

# BOWLING ON A STRING

## The IBF officially certifies string pinsetters while the USBC analyzes its next steps

■ By Paul Lane

In recent years string pinsetters for tenpin bowling have been featured in editorial stories and advertising pages in the bowling industry trade and consumer publications. Not surprisingly, string pinsetters have gotten a mixed response from bowlers and proprietors. While most responses are positive, there is a small percentage of traditionalists who have not gotten on board with the new trend.

There is a new aspect to consider, as Andrew Oram, the chief operating officer of the 144-member nation International Bowling Federation (formerly the World Tenpin Association), issued the following announcement in a press release on November 8, 2020:

"After extensive research and consideration, the International Bowling Federation (IBF) is certifying string pinsetting technology and has approved string machines for sport, leagues, and sport competitive tournament play worldwide (sport bowling)."

Oram's comments were a new and interesting development for the future of sport bowling. "Centers wishing to use string machines for sport bowling must comply with newly defined technical requirements," Oram continues. "These requirements are intended to ensure consistency across approved string machine centers [making them] IBF-compliant string centers, and maximum alignment with free-fall centers."

The perception is that string machines for tenpin



bowling is a relatively new development, but that's far from the fact. Jurgen Kiewning, the general manager of SES in Stockach, Germany, which has been building string machines since 1998, told us that his father, Erwin, was an employee of the Swiss company Schmid, which first introduced a tenpin string machine in about 1960. And, later, Erwin was in management with Brunswick after they purchased Schmid because of their interest in the company's free-fall GS machine. In 1998 Brunswick relocated its GS operations to Hungary and sold the tenpin string machine division to Erwin, who then founded and launched SES.

An early-model Schmid tenpin string machine was called K620, which stands for the year they were manufactured (1962). However, a brochure from Schmid, printed in 1960, features a 26-lane tenpin center with string machines in Osaka, Japan, around 1959. These early model string machines were installed throughout Europe. SES continues to manufacture and sell parts to centers that are still operating, and still actively markets and installs string machines.

IBI has featured stories on full scale entertainment centers, boutique centers offering a variety of attractions, including bowling lanes, in adventure and



Andrew Oram

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Dave Kist

amusement parks, a wildlife safari park, and medium-to-large chains of bowling centers, many of which have installed or changed to string machines. Some traditionalists believe string machines are little more than a novelty, designed for entertainment driven facilities. But this is a false perception.

While the IBF added tenpin string machine to their certification program in November 2020, three federations/associations have

already been experimenting with certification. Cara Honeychurch from the Tenpin Bowling Australia (TBA); Dave Kist from the Canadian Tenpin Federation (CTF); and Lisa John from the British Tenpin Bowling Association (BTBA) shared their time, experiences, and expertise with IBI. Their responses varied slightly, but the overall conclusions were consistent

“The decision to add string machines to our certification program was an easy one,” said Lisa John. “The association is fully aware that we need bowling center proprietors in order to keep our sport alive. Without proprietors, we would not have a sport; it’s as simple as that. In the UK, bowling centers are struggling to remain open with their current overheads. If switching to string machines allows them to keep their doors open, we have to embrace it.”

Cara Honeychurch added, “It was fairly clear a number of years ago that string machines were going to be the way of the future. They are safer, more economical to run, and require significantly less maintenance. In Australia there are increasing challenges in finding mechanics that can maintain free-fall machines.”

Dave Kist said that several years ago he posed this question to the CBF board: “It’s not a question of if string machines for tenpin should be considered, but when?” Follow-up discussions and studies eventually led to the CTF adopting a string certification program in time for the 2017-2018 season.



Lisa John



Cara Honeychurch

All three federations ran extensive research and testing programs before adding a certification program for centers with tenpin string machines, including running leagues that bowled in two centers, one with string and one free-fall, and comparing scores. The difference was negligible, and the conclusion was that there was no need to separate membership into two categories — one for string and one for free-fall. Honeychurch said, “For the first year [of tournaments] we had string machines in a separate category. However, we quickly realized that this was simply not practical. Since 2018, we no longer distinguish between the two. There are so many variables in the sport and lane conditions have a far greater impact in scoring than the type of [pinsetting] machine.”

John concurred, adding, “We do not separate membership. In terms of averages, we only found a swing of 1-2% in either direction, which is no more than a bowler’s difference in average when bowling in a league in two different centers with free-fall machines.”

Kist continued, “Canadian bowlers who wish to cross the border to participate in tournaments in the U.S.A. would only be able to use averages from free-fall centers as the USBC presently views string machines as being non-approved equipment.” He said that the CTF doesn’t see that as a problem; it’s not a common occurrence, and most bowlers who travel south of the border are high-performance amateurs or professional bowlers looking to make a buck in scratch tournaments with a healthy prize fund.

Jason Overstreet, the deputy director of USBC, forwarded the following statement that clarifies their current position:

“The market related to string pinsetters is continuing to mature and the product is still evolving. USBC will continue to monitor the marketplace and present a position if and when new information becomes available.”

