

AUGUST 2023

BCM

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- Update: Escape Rooms
- Bowl Expo in Pictures
- R.I.P., Sen. Ron Richard
- Q&A With Don MacBrayne

Beating the Odds

\$25,000 Frewing Scholarship Recipient Wins an Uphill Battle



Aaliyah Friend had a strong support system to help her stay on the right path.



HAS LAUNCHED!

SEE PAGE 55 FOR DETAILS



The new Stars and Strikes venue in Myrtle Beach, S.C., is the first company location in a tourist city. Bowling remains the star attraction.

Can an FEC Tap Into an Area's Tourism Market?

The new Stars and Strikes venue in Myrtle Beach, S.C., seeks to entertain both residents and visitors.

BY BARRY SPARKS

Stars and Strikes Family Entertainment opened its 16th location in Myrtle Beach at the end of February. The \$10 million, 52,500-square-foot facility is located in the Coastal Grand Mall, the largest indoor mall in South Carolina.

This is the first Stars and Strikes facility in a tourist area, according to Chris Albano, managing partner and co-founder of the company.

"We thought we would try our hand in the vacation market," he says. "This type of market is new to us."

While Myrtle Beach has a year-round population of 39,000, it attracts 19 million tourists a year. The metropolitan area is one of the fastest growing in the country, according to

U.S. Census figures.

This is the third location in South Carolina for the Georgia-based company. Other Stars and Strikes centers are in Georgia, Alabama, North Carolina and Tennessee.

"We always look for markets that fit our demographics — plenty of families with children, a certain income level and easy accessibility. That strategy has worked for us so far," Albano says.

Drive times are critical, particularly from a five- to 10-mile radius. Convenient to U.S. 17, U.S. 501 and the Myrtle Beach Airport, Stars and Strikes' newest venue can be reached easily.

Judging from the center's early

volume of business, the strategy has been successful in the vacation market, too.

Of course, Stars and Strikes offers plenty of fun for guests of all ages. The center has 24 lanes of bowling, all with SPARK, an immersive, on-lane technology with mesmerizing graphics that let bowlers choose from a variety of adventurous games.

Eight of the lanes are VIP lanes inside the upscale S&S Lounge. A corporate event space in the S&S Lounge seats more than 100 guests with a private bar.

"Corporate and private-event guests initially visit for the fun, only to be pleasantly surprised at the high quality and taste of the private-event



In addition to a giant arcade — now a mainstay at Stars and Strikes centers — the Myrtle Beach location offers laser tag and axe throwing.



buffets and food packages,” comments Albano.

In addition to bowling, Stars and Strikes features a 10,000-square-foot arcade with 93 games, a multi-story laser tag arena, eight bays of axe throwing and a large full-service bar surrounded by big-screen TVs for sports viewing.

The gigantic arcade is a product of years of learning, according to Albano. When Stars and Strikes started 18 years ago, the thought was that the popularity of arcade games would diminish over time because of the home experience. But that has not been the case.

“Arcade games have become so much more fun to play, and they are a great way for parents and kids to interact,” he says. “There are no age limits. Around 2015, we realized we needed larger and larger arcades.”

Myrtle Beach is one of the five locations where Stars and Strikes offers axe throwing. Albano says it appeals to a different demographic and provides another reason for customers to go to Stars and Strikes. Plus, it’s easy to operate, requires minimal staffing and doesn’t take up a lot of space.

The myriad attractions fuel a robust birthday party and corporate-event business.

“These are integral pieces for any FEC,” says Albano. “The birthday party is the ultimate family get-together. It’s a great opportunity for us to show off all of our cool attractions. There’s no better way to market our facility.”

The center offers great food for the entire family. Its menu includes wings, chicken tenders, burgers, specialty pizza, specialty pasta, family combos, sandwiches, wraps and more. Customers can order food from stand-alone kiosks. And a robot, resembling R2-D2 from “Star Wars,” delivers the orders from the kitchen to the guests’ location. All 16 Stars and Strikes centers now utilize robotics.

The robots have replaced food

runners and have helped alleviate staffing problems.

“The robots have been well received and been very successful. They are dependable, and don’t call off sick, complain or need a vacation,” offers Albano.

The Stars and Strikes in Myrtle Beach is the company’s first location to go completely cashless. Using point-of-sale kiosks throughout the center, customers can load any amount of money on to cashless cards, which can be used for all attractions.

Albano has declared the move to a cashless operation a success. It has eliminated the handling of cash, the need for balancing out the cash register at the end of a shift or day and decreased the concerns about having a large amount of cash at the center. Albano expects more Stars and Strikes locations to go cashless in the future.

Albano says he and his partner, Jack Canouse, take what they learn from each new location and apply it to future projects.

“We’re always learning and trying new things, realizing that they might not all work,” says Albano. “We want to make sure we keep our customers happy and engaged. The last thing we want is to become stagnant.”

At a Glance

Venue: Stars and Strikes Family Entertainment

Location: Myrtle Beach, S.C.

Proprietors: Chris Albano and Jack Canouse

Design and Architecture: US Design Lab

Bowling Equipment:

Brunswick Bowling Products

Immersive Experience:

Brunswick Bowling Products (SPARK)

Arcade Game Distributor:

Betson Enterprises

Laser Tag Arena Designer and

Equipment Provider: Lasertron

Axe Throwing: Lasertron