



# Game Changer?

The revolution inherent in bowling's new pinsetter choices

By Gianmarc Manzione

**IF THERE IS ONE** product within the world of bowling that can be described without hyperbole as “revolutionary,” it just might be the string pinsetting machine.

Consider, for example, the extent to which the string pinsetter keeps the sport of bowling top-of-mind in settings where people otherwise never would expect to encounter it.

Mike Resterhouse, Mechanical Engineering Product Manager at Brunswick, says that his company is installing string pinsetters “everywhere from residencies to hotels, bars, social venues, cinemas, senior living centers, apartment complexes — all because bowling is a good sport and a good revenue driver, so people want to be in the bowling game. String pins make that easier for them.”

Glenn Keenan, Vice President of Sales at US Bowling, says that those alternative settings in which the string pinsetter introduces people to the sport underscore the trends



Locations such as Pinz, where casual bowling is featured, are ideal for string pinsetters. Pinz is a US Bowling Corporation installation.

that are driving greater demand for the product both in the U.S. and internationally.

“It pretty much was a necessity to have it used for the new type of proprietor in the industry and where the market was heading,”

Keenan says of US Bowling’s reasons for jumping into the string pinsetter market.

Those places where the market is heading — literally, in some cases, to your home — are ideal environments for string pinsetters because

of their nearly nonexistent maintenance, their significantly lower energy use, many fewer parts than freefall pinsetters, the accompanying savings in labor costs all of those factors point to, and flexibility in lane length.

Keenan, an accountant by trade who is therefore keen on cost-benefit analysis, notes, "I have a client who had a 20-lane center with traditional pinsetters that we built for him around 2005, and since then we have built five more locations for him, all with string pinsetters. He went back to the original location and took out the traditional pinsetters and put in our string, and in the first year, between labor, parts, and power, he saved more than \$100,000."

For Neil Pennington, Director of Performance Equipment Management for QubicAMF, the cost savings that come with a diminished need for a mechanic, who typically makes upwards of \$55,000 a year, is one thing. Finding a mechanic capable of



At HeadPinz entertainment centers in Florida, the strings of the QubicAMF pinsetters are barely detectable amid the dramatic lighting.

working on traditional pinsetters? Increasingly, that is as much of a concern.

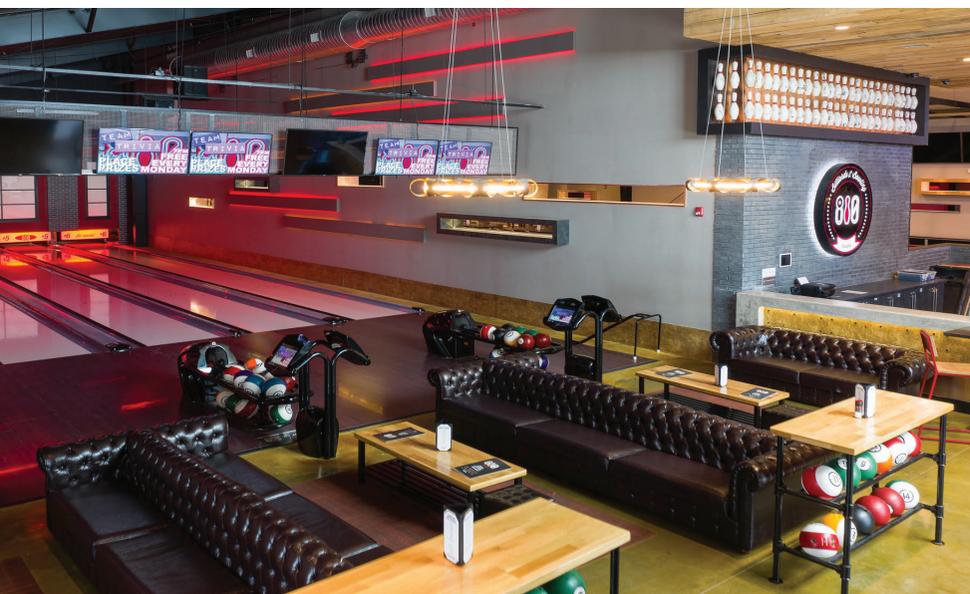
"Trying to find somebody to work on traditional pinsetters is challenging," he says, "and then bowlers

can become exasperated by that if those machines aren't running right. Traditional pinsetters just require a lot of labor, especially the older ones. Newer models are better, but they still require higher skill than string pin machines require. With string pinsetters, I don't need to have someone who is a highly skilled mechanic."

