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denver & the west

Despite full-tilt try, pinball pro takes second place

By [Robert Sanchez](#)
 Denver Post Staff Writer

He was right there. Just one more game to ice Colorado's pinball championship.

Donavan Stepp worked the machine over like a back-alley mugger, pushing it, shaking it, bending it to his will.

And then, inexplicably, one bad shot; then two. The balls disappeared behind the flippers. Game over.

"I fell apart at the end," says Stepp, 38, who finished second last weekend at the Rocky Mountain Pinball Showdown in Golden, adding to a slew of so-close-yet-so-far finishes for the eight-year professional pinball player from Lakewood. "I thought I had it, but it was like bam, bam, and I was done."

Brian Shepherd, a "pinhead" from Ohio, took the \$500 prize after qualifying last for the finals. He beat Stepp in the championship, scoring roughly 60 million points to Stepp's 25 million on a World Poker Tour machine.

Showdown co-founder Dan Nikolich said about 900 people attended the three-day event, including 150 to 200 people who attempted to qualify for the championship - the third-largest professional pinball event in the country. The event earned professional players points toward worldwide pinball rankings.

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And therein is the good news for Stepp, who came to the showdown as a favorite yet failed to deliver for the third consecutive year. His solid showing likely will put him in the top 30 in the World Pinball Player Rankings, up from 69th.

Stepp took two titles in side tournaments, but that only added to frustration over other failed showdown opportunities and a near-miss last year at the World Pinball Championships - the Super Bowl of pinball - when Stepp narrowly missed qualifying for the finals.

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Still, Stepp says, he got a trophy and \$150 for his effort last weekend. And he plans to attend the world pinball tournament again this summer.

"Maybe this will give me a little confidence," he says. "It can't hurt."

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