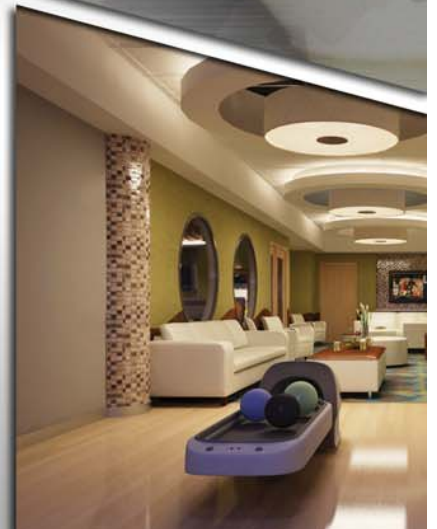


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DUCK DYNASTY?



DUCKPIN BOWLING IS POISED TO MAKE A BIG SPLASH IN THE INDUSTRY, IF RANDY WHITE HAS ANYTHING TO SAY ABOUT IT.



■ By Fred Groh

If Randy White is right about duckpins, the game whose range has been confined for 100 years to the Northeastern seaboard will be nesting around the world before long.

White, principal of White Hutchinson Leisure and Learning Group of Kansas City, MO, is completing a duckpin FEC in Vietnam and is in full design of another near Seattle.

Growing up in the 1950s and '60s in Baltimore, unofficial epicenter of duckpin bowling, White remembers half the lanes in the city as duckpin. "Guess where all the families and open play bowlers went. They went to the duckpin. Guess where the league bowlers went. The only reason we have tenpin bowling is because it was the official, sanctioned type of bowling for leagues."

"Leagues and tournaments had all the priority," he wrote in a manifesto on duckpin bowling two years ago. "Bowling centers were designed and operated for sport and competitive bowling, not the casual bowling public. Open play bowling was only available when sport bowlers didn't





need the lanes. In fact, the reason that you still see older tenpin centers with elevated concourses is so the sport's spectators had a good view."

White was never an avid bowler, but when he played it was always duckpins.

"It's easy to play!" he explains with a laugh. "You don't have that stupid ball with the holes in it that drags you down the lane when you don't let go of it right!"

And coiled in that remark is the way White is pitching duckpins to his bowling clients round the world.

In his firm's 24 years there have been more than 500 in 32 countries. Three dozen projects included bowling, where White Hutchinson supplied feasibility studies, full design, and assisted with management start-up, depending on the project.

White and his partner, Miles Hutchinson, opened the firm in the middle 1980s as a real estate consultancy. It was a time of recession in real estate brought on by overbuilding and federal tax code revisions, according to White, and he and Hutchinson specialized in evaluating troubled commercial real estate and developing turnaround or workout strategies for owners.

In January 1989 a bowling center owned by a shopping center client in Olathe, KS, a KC suburb, burned to the ground. The firm was asked to supervise the rebuilding.

"After raising my hand and saying I'd do it, I realized I hadn't been in a bowling center since I was 16 years old. Which was probably a good thing," White adds. "We rebuilt [Olathe Lanes East] and we broke all kind of paradigms in the bowling industry. We had the first completely level floors, the first cocktail seating, we up-

scaled the food, we had windows in the facility. And the business doubled."

Hutchinson and White quickly came to the conclusion that developing projects was a lot more fun and rewarding than working with bankers on the value of their collateral, and decided to move into project consulting, design and production. The timing was good. FECs were just appearing. And sprouting up around the first FECs, children's learning and play environments, themed restaurants, malls and zoos were just ahead for the firm.

White says he's been "trying to push duckpin for years and nobody had the guts to do it [install duckpins] because the paradigm is, you've got to have tenpin."

The two games differ little from an entrepreneurial standpoint, he points out. The architectural requirements are the same, the lanes being the same size. The capital investment is "about the same."

But duckpin is a better fit with today's bowlers because it's a more "social" basis for a bowling venue, White

believes.

"Duckpin is so friendly. The ball, women can handle it, men can handle it. It's just a fun game, [like] bocce ball now becoming popular throughout the country because it's extremely social and extremely approachable. Tenpin bowling is the most unfriendly type of open play bowling there is."

Bowling business people often miss that, White says. They "get stuck" thinking about their businesses because they focus on the entertainment, not the social experience.

"It's no longer going out for the entertainment. People are going out to socialize. All the entertainment does, all the food and beverage does, is facilitate socialization. People all over the world can't socialize unless they have a drink in their hand, they're eating something, or they're throwing a ball. The number-one motivation is, really, the social aspect of it. Especially today, if you're going to compete with the digital entertainment world [and] get them out of the home."

In the 2012 manifesto, "It's Time to Reinvent the Game of Bowling" (whitehutchinson.com/news/lenews/2012_december/article104.shtml), White concedes that tenpin has tried to make itself more user-friendly with lighter balls and bumpers. But he says his research finds that the "large, heavy, three-finger-hole ball" is "intimidating" to many people.

Also, an experienced tenpin player "can dominate the high scoring, so everyone isn't on an even playing field" and "often takes the game too seriously, diminishing the fun had by [the] entire group."

"Let's say goodbye to that three-finger-hole heavy bowling ball type of bowling and let everyone discover how much more fun bowling can really be," the manifesto concludes. "It's back to the future with duckpins. Let the ducks fly!"

White says the time is right for it.

Six months before he posted the manifesto on his website, he was contacted by Vietnamese entrepreneur Quang Man, owner-operator of a large soccer complex in Da Nang City, next to the National



Stadium where high-profile pro soccer is played. Quang was thinking about building an FEC next to the stadium on another side.

