

# BOWLING ENTERTAINMENT CENTER

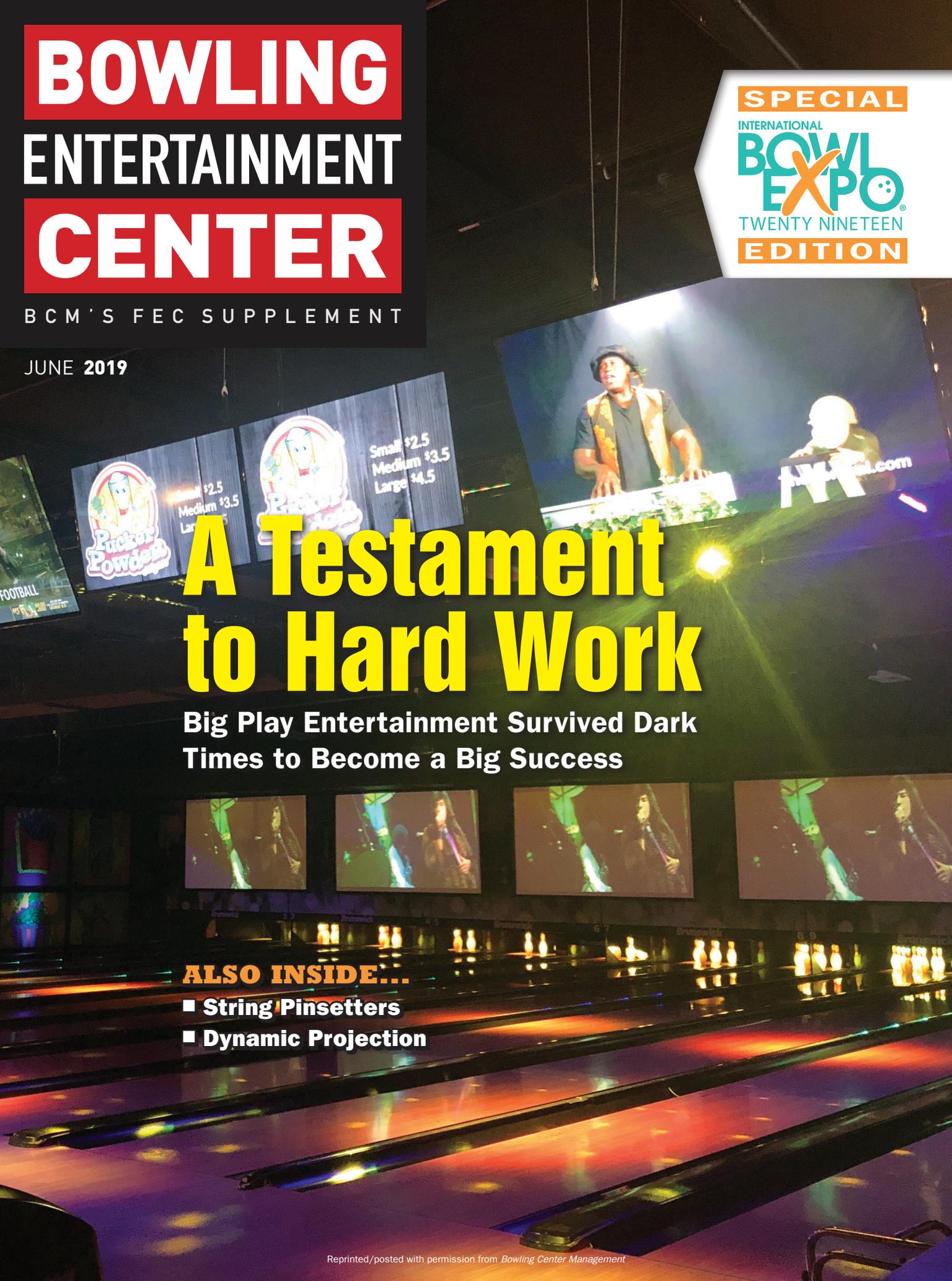
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# ~~No~~ Strings Attached

String pinsetting machines have been commonly used in Europe for many years. Has their time finally come in the United States?

By Barry Sparks

**NINETEENTH-CENTURY AUTHOR** and poet Victor Hugo said, "There's nothing as powerful as an idea whose time has come."

String pinsetters, invented in the mid-1960s, may fall into that category. Although the technology has been around for more than 50 years, the pinsetters have never been more popular. The past five years have been a time of significant growth, and the future looks brighter than ever.

Neil Pennington, Director of Product Management and Performance Equipment for QubicaAMF,

attributes the increase in popularity to a perfect storm of factors.

Pennington says increased awareness, the growth of entertainment bowling and labor challenges have fueled the sales of string pinsetters.

"As string pinsetters are being used in more markets around the world, investor awareness and acceptance has increased," he says. "Plus, more investors are including bowling in their entertainment business concepts, and string pinsetters are a great option for these facilities.

