

'I Want to Make Money'

That's the candid goal of Brandon Wooldridge as he expands Biloxi's Big Play Entertainment Center.

BY DENNIS BERGENDORF

What could be the hottest family entertainment center on the Gulf Coast was born as a gambling casino. Or, to be precise: Ray Wooldridge's plan for a big casino and hotel/condo complex — a plan that was rejected by government agencies on more than one occasion.

While details are complicated, what's important is that Wooldridge was a major developer who owned a minority stake in the NBA's New Orleans Pelicans. At about the time he sold his interest in that team, Hurricane Katrina struck, wiping out an estimated 20% of the nearby Mississippi city of Biloxi, including casinos and FECs.

Wooldridge's company, RW Development, "bought a lot of property... and by the time everything was cleared out and ready to start construction, the economy collapsed."

That's the recollection of Ray's son, Brandon, who graduated from college just before the Great Recession hit. "None of the family entertainment came back, and we were sitting on a bunch of vacant property."

RW sought permission to build its casino complex on a piece of land about 400 feet from Biloxi Beach, but the planning commission said no. Still, something needed to occupy the property. So why not miniature golf?



Big Play Entertainment Center offers an array of attractions that keep the people of Biloxi and beyond coming back again and again.

The 36-hole set-up opened in 2010, with Brandon at the helm.

Brandon, who had no experience in amusements or bowling (which would become a major component a few years later), jumped in with both feet.

Big Play Family Fun Center was a modest success, despite the Deep-water Horizon oil spill obliterating the tourist trade for about a year. "We got scared because this was our first venture into this kind of business," Brandon admits. "We ended up eking

out some property for bumper cars and go karts to try to generate some traffic."

Finally, the goo was gone from the beaches, tourists returned, and revenues began hitting projections. "Each year after that we added attractions," says Brandon. In 2016, it was bowling — 12 lanes of Brunswick strings in a 26,000-sq.-ft. addition.

And by then the name had become Big Play Entertainment Center, a mega center on its way to two arcades, a splashy bar that doubles as a music venue (Big Play Live), go-karts, bumper cars, laser tag, Laser Maze, virtual reality, a "mine" in which families can find gold and gemstones, two miniature golf courses and a

130-seat restaurant.

"We put a lot of effort into high-quality food, even though it's classics like wings, burgers and pizza and things like that. We do whatever we can scratch, fresh."

The go-karts have been such a huge hit that Wooldridge tried to expand that area about two years ago. "We were planning a three-level track. We were under construction and COVID happened, and we got shut down. We pulled the plug on it, redesigned it and came back with the

nicest one-level track we could come up with.”

“Dynamic” is one word that can describe Big Play and its goal of attracting as many different market segments as possible. In the early days, it tried adding a small carnival, but locals weren’t happy; it was said to be something like those traveling shows you see on parking lots. “We did it to test the market,” Wooldridge says. The rides were gone after a brief stay, but there are now three kiddie rides. Added across the street have been a quarter-mile go-kart track, a new building, and the kiddie rides, “about two acres of attractions.”

Though Brandon came into the business with zero experience running an FEC, he never let that hinder him. Over the years, he has “piecemealed” his education, with

a lot of help from BPAA and IAPPA, the teams at Brunswick and Creative Works, and guidance from consultants like Turfway’s Dave Wallace.

“I was trying to develop the property, run the existing business and train to open a new business,” he says. “Having to do all that by myself without Dave there would have been really challenging.”

So far, the biggest revenue producer is the pair of arcades, with their 85 and 60 games aimed at both kids and parents. In addition to the popular crane games, there are attractions like Omni Arena and Halo Fireteam Raven. The redemption center is filled with prizes ranging from candy and trinkets to high-end devices.

If you browse Big Play’s website, you may run across \$2 bowling on Tuesdays. That’s no typo. “Get the

whole lane for up to six people” for \$2 an hour, Wooldridge says. Of course, shoes are regular price, and “we make more off the shoes than we do off the bowling.” Not to mention a lot at the bar.

With fixed capital costs and relatively low electricity bills for the string machines, Wooldridge feels bowling makes an excellent loss leader. “We’ve got arcade games turned on, got the kitchen open and all these different things, so to us it’s a very small cost to get sold. We want people to come in and do other things.”

So even though the center is practically giving bowling away on Tuesdays, “we bring so many people in that we sell enough food and alcohol, games and other things that it’s one of our best nights of the week.”

Two-buck bowling is just one of the daily specials Big Play is noted for. “Each day of the week, we have a pretty aggressive special. It’s just to drive weekday business outside the season.”

For instance, Wooldridge notes that on Wednesdays, arcade games and bar drinks are half-price. Mondays feature \$20 credit on video games and \$7 mixed drinks.

Yes, daily means all day. “We’re in a service-industry market and some people don’t get off work at 4 to come have a drink during happy hour,” he explains. “We didn’t want to limit who we’re marketing our specials to.” Adds Wooldridge: “We don’t do happy hour. We do happy day.”

One extremely popular special that didn’t survive was “Three-Dollar Thursday,” when burgers and pints of beer were \$3 apiece. “We got so

busy that we had to stop. We sold too many of them.” Still, Wooldridge says that was the biggest night of the week for the arcades.

The 37-year-old says the best advice he can give to proprietors with FECs or BECs in their future is to “do your homework and hire consultants.” He says industry professionals may be in business to sell, “but they have a wealth of knowledge. They do this every day, so collectively they can put together a pretty good plan for you. And you don’t have to reinvent the wheel.”

At a Glance

Venue: Big Play Entertainment Center

Location: Biloxi, Miss.

Proprietor: Brandon Wooldridge

Financing: People’s Bank and Firestone Finance

Bowling Equipment: Brunswick Bowling

Arcade: Betson Entertainment

Redemption: BMI Merchandise (and others)

Debit Card System: Intercard

Laser Maze: Creative Works

Laser Tag Arena Designer: Creative Works

Laser Tag Equipment Manufacturer: Delta Strike

Bumper Cars: Ride Development Company (RDC)

Miniature Golf: COST of Wisconsin

Music Source: Bowling Music Network (BMN)

have major plans to do the same this year.”

In the works are expansions that will bring a 20,000-sq.-ft., two-story laser tag arena, a “Star Wars”-themed arena, 30 more arcade games, more birthday party rooms, and three franchises: Just Love Café, TCBY and Mrs. Fields.

“That’ll allow us to sell ice cream and cookie cakes to vertically integrate that part of the business,” Wooldridge explains. “Right now, everybody brings in their outside treats for birthday parties.”

Big Play is a successful entertainment center, but “we’re trying to become a regional entertainment destination. We used to have customers come in from 30 minutes away, but now we’re seeing them come in from up to an hour-and-a-half away.”

There are quite a few FECs that have been started from the ground up, but maybe not so many that have been built one attraction at a time. By a guy whose father owned an NBA team. A guy who had absolutely no bowling center experience, other than to roll the ball occasionally.

But that’s exactly the story behind the Big Play Entertainment Center, which is a very big deal in Biloxi and far beyond.

At the beginning, Wooldridge himself “spent probably two years going to seminars and shows.” Among them were several Bowl Expos, Laser Tag 360s and the IAPPA Expo. He acquired a ton of literature, and Wallace “helped organize my thoughts and sort out the whole process.”

As for his goals, Wooldridge is candid: “I just want to make money. We are trying to be the premier — and I think we already are — entertainment destination in Mississippi. We’ve added on every year, and we



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