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Feld's monster truck jam hits Tampa - hard

By [Michael Scott Davidson](#)

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With the groan of hydraulics, a dump truck emptied its first load of dirt onto the surface in Raymond James Stadium precisely five minutes after noon on Wednesday.

Nearly 21 tons of concrete shards splayed out across the stadium's southwest corner as the weathered truck lowered its container with an overwhelming "BOOM!" With that, it rumbled back out to the parking lot.

One load down, at least 339 more to go.

Raymond James was in the early stages of a two-day metamorphosis from football field to a pit of destruction. Tonight it will host one of the world's most famous motorsport events.

Monster Jam will send 10,000-pound machines barreling across the stadium floor, a trail of crushed cars in their wake. There will be wheelies. There will be flips.

There will also be a display of spectator passion that two of the area's professional sports teams — the Bucs and the Rays — would no doubt envy. Over two weekends, the Monster Jam is expected to draw more than 110,000 fans to Raymond James.

Monster Jam is produced by Ellenton-based Feld Entertainment Studios. The series has become so popular that the company will stage events in nine North American cities this weekend alone, including sending 16 of its 46-truck fleet to Tampa.

But before the engines roar, a stadium must be transformed.

Enter Craig Leiffer, who has a mustache-goatee combo on his face and the weight of bringing this operation together on his shoulders.

As dirt crew coordinator, he was tasked with choreographing construction that includes 100,000 square feet of fabric, more than 7,000 tons of dirt and a crew that will put in hundreds of hours of labor from start to finish.

"Most of these track crew guys are from up north," Leiffer said in an amiable Southern accent. "When winter comes in, this keeps a paycheck coming in and keeps them busy."

By Wednesday afternoon, they had already coated the stadium in a layer of black geotextile fabric and rectangular sheets made of a plastic and fiberglass mix.

The first two layers will prevent any of Monster Jam's dirt from ever touching the stadium's well-kept surface — once dubbed the second-best grass field in the NFL.

Next came the fine concrete to make the road base. Six dump trucks would then deliver clay dug out of a grass parking lot across the street to make the track and its features.

With just under 69 hours until showtime, there was not a second to spare. The crew planned to be on the scene until at least midnight.

“These guys work like a clock,” Leiffer said. “They don't send any rookies out here.”

Leiffer, 47, has spent nearly half his life working with the show.

He said it was his father, Earl, who invented the mixture that comprises the rectangular flooring Monster Jam still uses today. It replaced plywood in the mid-1990s.

“It's real similar to a white cutting board in a kitchen,” he said.

Leiffer was 25 when he started hauling dirt for Monster Jam. He became a crew coordinator at 30.

Since then he has built 10 tracks a year at southeastern venues in Atlanta, New Orleans and across Florida. The tracks are built on surfaces including basketball courts and skating rinks.

Still, Leiffer maintains that Tampa's two shows — less than a month apart — are the best attended of any he has worked.

“They almost sellout, both shows,” he said.

Throughout the track building process, a parade of a dozen yellow Caterpillar vehicles — bulldozers, excavators, forklifts — will roll back and forth through Gate D at the stadium.

The equipment will be used to shape ramps and obstacles for the monster trucks. The track's dimensions, angles and layouts are precise; an error could result in a wreck.

Already totaled are 18 sedans waiting to be hauled in from the stadium's parking lot. There's also a faded RV that'll meet its doom this weekend, and a retired double-decker bus that will become part of a backflip ramp.

Even after the track is constructed, Leiffer and his team will be at the stadium.

It's their job to maintain the track's condition during tonight's show and coordinate removal of any wrecked monster trucks.

They'll leave the dirt and return in early February for Monster Jam's second and final Tampa event this year. Then the field will be back to its old self, restoration taking only a third as long as the initial transformation.

“We get up on Saturday morning and we don't go to bed until Sunday when we're done,” he said. “To have the show here on a Saturday night and by 11 a.m. Sunday morning have it all gone, green grass back — that still to this day floors me.”

Leiffer and his crew know they are just setting the stage for the real star: Grave Digger.

The most infamous of the monster trucks, Grave Digger has green flames across its black hood and an image straight from a 1970s horror movie poster airbrushed across its side. Its polished fiberglass body is a 1950 Chevrolet Panel Van.

