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H O P E

STRING THEORIES

What proprietors are saying about string pinsetting machines.

BY DENNIS BERGENDORF

String pinsetters are taking the bowling world by storm, and the reasons are simple — as in simplicity, ease of operation and overall costs. BCM talked to five proprietors of centers that either have string machines already or are in the process of replacing freefall pinsetters, and asked them why they're going the non-traditional route.

Venue: The Keg Social, with 28 lanes in Orlando, Fla.

Proprietor: Joe Dziemianzuk

Product: Funk Bowling String Pinsetters

The Keg opened in December in what had been a run-down traditional center.

"Our target demo is 21 to 45 years old," says Dziemianzuk. "We did not design it for families, but for people in that wheelhouse that are in for more social interaction."

The center features four bars, a large chef-driven dining room and a ping pong area. Patrons are given buckets of balls and there's a human ball retriever. Also featured are axe-throwing, two game rooms, billiards, a separate Karaoke room, and meeting and VIP rooms.

Dziemianzuk says the bowling lanes "look like a traditional house, except we run string pins and nobody knows the difference. We're an entertainment facility so we're not targeting leagues in any way," he says.

"We wanted to minimize our labor costs and our repair and maintenance costs. That's why we went to string pins."

Dziemianzuk says he hasn't "done a deep dive on costs," but he knows savings are significant. With the old freefall machines "we had a closet

full of parts and had a breakdown on every third machine because of their age. Just the cost of a maintenance team on staff all the time to service them was overwhelming."

While The Keg isn't a league center, it does attract league bowlers who want to practice, and therefore the lanes are oiled on an almost-daily basis.

"We want to make sure they're happy with the quality of our lanes," Dziemianzuk says. "We treat it like any traditional type of center."

and a bar that pours domestic, import and craft brews. There's also a 50-game arcade that includes Virtual Rabbids, Zombyte, Groove Guardians, and Cold Clash.

The duckpins are a recent addition. "I wanted to add another entertainment option to the facility," says Kolquist.

Though the mini lanes are only 16 feet long, they are geared toward adults. "You'd think they'd be for children, but we've put them very close to our bar environment. So

adults come in and they've got an activity to do instead of just drinking," he says.

Of course, for the duckpins, Kolquist had no choice other than strings, but he's still impressed. "I've been amazed at how little maintenance is required, in terms of stops."

And Skyline runs leagues — even in the duckpin room. "I don't even have a mechanic present because the only issue that ever happens is a pin gets tangled, and 98% of the time

it's smart enough to figure how to get itself out."

Plus, Kolquist adds, any member of his serving staff is capable of untangling a string.

Venues: Town Line Luxury Lanes, with 48 lanes in Malden, Mass., and

"I looked at how much I was paying in labor, how much I was paying in parts every year, how much down time I was having. I know strings can pay for themselves in few years, so I [did] it now."

— Anthony DeCotis

Venue: Skyline Social & Games, with 22 freefall regulation lanes and seven mini ducks in Duluth, Minn.

Co-owner: Corey Kolquist

Product: Brunswick Duckpin String Pinsetters

Skyline is a social center designed for adults, with bowling, restaurant

Gametime Lanes and Entertainment, with 20 lanes in Amesbury, Mass.

Co-owner: Anthony DeCotis

Product: QubicaAMF Edge String Pinspotters

Town Line is currently freefall, but it's in the process of converting all 48 lanes to strings. DeCotis and partner Steve Belmonte made the decision after positive results at Gametime, which has 12 lanes of strings plus eight candlepin lanes.

"I can't tell you the last time I had a problem on a lane that didn't correct itself. The machine shakes out the pin," DeCotis says.

"In Malden I looked at how much I was paying in labor, how much I was paying in parts every year, I looked at how much down time I was having for so many reasons," he says. "I know the strings can pay for themselves in a few years, so I might as well do it now rather than later and get that under my belt."

DeCotis calls Town Line a hybrid. On weekends it's more of an FEC with billiards, 50-plus arcade games, a restaurant and a popular lounge called Mixx 360. But during the week it's a league center.

"We've been watching pretty carefully the pin reaction, especially with better league bowlers, and they're pretty delighted," DeCotis says.

And he's sure strings are here to stay. "We're hoping it's going to be the new wave of the future for the industry, and we're looking forward to when the USBC comes on board with other parts of the world."