"Finally, it has become increasingly more difficult for centers to find and retain good technicians to maintain pinsetter equipment. It is

a special skill set that is becoming harder to find each year."

Mike Conejo, Creative Director for US Bowling Corporation, likens the string pinsetter to the idea of an electric car, which has been around since the 1830s. Electric cars enjoyed a rebirth in the 1960s and '70s, and now are experiencing renewed popularity.

"The technology has caught up with the idea," he says. "The future for string pinsetters is now."

Dave Sella, Vice President of Capital Equipment for Brunswick Bowling Products, adds, "String machines are here to stay. They are going mainstream."

Simplicity is one of the reasons for the popularity of the string pinsetter. The string is actually heavy-duty nylon cord that is attached through a hole in top of the pin. The string has no interference with the pins when the ball hits them, nor does it restrict the action of the pins. After each ball, the machine pulls the pins back into the rack and resets the pins that weren't knocked down.

Since the nylon cord is black and the pinsetter background is black, bowlers often don't even realize they are bowling on a lane equipped with a string pinsetter.

String pinsetters offer a number of advantages. One of the most commonly mentioned is safety. Free fall pinsetters are complicated, potentially dangerous pieces of equipment with thousands of moving parts. Maintenance of the machines

Manitoba, Canada, says, "I can take an entry-level employee and train them to be a string pinsetter mechanic in about seven minutes."

With that, proprietors can save the cost of a mechanic's salary and benefits.

And since string pinsetters have considerably fewer moving parts, there are fewer parts that need to be replaced.

String pinsetters operate on 24 volts, making them more energy efficient. Some manufacturers estimate that string pinsetters consume 50 to 75 percent less energy than traditional free fall pinsetters.

Besides costing about 80 percent of free fall pinsetters, the overall cost of ownership for string pinsetters is considerably less.

"String pinsetters require low maintenance, experience minimal

ment homes and private residences.

While one of the concerns with string pinsetters is the possibility of tangles, Resterhouse says that is an unusual occurrence.

"Our machines can sometimes go 6,000 frames without a tangle," he says. "And, most of them can be cleared quickly with our detangling mechanism. Tangles can be unknotted manually, if need be."

While leagues and scores rolled on string pinsetters have been sanctioned in Australia, the United Kingdom and Canada, they have not been certified by the United States Bowling Congress. Some industry observers consider this a drawback.

"The USBC [has not addressed] the issue of string pinsetters, and I think that's unfortunate," says Fatigati.

Mark Buffa, President of Buffa Distribution, believes it's a matter of time — perhaps three to five years — before USBC will certify string pinsetters.

"USBC sanctioning would be huge," he says. "It would definitely open the flood gates."

"Much of the world is embracing string pinsetters, and the United States is not far behind," adds Conejo.

Resterhouse believes the tipping point may come when a major chain installs string pinsetters.

Tenpin Bowling Australia established a separate category within its rules to approve the use of string pinsetters in TBA-registered centers, beginning Jan. 1, 2018. Bowlers are entitled to awards, but all achievements are recognized in a separate category.

Bowlers who enter tournaments in traditional venues, where an average is required, must provide an entering average obtained from participating in a traditional registered bowling center. An average obtained in a string pin venue can't be used as the bowler's entering average in that case.

**Simplicity is one of the reasons for the popularity of the string pinsetter. The string has no interference with the pins when the ball hits them, nor does it restrict the action of the pins.**

requires a mechanic who has been trained with safety in mind. A death related to a free fall pinsetter was recorded as recently as last October.

Not only are string pinsetters, which have fewer than 75 moving parts, safer, they can eliminate the need for a mechanic. Proprietors, particularly those in smaller towns, often struggle with finding skilled mechanics.

"It's much easier to train someone to maintain a string pinsetter," says John Fatigati, President of Switch. "It could be an employee who maintains your arcade machines, or someone who also works the front desk."

Trevor Peters, proprietor of Thunderbird Bowl in Brandon,

wear and are extremely reliable," says Michael Resterhouse, Product Manager for Brunswick.

Notes Fatigati: "Ninety-five percent of new centers are not built to be competitive houses. Their main focus is recreation. There is no real need for investors to put in traditional free fall pinsetters."

He points out that many millennials and Gen-Z customers have never competed in a league, nor do they care about what type of pinsetter is used.

String pinsetters can be found in virtually every different kind of venue — family entertainment centers, boutique bowling centers, hotels, movie theaters, truck stops, retire-

In July 2018, the British Tenpin Bowling Association announced that string pinsetter centers and bowlers would be treated the same as traditional free fall centers and bowlers, provided all other lane specifications were met.

this change and could not ignore the new initiative by the industry and bowling proprietors.

The Canadian Tenpin Federation also sanctioned string pinsetters beginning in 2018.