After three rounds of pummeling, Grave Digger will exit tonight's event with any number of parts, including its six-and-a-half-foot wheels, strewn across a wasteland of squashed cars.

“You're driving blind essentially,” said Charlie Pauken, who will pilot the monster truck from its 12-foot-high cockpit.

“By which way your body is being thrown, you have to react.”

The key to a crowd-pleasing monster truck run is going full throttle during the entire two minutes you're allowed on the track, said Pauken.

“You want continuous action until the truck is unable to move,” he said.

“You may have a wheel come off but you keep going.”

There's something about seeing the jumbo vehicles take flight off massive dirt ramps and crush junk cars like empty soda cans that brings people to their feet.

Pauken said his forte is the freestyle competition — where drivers perform tricks and stunts of their own choosing to wow fans and judges alike. Pauken calls it “making the truck dance.”

“When you can bring the truck around a ragged edge and put it on one wheel, then bring it back down. That's making the truck dance,” he said.

Pauken, 47, could be considered an old-timer among the other drivers. He's driven monster trucks for 27 years total — Grave Digger for 16.

He got his start in his hometown of Maumee, Ohio. A motorhead from the start, he grew up driving go-karts, mini-bikes and four-wheelers.

Before he drove the most famous monster truck of them all, he was behind the wheel of the locally built Excalibur.

“I never thought I'd make a career out of driving a monster truck,” he marveled on Friday, adding that he had no plans to retire.

“If I can climb in and get in the truck, I'm driving it,” he said.

In street clothes, Pauken looks like the kind of guy you'd shoot pool with on weekends or see bowling a few frames with his family. He walks with his hands tucked in the pockets of his blue jeans, a subtle smile on his face.

But when he dons his signature purple, black and green racing suit, there's no more Charlie, only Grave Digger. The truck has its own identity, and Pauken said it's up to him to make it come to life.

“I compare it to being Clark Kent, 'cause I'm a mild-mannered guy,” he said. “You put the suit on. You strap in. You get the adrenaline running. It's like an alter ego.”

He looked down at his arm and chuckled.

“I get goose bumps talking about it.”

The company acquired the complex in May 2012 for \$8.5 million. In two side-by-side buildings it has office, shop and rehearsal space for its entertainment ventures which range from the “Disney on Ice” and Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus.

Feld got Monster Jam when it bought Live Nation's Motorsports business for \$175 million in 2008.

It's deep inside the complex - a former General Electric plant - that the monsters come to life. Behind a set of giant garage doors, Feld Motor Sports' mechanics and fiberglass crafters build and repair the mammoth motor vehicles.

Measuring roughly 100 feet by 100 feet, the facility is a mashup of a scrap-yard and Frankenstein's laboratory.

Eight of the trucks were deployed from Ellenton to sponsoring businesses in

Hillsborough, Pinellas and Pasco counties Thursday afternoon.

At Elder Ford of Tampa a large group of fans was already waiting when the crown jewel of the fleet was unloaded at 2 p.m.

The DePolis family was among more than 400 fans who came to get a photo with Grave Digger.

Chris DePolis hoisted his daughter Annabelle, 4, onto a wheel three times her height for a picture while his twin 8-year-old boys ran to get an autograph from the truck's crew chief.

Christopher and Michael have gone to Monster Jam with their father for the last four years. At the preshow Pit-Party they get their programs autographed by every driver they can - the driver of Toro Loco signed Michael's face once - and study the books once they get home.

"As soon as we get into the stadium they lose their minds," their father said. "Then it's all popcorn, screaming and yelling for the different character trucks to come out... I just enjoy getting to spend the day with my boys."

For many Americans, going to monster truck rallies have become a family tradition, said Terald Hopkins, the Ford dealership's general manager.

He recalled seeing Bigfoot - widely regarded as the original monster truck - crush (drive over) cars in St. Louis as a boy in the mid-70's.

"Then it was more about racing each other and jumping things," he said. "I'll never forget as a little kid sitting in one of the tires. That was the coolest."

In 2011, Hopkins took his soon to their first Monster Jam as a family in North Carolina. He said the event resonates especially well with children.

"It's like the toys that you play with, seeing them out there," he said.

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