

# BOWLING ENTERTAINMENT CENTER

BCM'S FEC SUPPLEMENT

AUGUST 2023

**BEC INTERVIEW:**  
INSIDE THE BRAIN OF DON MACBRAYNE

**FROM THE GROUND UP:**  
WHY FOOD IS A KEY PIECE

## Escape Artists

Today's Rooms  
Are Taking Themes  
and Special Effects  
to a New Level





BCM correspondent George McAuliffe (right) and 2022 BPAA Proprietor of the Year Don MacBrayne sat down during International Bowl Expo in Orlando for this far-reaching interview.

# Passion for People

**Don MacBrayne on why  
a BEC needs to focus on its  
staff members first.**

WITH GEORGE McAULIFFE

*Don MacBrayne recently marked his 50th year in the bowling business. He remains active as a consultant, although his goal is to be able to spend more time with his family in suburban Denver, Colo. MacBrayne began his career with Brunswick Recreation Centers (now a part of Bowlero Corporation) as a porter while in high school. A porter back then was tasked primarily with keeping a center's public spaces clean. Most recently, he was a partner in three centers in the greater Denver area operating under The Summit banner, which his company ultimately sold to Main Event Entertainment. In 2022, shortly before selling those centers, he was named BPAA Proprietor of the Year (June 2022 BCM).*

**Don, this month we decided it might be beneficial for BCM readers if we had a conversation with an early adopter in the transition from traditional bowling centers to bowling entertainment. You were at the top of my list. Let's start at the beginning. How did you get into the bowling business? Tell us**

**a little about your traditional bowling years.**

I spent 16 years as a general manager for Brunswick centers in different locations from Vancouver, B.C., Canada to Los Angeles — a total of six different centers. The emphasis in those years, 1977-1993, was all about the league bowler... the best way to sell more beer... get more league bowlers... create special events... get more league bowlers... create more tournaments... get more league bowlers. We would solicit businesses and companies in the community with free parties and events, but that was to get more league bowlers.

**When did your transition to Bowling Entertainment Centers (BECs) begin? How did that happen?**

About 1994, Brunswick stopped building traditional bowling centers. We witnessed the start of the decline of league bowlers (for many social reasons) and pushed the pause button on traditional center development. We had started the testing of FECs with the construction of USPlay in Kennesaw, Ga., and Red's in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Finally, we built our first ground-up, modern-day BEC in Lone Tree, Colo., in 2004.

**What were some of those social reasons causing the decline of leagues?**

In California, it was fueled in the early '90s by Cal OSHA's smoking ban in the workplace. When that happened, most centers lost between 400 and 1,000 league bowlers from their base of 3,000 to 3,600. At the same time, the culture was changing. People had so many more distractions to take up their recreation time. Signing up for a 35-week league lost its appeal. Families became two income and the dynamic of the bowling business changed tremendously. Leagues became less and less of the business.

**I interrupted you. You were telling us about the transition to BECs.**

Well, we needed to transform the business in order to survive the decline I described. We started to look at the non-bowling aspects of our business and non-league reasons to get people interested in bowling. Most of our centers had some presence of arcade games, from a few on the concourse to small arcades, and we knew we needed a different approach to food and beverage to attract and keep more casual bowlers. So we started there. Interestingly, when we built BECs in Brunswick, we opened them as non-smoking facilities to better attract families and younger adults.

**As those portions of the business grew, how did that affect your approach?**

It affected so much — the design of the centers, where they were located, the amenities, the F&B products, even the service model. We figured out that if we wanted more casual traffic, we needed to step up our design, our real estate strategy. With leagues down, we needed more curb appeal, more theater of entry. We modernized our color schemes, upgraded the house balls and shoes and shifted the culture to a "hospitality" approach.

### What do you mean by “hospitality” approach?

Hospitality, as in thinking like restaurateurs or hotel owners think. From housekeeping to guest service, we needed to step up our game to shift the market perception and get casual bowlers into the buildings. We made bowling, and eventually the whole entertainment experience, a more family-centric product. We stopped using “bowlers” as a term for customers and started using “guests.”

### How do you make it more family centric?

We did things like bundled pricing — 1.5-hour lane rental for four people with pizza and soft drinks for a single price. That was popular and encouraged people to come in. We sold more bowling in packages and by time than by the game. We started converting Brunswick Recreation Centers to Brunswick Zones. We updated logos and our signage for better curb appeal, and changed our real estate dynamics from warehouse districts to be on Main Street. The first Zone we built from the ground up was Lone Tree in a Denver suburb. It had two bars, a large arcade, laser tag, group sales/birthday office and 48 lanes.

### How did you go from Brunswick to The Summit?

We grew the BECs to 14 Brunswick Zone XLs and continued to expand the FEC side, adding redemption, growing the arcades, adding laser tag and other attractions. We improved the bar and restaurant piece and added a big focus on corporate group events and kids’ birthday parties. While I was VP of Brunswick XLs, we started a joint venture with three guys — Dennis Schavietello, Gary Upperman and Nick Cashion — who were real estate developers in Colorado, where I lived. Those guys liked the business and wanted to do more but Brunswick’s top executive decided no more joint ventures. I was approaching 40 years with Brunswick and contemplating retirement. The timing was right. We became partners in The Summit. We grew The Summit to three locations and then Main Event came knocking last year.

