

## WATCH NOW: BOWLING ON A STRING, THE POSSIBLE FUTURE OF ONE OF WISCONSIN'S SIGNATURE SPORTS

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GREEN LAKE — The number of eyeballs on the 22-second video began to pile up.

Less than 24 hours after Orly Rivera uploaded the clip on Jan. 7 to the social media platform TikTok, it had amassed an impressive 12,000 views. Not bad, Rivera thought, for a small bowling alley in a resort town of fewer than 1,000 people.

Only that was just the beginning.

Within a week it had topped 1.1 million views, far beyond anything that had been posted in the past on the 300 Club's social media pages for things like meatloaf and chicken wing specials, toy drives for the local Boys & Girls Club and paid appearances by former Green Bay Packers players like Frank Winters.

The video — a woman throwing an orange bowling ball down a lane into a set of brightly lit pins with strings attached — offers bowlers and non-bowlers a peek at what one of Wisconsin's signature sports could look like in the years to come.

As of Thursday, the video had more than 15 million views, making the 300 Club internationally known for the unconventional way in which pins are set on each of the bowling center's 12 lanes.

Instead of the traditional pin-setting machines that sweep pins into conveyors that refill triangular racks, the 300 Club uses what are called string pinsetters. Each of the 10 pins on each lane are connected to a series of paracord strings supported by a pulley system. After each ball, all of the pins are automatically pulled back up into a rack, with the machine returning to the lane those that were not knocked down by the first ball.

The system is less expensive to maintain, all but eliminates jammed pins and is easier to manage for the shrinking staffs at bowling centers. However, the technology, while approved in 2020 by the International Bowling Federation, doesn't yet have the approval of the U.S. Bowling Congress. That means those centers in the U.S. using lanes with string pinsetters can't run sanctioned leagues or tournaments.

### 'Large pill to swallow'

At the 40-lane Bowl-A-Vard Lanes near East Towne Mall, Don Bussan looked at string pinsetters when he replaced his traditional pinsetters last summer. When he bowled on a string lane he never noticed the strings nor saw a change in his average score.

However, Bussan didn't want to risk losing up to 30% of his revenues generated from his nearly 100 leagues, so he went with refurbished traditional pinsetters. But that means he still needs three mechanics and a 30-foot wall filled with parts and tools to service the system. Maintenance on a string pinsetter is minimal, save for tightening the tension on strings, something that is easily learned.

"It's a large pill to swallow if it doesn't go well for you," said Bussan, who has owned the business for more than 30 years and has diversified with banquet facilities, an arcade and outdoor volleyball. "We have a lot of league bowlers who like to go to tournaments." Wisconsin is home to 280 bowling centers. The 300 Club and Punch Bowl Social, which has been closed for months but has plans to reopen in Milwaukee's Deer District, have string pinsetter systems. The businesses don't run leagues and each offers bowling as part of an entertainment center where customers can bowl, play arcade games and order food and drinks from comfortable lounge seating at each lane. The eight-lane WhirlyBall entertainment facility at Brookfield Square uses string pinsetters, too.

Bowling purists worry about strings can affect the way pins fall and spin, and they have concerns about inflated scores. But COVID-19 has ravaged the industry, participation in league bowling continues to decline, and some owners are selling their properties to developers



Orly Rivera, a manager at the 300 Club, talks about his TikTok video of the string pinsetters that has gone viral and has received more than 15 million views. - AMBER ARNOLD, STATE JOURNAL



Eddie Bryant, general manager at the 300 Club in Green Lake, shows the inner workings of one of 12 string pin-setting machines at the bowling center. - AMBER ARNOLD, STATE JOURNAL



Bowling pins at Club 300 in Green Lake are connected to paracord as part of a string pinsetter system that is less expensive to maintain and operate than traditional pin-setting machines. However, the U.S. Bowling Congress has not yet recognized string pinsetters for use for sanctioned league and tournament play.  
AMBER ARNOLD, STATE JOURNAL



The strings attached to the pins are barely visible to Jayden Mendoza, 5, who came to the 300 Club in Green Lake last week to bowl with his family. - AMBER ARNOLD, STATE JOURNAL



Eddie Bryant, general manager at the 300 Club, shows how tension on strings can be adjusted. Bryant said tangles are uncommon and easier to fix than a jammed pin in a traditional pin setting machine.  
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for other uses, forcing the USBC to take a closer look at the string systems that are popular throughout the world and beginning to grow in the U.S. due to challenging economics.

“The trend is there. It’s going to happen,” said Neil Stremmel, executive director of the Pewaukee-based Bowling Centers Association of Wisconsin, which represents 224 businesses. “And if the USBC doesn’t figure out some sort of solution to this, I don’t think it’s going to stop a lot of the proprietors from just going ahead and moving forward anyways. It can become a very viable option.”