On Jan. 15, 2019, Paul Pasion, 31,

Afterward, he said, "Bowling a 300 is always a great feeling."

When informed it was the first ever sanctioned on a string pinsetter, he said, "It's definitely a greater feeling."

Pennington believes Pasion's perfect game brings legitimacy to string pinsetters.

"The more honor scores you have on string pinsetters, the better. The more competitive bowlers will take note, and I believe they will increase their respect for string pinsetters," he says.

One of the biggest concerns of league bowlers is that they won't get as much pin action from string pinsetters and, consequently, they will roll lower scores.

Most industry experts agree that the pin action is slightly different

**String pinsetters have popular in central Europe, Asia and Canada for a number of reasons. They are very compatible with non-tenpin games such as 5-pin and 9-pin.**

In its announcement, the association acknowledged it would be a difficult transition for many bowlers, but it accepted it had to manage

became the first bowler ever to roll a sanctioned 300 on a string pinsetter. He accomplished the feat at Airport Bowl in Middlesex, England.

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on string pinsetters than free fall pinsetters, but it's very similar, particularly if using kickbacks like those used with free fall pinsetters.

To ensure maximum pin action, it's recommended that proprietors rotate the 1, 2, and 3-pins monthly or quarterly. Unlike the free fall pinsetter, pins stay in the same position, unless rotated.

"There are still messenger pins, but they act a little different," observes Buffa, who believes averages will be about 10 pins higher on string pinsetters. "I think string pins also can topple over other pins easier. And, occasionally, a string will knock over a pin."

There isn't conclusive evidence that string pinsetters will either increase or decrease scores. Early data and observations, however, suggest scores tend to be higher on string pinsetters.

In the 2019 Middlesex String Pin Doubles, held at Airport Bowl in England, 108 entries had a combined entering average of a little less than 166, bowled with free fall pinsetters. After bowling a total of 432 games on the string machines, their combined average was a fraction higher than 169.

"We've had high school bowlers and league bowlers tell us they don't see much difference in the scores," adds Resterhouse.

Judging from chat rooms and online comments, many league bowlers are adamant about not bowling on string pinsetters. Some say they would quit bowling rather than make the switch. Some proprietors are reluctant to go to string pinsetters because of their concern about league bowlers.

"String pinsetters are threatening to purists," says Buffa. "But league bowling is a small market and it's getting smaller. The industry has shifted from leagues to entertainment.

"I understand some league bowlers don't want to compete on

string pinsetters, but when everyone is competing in the same environment, it's all relative."

String pinsetters have been popular in central Europe, Asia and Canada for several reasons. They are very compatible with non-ten-pin games, such as 5-pin and 9-pin bowling. Centers in those countries tend to be smaller than in the United States, and foreign countries have been ahead of the curve when it comes to the social and entertain-

ment aspects of bowling.

"Optimistic" is the word most often used to describe the future for string pinsetters. And Resterhouse shared some Brunswick figures that support the optimism.

"Our percent of string pinsetter sales has increased 5 percent each of the past five years," he says. "Fifty percent of our European sales are now of the string variety."

It certainly seems like an idea whose time has come.

## How One Proprietor Decided to Make the Change to Strings

**THIS SUMMER**, Bob McKay, proprietor of Woodlawn Bowl in Guelph, Quebec, Canada, will replace 24 lanes of tenpin free fall pinsetters with string pinsetters.

"It's a bold move, but one I think is a no-brainer," he says. "I did a lot of homework and I'll save a fortune in a mechanic's salary, replacing parts and in the overall maintenance of the machines."

McKay figures he will realize a return on his investment in less than four years.

Before making the decision, McKay visited several centers, talked with proprietors and plied league bowlers with countless questions.

"I was skeptical, and I wanted to make sure I got as much honest input as possible. I was adamant about talking to proprietors and league bowlers," he says.

He visited a 20-lane center with string pinsetters in North Carolina. The proprietor told him, "It's the best decision I ever made."

McKay says the minimal amount of maintenance and attention the string pinsetters required "opened my eyes." The North Carolina center runs a 20-lane league without having to have a mechanic in the back.

Curious about stoppages, McKay asked the North Carolina proprietor about his experience. He shared the following statistic: In 9,000 frames, he had three stoppages — one for a ball return, one for a machine stoppage and one for a tangle.

McKay figures the string pinsetters will eliminate many of his league bowlers' complaints and probably get them out of the center 30 minutes earlier.

"Fewer breakdowns and waits are a big selling point to league bowlers," says McKay, who immediately announced his decision to switch to string pinsetters to his league bowlers.

Concerned about scores and averages, he asked the three highest-average league bowlers about their experiences on string pinsetters. One said his average went up a pin, one said his went down a pin, and the other's average was about the same.

McKay expects to lose only a few league bowlers because of the switch to string pinsetters.

"It's inevitable that we're going to see more string pinsetters because the cost savings and advantages are so great," he says.

— Barry Sparks