULD BE IMPROVED

With speeds on the rise the need for safe stopping becomes a greater challenge. The current standards lack in requirements for emergency stopping devices. Passive braking is much safer than active braking by the participant. Passive brakes would prevent many user errors. And adding standards with incremental requirements to stop the rider as the speed increases would reduce the number of high speed accidents.

OSHA STANDARDS

Both federal and state OSHA standards apply where the person injured is an employee of the zipline company. For example, in a zipline accident in Utah an employee of a commercial zipline was fatally injured when he grabbed hold of a customer and the employee went back out on the zipline holding onto the customer and fell 75 to 100 feet to the ground below. An investigator from the Utah Occupational Safety and Health department found that protective equipment had not been provided, used and maintained by the employee. The investigator cited the employer for violation of a federal law requiring protective equipment. (29 CFR 1910.132(a))

OSHA ZIPLINE PAMPHLET

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) recently released a pamphlet entitled "Protecting Zip-Line Workers." The pamphlet was produced with input and assistance from the ACCT Employee Workplace Safety Task Force. You can

view a PDF of the pamphlet on the ACCT website.

OSHA STANDARDS MAY APPLY TO NON-EMPLOYEE ACCIDENTS

At one time OSHA standards were considered solely applicable to injuries in an employment context. However, in recent years several courts have held that OSHA regulations may be used to establish a standard of care for negligence purposes in a non-employment context. Hansen v. Abrasive Engineering and Mfg., 856 P. 2d 625, (Oregon Supreme Court, 1993); Dixon v. International Harvester Co., 754 F. 2d 573 (United States 5th Circuit Court of Appeals, 1985.)

EXPERTS

An attorney hired by an injured person or his family can benefit from the use of experts to identify standards and to assist in determining whether the standards were violated.



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Rex Bush has practiced plaintiffs' personal injury law in Utah since 1984.

Troy Richardson has over 15 years experience designing and building ziplines. His company built the towers and platforms for the world's first zipline at the Park City Mountain Resort in Park City, Utah. Mr. Richardson designed the first passive braking system zipline trolley. He has assisted in the formulation and promulgation of zipline industry standards. He holds patents on both front and rear brake (zipline) trolley technology. And, he has served as an expert witness on zipline injury cases.

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