When the project opens (scheduled for next month), White Hutchinson will have been responsible for the feasibility study; the full-design intent, which takes the architecture to just short of local permitting; the full interior design; specifying the equipment, furnishings and appointments in the facility; assisting with F&B concepts, procurement, management start-up, marketing; and will send people to train staff on how to operate the rides and the bowling.

Under pell-mell construction on a 24/7 schedule for the past year, the 157,000-square-foot project, named Helio Center, will include indoor ice skating, blacklight go-kart rides, children's soft-play and play-and-discovery center, 19 karaoke rooms, a six-station food court and four restaurants with display kitchens. And 14 open play duckpin bowling lanes plus a two-lane duckpin boutique.



For years, duckpin expansion was hobbled by the folding of the companies that manufactured pinsetters for the game. Bowl Mor, founded by Howard Dowd and R. Lionel Barrow, apparently intended to manufacture pinsetters for every bowling game. Dowd and Barrow started with candlepin—and had four working machines in 1949—then moved on to duckpin, five-pin, nine-pin and tenpin. Development costs for the tenpin machine seem to have been too great and the company went Chapter 11 in the late 1960s. A parts business was maintained for the duckpin machines for a few years; then that, too, stopped.

The other brand of pinsetter was the eponymous brain child of inventor Ken Sherman. The story is that Sherman, who put his incredibly complicated machine on the market in 1953, turned down an offer from Brunswick to buy the rights, at which Brunswick turned exclusively to tenpin. Sherman continued for a short time after Bowl Mor faded, and then also closed.

For 40 years, duckpin houses have had to fashion their own

replacement parts or buy for parts the rare old machine that suddenly pops up on the market.

Quang is not going to install Shermans, Bowl Mors or indeed any free-fall pinsetters in Da Nang. He will use string machines—particular machines that will be convertible from duckpin to tenpin and vice versa, allowing both games to be played on the same lane according to demand. As a bonus, being string machines, they are mechanically simpler than free-fall machines (200 parts compared to as many as 2,200) and cheaper (a third less than a brand-new free-fall machine).

Quang can't decide to run duckpins in the morning and tenpin that night, explains Dave Frewing, president of US Bowling, which is supplying

the bowling for Da Nang. But two men can make the conversion on 14 lanes, going either way, in one or two days. Pin action is the same as in free-fall machines because the pit built by US Bowling is the same as in traditional tenpin layouts, he says. The company sells the same pinsetter as a tenpin string machine and in its Rollerball small-ball game. It's been in US Bowling's line for six years.

The convertible pinsetter "removes the risk of pioneering," White observes, "because if it doesn't work you can switch to tenpin very easily. However, I told [Quang] I predict within one year he will switch to 100% duckpin."

On White's first trip to Da Nang to explore bowling with Quang, the two were touring a couple of new tenpin houses in Ho Chi Minh City when Quang turned to him and said, "You know, we Vietnamese we don't really like this bowling."

"Well, just look at the size of the Vietnamese and look at that ball. My client is maybe 5'2". The Vietnamese, the older ones, are all smaller." White told Quang another form of bowling could be installed, and shipped him a duckpin ball to examine.

In a thorough inspection of the ball and later the game, Quang was impressed. He noted even the shape, sound and sight of the flying pins.

But he told us, "The main reason for us to choose duckpin from tenpin is the balls of duckpin. These balls are lighter, more suitable for Vietnamese people's physical condition than the traditional heavy ones. Strong or weak hands, people can enjoy playing for hours without suffering from arm ache the next day. The holes of tenpin balls sometimes hurt people's fingers, too, while duckpin balls have no holes. Moreover, thanks to the ball size, even a small kid can join their parents' games to bring a better experience for the family."

White adds, "They're very social when they go out. The number-one form of entertainment is private karaoke rooms, where they get together as a group. When you go to restaurants, half the people are in groups of 15, 20 or more. Bowling is a very social type of thing, so [duckpin] really fits in

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with the way they socialize.”

White reports that he is starting work in a number of countries where there is no bowling tradition. “Therefore you introduce the most friendly type, which is duckpin.” When we talked to him most recently, he had just returned from Jordan, where he is working on a mall entertainment center that will include 10 lanes of duckpin.

Closer to home, the ducks are flying to Puget Sound in Washington State. White’s project there will open with 10 tenpin lanes including a 2-lane boutique. But duckpins will do better: 12 lanes including a 4-lane boutique. All 22 lanes are being equipped with the convertible pinsetter, and “Based on what we expect from consumer demand, all lanes will be duckpin by the end of the first year,” White told us. The project will also feature a four-star restaurant, an arcade and laser tag.

Make no mistake, the string pinsetter will most likely limit duckpin to recreation bowling. Stan Kellum, executive director of the National Duckpin Bowling Congress (NDBC), the sanctioning and governing body, reports that experimental trials of duckpin string machines have drawn a sour response from hard-core league players. They want to see free-fall pin action.

On the other hand, White thinks tenpin players can be won over to duckpins, after a fashion. “Part of the [business] problem is you get serious tenpin bowlers showing up in a social group and all they want to do is the sport. [But] you put them in front of duckpin and it’s a new game.”

In any event, if keeping the duckpin game alive is the goal, the number of sanctioned U.S. duckpin houses is down to 47 (plus four or five that don’t certify) and



a total of 820 lanes (an additional 100+ lanes are uncertified). NDBC members number 4,800 adults and 1,700 youth bowlers, while non-member duckpin players are estimated at about 9,800.

And if Randy White is right about the attractiveness of duckpin bowling, and his pitch for duckpins takes hold as did his pioneering ideas at Olathe East, at least some of those numbers could start climbing. ❖



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