Venues: Pinz Entertainment, with five string centers in New England

Proprietor: David Breen

Product: US Bowling's 24-Volt Breen calls his establishments "location-based entertainment," and each has a large arcade, plus restaurant and bar area with entertainment. "Late-night entertainment

Early String Research Released by USBC

IN THE EARLY days of synthetic lanes, many in the industry opined that they would never replace traditional wood lanes. It took barely 20 years for synthetics to essentially wipe out wood, as proprietors cited their ease of maintenance and budget friendliness.

Are we now at a similar place with string pinsetters? With more and more proprietors opting for strings, and with the International Bowling Federation giving its stamp of approval to show support for the men and women who own bowling's "playing fields," the United States Bowling Congress is now involved in a comprehensive study on how string machines impact scoring.

That's a factor that doesn't really matter in scratch competition, but because so many certified leagues and tournaments utilize handicap based on averages, it's important that apples be compared with apples and oranges with oranges. The ultimate result could be an adjustment for averages compiled at string pinsetter-equipped centers, similar to the system used for Sport and Challenge league averages.

On Jan. 6, the USBC released a preliminary research report as part of its study of string pinsetters. It said that data shows string pinsetters yield a lower strike percentage and leave a higher percentage of multi-pin spare combinations compared to traditional freefall machines.

The data comes from USBC's Bowlscore machine, which analyzes pin flight and pinfall from thousands of automated shots across specific entry angles and offsets.

Among the findings:

- Average strike percentage down a combined 6.9% across all entry angles tested.
- The greatest decrease in strike percentage occurred on light-pocket hits.
- Multi-pin spare combinations were up across nearly all entry angles.
- String pinsetter pinfall is statistically different overall compared to traditional freefall pinsetters.

The study, being conducted at the International Training and Research Center in Arlington, Texas, involves the installation and testing of multiple string pinsetters, and testing is scheduled to continue through 2021. Future aspects of the research will include spare conversion testing using USBC's Enhanced Automated Robotic Launcher (EARL), as well as league and tournament simulations. USBC said it would study design variables in the machines, including, but not limited to, pin deck and pit area, string composition and pin evaluation.

"If USBC does explore a certification standard for string pinsetters in the future, there could be a wide range of manufacturing or installation specifications to consider," said USBC Executive Director Chad Murphy.

is a key point of our business model," he says.

Some locations also feature virtual reality, axe throwing, laser tag, outdoor patios and/or bocce.

"The Milford [Mass.] location's 20 lanes opened in 2006 with [freefalls], which are great machines. But we put in the US Bowling 24-Volt three years ago and it's worked wonderfully."

Breen explains that, "We were never designed as league houses.

We were designed for social gatherings. We're just doing 'glow bowling'... entertainment-style bowling 24-7. Strings aren't going to bother anyone."

To Breen, it was an efficiency matter. "It became not having to have mechanics for the center." In bowling-diverse New England there are tenpin, candlepin and duckpin centers, "so sometimes it's tough to find a mechanic," he says. "I no

longer have a mechanic in any of my bowling centers.”

Beyond labor, there have been other operating cost savings. Breen says that at Milford, the electric bill went down some \$1,500 a month. Plus, he was spending about \$1,000

a month on parts alone, and now has to replace only the occasional pulley, cable, pin, string or other part.

Another big savings is those pins. With freefall, he put in 40 cases each season. “What happens [now] is

every couple of months I’ll order one case of pins.”

Venues: 810 Billiards and Bowling, with 20-lane and 12-lane string centers in the Myrtle Beach, S.C., area, and one string franchise in Chandler, Ariz.

Proprietor: Michael Siniscalchi

Product: Switch String Pinsetters

“We’re an upscale bowling and entertainment center,” says Siniscalchi, who also is President of “more of a sports bar that incorporates billiards and bowling and other games into our space.”

It combines bowling with entertainment and offers a dining and bar experience that focuses on bringing families and friends together for social interaction, friendly competition and great food, according to Siniscalchi.

810 went with strings because “we’re not in traditional bowling. We don’t do leagues. We don’t do any competitive or sanctioned tournaments.” The demographic is “more the entertainment customer. Young families.”

The company’s third location in North Myrtle Beach does have 20 lanes with freefall pinsetters, and Siniscalchi can see the difference.

“From the maintenance and ease of use of the string machines, it works much better for us than the upkeep and all the work of the freefall machines,” he says.

And expenses are lower, “in terms of maintenance cost, operational cost, and the ability to find properly experienced mechanics for the freefall machines.”

Siniscalchi says he believes customers are ambivalent to the difference. “From an entertainment customer’s standpoint, they’re the same. From a league bowler’s standpoint, obviously, they’re only using sanctioned lanes that have freefall, but that’s not really our customer.”