### What a great history and a great career. Many of our readers operate a single location. You’ve been a multi-unit operator for decades. What is your advice to those folks who might be thinking of adding a location or at least growing the business they have?

The old saying is that you want to set up your business so that you can work on the business, not in the business. When I set up the first Summit in Windsor, it was with the discipline that I would want if I had multiple locations. We established, documented and trained to service standards — everything from the laser tag experience, the redemption store experience, issuing a lane and the entire F&B cycle, plus housekeeping standards, cash systems and maintenance standards. Absolutely everything was documented and systematized. We mapped the guest experience and staffed accordingly. We created our mission statement and had our certified training program. Our management team and team members delivered that experience. I was there to support

and cheer them on.

### What’s the foundation of that setup?

Your goal is to have a family of four spend 3.5 hours and 250 bucks in your center, and that they will come back at least three more times in the next 12 months. Early in the process, you should develop a solid mission statement. Ours was: “To consistently deliver an elevated experience to every guest, every visit.” Understand, and help your team understand, that the moment of truth is on the guest’s walk from your front door back to their car. We want at least one person to say out loud, “That was fun! Let’s do it again.” That’s when you’ve won. Of course, if they get to the car and nobody has said, “Let’s come back,” then you’ve failed.

### With the foundation in place, what else is important?

Just to rattle off some bullet points, in no particular order, I’d say: Determine your primary target demographic. Build your products, service model, finishes, environment standards, marketing and messaging around your primary target. Others will come. Layout: We need to move guests through the four corners of the building efficiently. Team members are number one. That’s a little counterintuitive, as most say the customer is number one. But I don’t think you can serve the customer the way you need to without putting your team first.

### Tell us more about ways you put the team first.

The team needs to be inspired and rewarded to live the mission statement. They need the training and support to succeed and constantly reinforce it. Very high on the list: The staff needs to be empowered to make things right for the customer. Resolving guest complaints, and exceeding expectations in that resolution, creates loyal customers. You can’t wait for a manager to do that. So you need to create and lead a deep community spirit — first the internal community, your team, and then the greater customer community.

### How do you translate those principles to operations? Give us some examples.

You have multiple — in our case, four — businesses under one roof. You must move the guest seamlessly among those four businesses so that it’s easy for them to spend money in each. At the same time, you must be a professional in each of those four businesses because each business has its own levers to pull. If group events are going to be 20% of sales, and if a corporate group is going to spend \$40,000 with us, then we have to be competitive to the Marriott in products and service for group events. Same thing goes for the bar, the food service, the game room. You can’t just take what you know about, say, bowling and apply it to the game room; you have to get as good at the game room as you are at bowling.

### We know the bar/restaurant piece is highly important, but it is the one that scares many proprietors the most. What’s your advice to them?

The first discipline has to be with consistent product quality, and then build around that. The last thing you want to hear is, "Where's Charlie? He makes the best margarita in the house." That's death. It has to be our FEC's margarita, not Charlie's. When you get there, you have achieved consistency. A close second is dedication — an absolute focus — on cleanliness and health, both standard operating procedures (SOPs) and culture. The place must be clean. Third: Know your target demographic and create great products that they need and want. If your customers are primarily families with kids 5-12, then you don't need top-shelf scotch. Design your products around the target demographic.

**I'm interested in how your thinking about the BEC evolved over time. Any "a-ha" moments?**

I always looked at business with both sides of my brain — the science of business and the art of business. The art is about creating feelings, how the guest feels. Science is becoming a better operator, starting with knowing my numbers: how much bar revenue versus food, shoe revenue versus bowling, game revenue versus guest count, average game card sale, just to name a few. By the way, did you know that you can determine your actual capacity versus potential capacity in bowling? When our team found that balance — being good people creating great experiences

for guests, but with the business discipline managing the cost side — that's when we were hitting on all cylinders. Same for me personally. When I balanced my endorphins of interacting with guest and staff with managing the profit-loss statement, that's when I felt I was doing my job.

**There is a new generation stepping up in the industry. Can you distill the "MacBrayne keys to success" for our younger leaders to consider?**

This hasn't changed for me in 40 years-plus: Be passionate about developing people. When you take a sincere interest in your people and teach them the "whys," they will always remember that. When you are their first employer, which bowling centers are in many cases, you have the opportunity to teach them, so be a memorable first employer. That's having a passion for developing people, supporting their education, sending them to seminars or Bowl Expo — whatever can help them grow in your organization or in whatever they may choose to pursue.

*George McAuliffe has created and operated family entertainment centers from 2,000 to 150,000 square feet as a corporate executive, entrepreneur and consultant. He is president of Pinnacle Entertainment Group (not affiliated with The Pinnacle brand) and may be reached at georgemc@groupinnacle.com or 314-422-7197.*

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**Step 2 - Plan Your Trip to International Bowling Campus in Arlington, TX**

**Step 3 - Attend the School of Entertainment Center Management & Stress Less about the Future!**

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— Richard Kenny, Forest View Lanes



**October 1 - 6, 2023**