



Rocket Center Lanes has brought bowling to a high school campus facility in Bowerston, Ohio.

It's Back to School for Bowling Lanes

Reversing a 21st-century trend, bowling is finding its way back to school campuses and other unique venues.

BY BARBARA PELTZ

At the height of its popularity, on-campus bowling lanes could be found in more than 220 colleges and universities in the United States. Most were modest, typically located in the basement of the school's student union. Their primary purpose was for physical education classes, intramurals, student and faculty leagues, club sports and open bowling. But over the years, the number of campus bowling venues dwindled to fewer than half as many as the student unions in which they were housed were considered prime real estate on campuses.

In recent years, however, the trend has begun to reverse as colleges and universities have been adding bowling back into the mix. Only this time, they are state-of-the-art centers with an emphasis on competitive bowling. Driving forces behind the trend were the recognition of women's bowling as a sport by the National Collegiate Athletic Association and of both women's and men's bowling as a sport by the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics. Bowling began as an emerging sport and has subsequently qualified for varsity/

championship sport status with both the NCAA and NAIA.

Bowling at the University of Nebraska has been a varsity sport for 25 years, and over that time became one of the top programs in the nation with 12 national titles, including nine NCAA championships.

What was once an all-campus bowling facility has been upgraded and now is part of the Husker Training Center, housing six lanes, coaches' offices, a pro shop, players' locker room and a lounge.

The most recent renovation in

2020 provided the Huskers with a tournament-quality practice facility. It is the only campus tenpin venue in the country that is leased by the athletic department for exclusive use of the bowling team. Nebraska's coaches credit the practice facilities for playing an integral role in the Huskers' success.

Although high school bowling dates to the 1930s and thousands of schools across the country offer high school bowling as a letter sport, it's rare for a high school campus to include a bowling center.

But in 2022, two schools (K-12) opened new bowling facilities on their campuses. One of them, Rocket Center Lanes in Bowerston, Ohio, was named the "Best New Traditional Center" in the 38th annual Bowling Center Architecture and Design Awards competition, coordinated by BCM.

Conotton Valley High School is the home of the Rockets and is the only

high school in the Conotton Valley Union Local Schools district. The 10-lane facility is located in the Rocket Center, an 84,000-sq.-ft. multi-use facility with a gymnasium, fitness center, walking track, pre-school classrooms, locker rooms, weight rooms and more. A pro shop is scheduled to be added soon.

Boys' Bowling head coach Dennis Gordon credits Atwood Lanes proprietor Charlie Tinlen with helping the Rockets succeed.

"During construction of the Rocket Center, Charlie literally gave us the keys to his center, enabling our bowling team to practice when we could," Gordon says.

In addition to Gordon, the Conotton coaching staff includes Brian Baxter and Assistant Coach and Girls' Head Coach Robyn King, who also serves as the high school's band director.

The Rockets also have a direct connection with world-renowned coach

Jeri Edwards, a 2013 inductee into the Bowling Coaches Hall of Fame. What started with individual lessons at Edwards' home base in Akron, Ohio, has expanded to include several trips each year by Edwards to work with the team at the Rocket Center.

In just their fourth season, the Lady Rockets claimed the 2022-23 Ohio High School Athletic Association Division II State Championship, while the boys' team finished third in their division.

Gordon has noticed an increase in families moving into the region and credits the Rocket Center for that. Gordon says that having an on-campus facility enables students to easily work in practice sessions around their schedules. A bonus is that they also can work at the center, learning many aspects of the bowling business.

Last year also saw the addition of a four-lane center at a residential childcare facility just west of Chicago.

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Mooseheart is a self-sufficient, 1,000-acre campus that was dedicated in July 1913 by the Moose fraternal organization. Mooseheart cares for young people whose families are unable to care for them from infancy through high school. The organization provides children with a wholesome, home-like environment and the best possible training and education.

When Mooseheart replaced its outdated Student Center, originally built in 1919, a modern bowling center was included in the 18,000-sq.-ft. Mooseheart Activity Center. Additional amenities in the MAC include a weight room, movie theater, activity room, common study area, kitchen, table tennis and Foosball, giving the facility the look and feel of a small college student

union.

While the overall purpose of adding bowling to the MAC was to provide recreation for the students, Facilities Director John Lochbaum sees the potential for more. Mooseheart already is active in the Illinois High School Association, with teams in boys' and girls' basketball and track, boys' soccer and wrestling and girls' volleyball.

With four lanes on campus, students now have a place to practice their bowling skills. The region is loaded with talented youth bowlers and strong high school bowling programs.

Competition will likely take place at a commercial center, due to the size

Mooseheart is a residential childcare facility just west of Chicago that now has a four-lane bowling installation.



of Mooseheart's string-pin center. But the Illinois State BPA figures to be a valuable resource as Mooseheart develops its high school bowling program.

Gary Sparks ran the 18-lane on-campus center at Vincennes University from 1989-2017. In addition to providing a practice facility for the Blazer bowling teams, the center facilitated the accredited Bowling Center Management program. Sparks credits having the on-campus lanes with his ability to control the lane conditions offered to the bowling teams.

"Having the lanes on campus was a huge recruiting tool as it provided potential team members a place to practice with no charge and also anytime the center was open. Having a bowling center right on campus was an enticement to come to VU that many schools couldn't offer."

Regardless of the number of schools with lanes on campus, school teams will always depend on and benefit from strong relationships with commercial bowling centers. Bill Straub is quick to stress the importance of working with local centers.

Straub, Nebraska's head coach from 1985-2019, recognized this early in his coaching career. The forward-thinking coach, a three-time PBA titlist prior to embarking on his coaching career, also has been an advocate for string machines, first outfitting the Husker bowling center with them in 2007.

"From a goodwill standpoint as well as providing another environment for our teams to improve and compete, working together with local centers proved to be a win-win," he says.

10 Campus Group Ideas for Commercial Centers

Most campus bowling centers don't have enough lanes to host large group events. And even if they did, many would need to cater the food. Establishing relationships with the campus center and/or student union manager and other campus department heads can generate new and lucrative revenue streams for commercial centers. Here are 10 ideas for campus-related group events:

1. A team-building bowling party for each athletic team prior to or early in its season. Think about the number of sports — both men's and women's — that the school has.
2. An end-of-season bowling party for each of those teams to include family members and other invited guests.
3. Fundraising events for every team, every club, every fraternity and every sorority on campus.
4. Other fundraising events organized by students for their community outreach programs and various causes.
5. Holiday parties for the aforementioned groups, as well as students who do not travel home during that period.
6. Fun tournaments for the aforementioned groups, with the qualifying rounds at a commercial center and the finals at the campus center.
7. Weekly, bi-weekly or monthly leagues for university professors and staff members. Texas A&M, with its 73,000 students, has more than 3,500 faculty members. Amherst College, with an enrollment of 1,800, has more than 260 faculty members. And don't forget community colleges and high schools.
8. Holiday parties for faculty and staff members — perhaps divided by department, depending on the school's size.
9. Graduation bowling parties.
10. Reunion bowling parties.