A preliminary study by the USBC released in early 2021 showed that string pinsetters yield a lower strike percentage and leave a higher percentage of multi-pin spare combinations compared with traditional free-fall systems. However, more study is underway and a report could be issued later this year, according to Chad Murphy, the USBC’s executive director.

“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,” Murphy said. “The research project has just started, but we will understand the issues better by the end of (2022).”

In 2020, a tournament of elite bowlers in Naples, Florida, used both types of pinsetter systems and found average scores were about 1.3 pins higher for those bowling on lanes with string pinsetters.

According to the 11th Frame, a bowling news website operated by Jeff Richgels, a professional bowler (and reporter for the Wisconsin State Journal), finding those qualified to maintain traditional pinsetters is only becoming more difficult, which makes string pinsetters more attractive.

Richgels spoke with Pat Ciniello, chair of QubicaAMF, one of the leading pinsetter manufacturers and who is also president and CEO of Bowland & HeadPinz Entertainment Centers.

“In a mom-and-pop 12-lane bowling center where you have to be everywhere — the cook, the desk person, the janitor, etc. — string pinsetters run pretty flawlessly. It’s going to allow a lot of people to stay in the business,” Ciniello said. “We have to look at the future, and labor cost is going to be a big, important part of it. With strings, the proprietor has the option of a less costly product energy-wise, parts-wise and even potentially salary-wise dealing with individuals who are easier to train because it’s so simple.”

### Declining numbers

The number of bowling centers is in constant flux and at the whim of the economy, land values, aging equipment, retirement and operators willing to take a risk on a sport that has been in decline for nearly four decades.

In 1980, the combined membership of the main national bowling associations in the U.S. totaled about 10 million bowlers. That number, for the first time, was just under 1 million members for the 2020-21 season at about 850,000, a 29% decrease from the previous year, according to Murphy.

Among the more recent closures have been Village Lanes in Monona and the lone bowling centers in communities like Beloit, Rhinelander, Milton and Suring. Swiss Lanes in New Glarus was demolished a few years ago to make way for a Casey’s General Store, a Kwik Trip now stands on the former site of Cardinal Lanes in Brodhead while in Madison, Badger Bowl, which opened in 1977 on East Badger Road, has been removed to make way for a high-end car dealership.



*The former Green Lake Lanes has undergone a more than \$1 million renovation and expansion that includes new lanes, string pinsetters, comfortable seating, new touch screen scoring and gaming screens, and a name change to the 300 Club.*

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*The 300 Club in Green Lake had for decades been a typical small-town bowling alley until a more than \$1 million transformation in 2021.- AMBER ARNOLD, STATE JOURNAL*



*The 300 Club bowling center has done away with old-school black balls and has only a stock of colorful balls for customers to use.*

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### A success story

The 300 Club, along Highway 23 on the north shore of Wisconsin's deepest natural inland lake, could have been one of the casualties but for Justin Krueger, a Ripon native and construction company executive who in late 2020 purchased what for decades had been Green Lake Lanes.

The bowling facility had been a classic Wisconsin destination with leagues and beer frames, but Krueger has spent more than \$1 million on a name change and upgrades with new lanes, lighting, furnishings and string pinsetters. The project also included the addition of an arcade and rooms for parties and meetings.

"We've probably done 300 parties since we opened this up. It's been insane," said Eddie Bryant, the 300 Club's general manager. "Everything about bowling is changing."

Customers pay \$14 per hour per lane for up to six people to bowl. Music and colorful lighting are a constant, along with electronic scoring and alternative games integrated into the bowling, touch screen score pads and screens above. One game allows players to build a video monster with each strike thrown. In another, with each strike thrown, a boulder is launched from a virtual catapult at an opponent's castle. Pencils and paper score sheets are nowhere to be found. Shoe rentals are \$2.

Bryant, a Ripon native who won the Ripon city bowling tournament in 2021, believes the 300 Club could be the future business model for other centers. And once the USBC approves string pinsetters, it will make the economics of the industry more favorable and help keep a Wisconsin tradition alive.

"What we're doing is up and coming," Bryant said. "We're setting the standard. We're excited about it, we're scared about it, but every day is new, and every day we just keep pushing along and figuring out the best way to make this all work."



*Isabelle Loberg, 11, and her brother, August, 5, play an arcade game during an after-school visit to the 300 Club in Green Lake. The bowling center has a diverse lineup that besides the arcade includes meeting and party rooms, an outdoor patio, food and a sports bar.*

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