Popular as string pin machines may be in FECs or alternative settings such as residences, Pennington also finds that competitive bowlers respond well enough to the experience.

"We have a customer in Canada that is 70 percent league-based. He put in string pinsetters and his leagues are doing great. He hasn't lost any business. The biggest driver for him was reliability. He couldn't get someone to maintain the freefall machines and his customers were complaining on various social media outlets about the experience at his center."

As Switch distributor John



String pinsetters from Switch are utilized at 810 Billiard & Bowling, an entertainment center at the Market Commons development in Myrtle Beach, S.C.



Funk Bowling provided the string pinsetters for Universal Lanes in metropolitan Detroit.

Fatigati puts it, competitive bowlers “just have to bowl on [string pin lanes]. The pin action is a little different, obviously. It’s not worlds different, but it’s more subdued. There are some spares that I don’t think you could make technically with a string machine, some of the bigger splits, but most people can’t make those anyway.”

Funk President Alex Funk points

to one compelling example of a competitive bowling enterprise that embraced string pin machines long before they became the trend that is underway in the industry today.

“The University of Nebraska was one of the first to convert to string pin — they did it 18 years ago — and they are one of the most successful college bowling teams,” he explains. “They have been practic-

ing on string pin machines for 18 years now, winning multiple NCAA championships. For me, that is always proof that string pins cannot be that different [from freefall machines].”

For Fatigati, the trend toward string pinsetters is strong enough that “It’s going to be something that eventually the market will have to accept because the majority of places that are being built now are recreation driven. You’re going to get casual league bowlers who don’t care whether they’re bowling on string pins. They just want to come hang out with friends, have a few drinks and laughs, and have an experience where you don’t have machines breaking down and you can keep it moving.”

Keenan puts the case for string pinsetters more bluntly.

“Unless it’s a new traditional center that is going after the league market, there’s no reason to ever install a traditional pinsetter again, and that’s coming from a company in US Bowling that is a very big re-manufacturer of traditional pinsetters.”

## Strong League Center Owner Sees No Downside to Strings

**DON ALLEN** had been in the bowling business all of his life, a third-generation proprietor known and respected in the Portland/Vancouver metropolitan area. But a heart attack in 2018 got him and his wife, Rachael, to begin thinking about retirement.

Then a string of events — best saved for delineating on another day — prompted the Allens to change their minds. Rather than closing, they decided to invest \$1.1 million in a new scoring system, a new POS system, new gutters and caps... and 36 string pinspotters from QubicaAMF.

When that new equipment is installed, Allen’s Crosley Lanes, located in the Hudson’s Bay neighborhood of Vancouver, will be a fundamentally different bowling center. It will transform from a traditional league-based center into an FEC — but one that Allen expects to continue to have a strong league base.

However, the United States Bowling Congress will not certify leagues that bowl at centers utilizing string machines. Don Allen does not care.

“It’s getting harder and harder to fill a 42-lane house,” says Allen, referring to Crosley’s pre-modernization size. (Six lanes will be removed to make way for a larger arcade.) “League business has been declining for a number of years, and we’re certainly not immune to that. But as we’ve changed our focus to open play and recreational bowling, that has more than made up for it.”

Still, Crosley Lanes will continue to floor leagues. Lots of them. They just won’t be certified. Allen says he has had a few bowlers express concern over not being able to establish a recognized average at the center, but only a few.

“We talked to our leagues before making this decision,” he says. “Most bowlers told us they’ll never roll a 300, so they don’t care. Others have already got their 300 rings, so they don’t care. And most don’t bowl in any tournaments where they need a certified average. So I don’t think we’re going to lose many, if any, of our league bowlers by putting in strings.”

— Bob Johnson