The overall consensus is that whether a center has string or free-fall machines is irrelevant. It’s about lane patterns and conditions, being able to make adjustments, selecting the right bowling ball, and shot-making — all good points that apply to higher average bowlers. But 90% of the typical recreational bowlers in handicapped leagues, open, and party bowlers who have lower expectations and skill set. In short, the fundamentals of the sport are unchanged and apply equally to both string and free-fall machines.

The IBF’s CEO Andrew Oram compared bowling’s conundrum to tennis. “Players bowling on both string and free-fall machines face fewer, if any, challenges than, for example Pete Sampras in tennis successfully winning tournaments on hard courts, clay, and grass,” Oram said, and, “no one questions the legitimacy of one surface compared to another. They are simply accepted. And the players make adjustments accordingly.”

Additionally, in order for the IBF and member federations to certify a center with string machines, the machines must be

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compliant with the newly defined technical specifications. These specifications also extend to lanes, pindecks, gutters and kickbacks. These elements are all required to meet IBF's universal standard specifications.

All three federations are encouraging proprietors of centers with string machines to sanction their lanes and to promote league bowling and membership as an opportunity to develop an added revenue stream as the industry tries to recover from the devastating economic effects of COVID-19. Apart from adding revenue, the idea is to get proprietors to recognize the benefit of promoting league membership. This encourages customers to be more committed to the sport while qualifying for recognition and awards programs and benefits that are denied without official sanctioning.

For many, the future of bowling world-wide is going to

look different than the past. Honeychurch said, "I predict that in 20 years you will see very few free-fall machines in Australia unless there is a significant innovation in free-fall technology, making them a more [economically] viable proposition for proprietors." John and Kist agreed with Honeychurch's prediction.

The equipment manufacturers and suppliers also have some interesting insight regarding the future of tenpin string machines since the IBF's recognition and certification program has legitimized their product.

Brunswick's John Prokopec and QubicaAMF's Neil Pennington shared similar views: both felt that



John Prokopec



Roger Creamer

proprietors who want to have league programs in their centers will have a choice in the future between free-fall and string pinsetting machines. Right now, it all boils down to preference and financial considerations. String pinsetting manufacturers

believe there will be an increase in sales in those markets where the associations have a string machine certification program.

QubicaAMF's Roger Creamer added, "I cannot remember a time when World Bowling, or FIQ and WTBA, or any other bowling federation so publicly recognized our sport of bowling center proprietors as has the IBF. It's the proprietors that take the financial risk in investing in the bowling business. No proprietors, no bowling centers, NO SPORT."

David Frewing of US Bowling says, "Many proprietors know that without a good mechanic their bowling center business is in jeopardy. To train a new mechanic for their free-fall machines, the proprietor either must spend years training or send them to a mechanics



school. Today, these centers have a choice: stay with their free-fall machines or change to string machines which are relatively maintenance free and more cost efficient."

Switch Bowling's Alain Winterhalter added, "The short-term benefit of a reduced cost of equipment with string machines is outweighed by the long-term benefit of substantially reduced operating costs, while still being able to offer sanctioned league and tournament play to their customers."

Pennington at QubicaAMF believes that in the short-term, associations and their members can get more comfortable with string pinsetter machines by hosting and participating in events in centers that have them.

Kiewning has an upbeat outlook, saying, "Most European associations have experienced a steady decline in memberships for decades. The associations want to turn this around and see an uptick in memberships. Certification of centers with string machines offer these associations an opportunity for regrowth and should be encouraged to work closely alongside proprietors to make this happen. This is a great opportunity for all parties concerned."



David Frewing

"I think acceptance of string pinsetters for competitive play will be one thing to watch," says Prokopec. "I could see where more mature markets simply may not be ready to move on from traditional free-fall pinsetters and that it may take longer for

them to be accepted. Acceptance may be more prevalent in new and emerging markets where string machines are likely to be more common." The overall consensus is that as more proprietors install tenpin string machines, the associations in those markets will need to be more open-minded and reconsider their positions by recognizing the opportunity and potential for developing new members.

Clearly, Oram understands the needs of today's proprietors. In his press release he wrote, "COVID-19 has had, and continues to have, a significant impact on bowling centers throughout the world. Now, more than ever, new technology is needed to help centers overcome the



Alain Winterhalter

financial damage as a result of mandatory shutdowns and ongoing social distancing imposed in most countries. We could not sit still, desiring instead to help improve their operations to ensure long term growth and prosperity for the sport." Oram goes further by adding, "Our approval of string pinsetters for sport bowling ensures bowling operators and investors have real choices in new technology. Free-fall and string technology are viable options for sport bowling. Now operators and investors who choose string machines as a way to make their businesses more efficient, profitable, and sustainable can continue to offer and engage in sport bowling."

Undeniably, installations of tenpin string machines in the marketplace will continue to gain momentum, especially in growth and in new emerging markets. To have string pinsetters as an option for sport bowling will have a long-term positive affect on the industry globally, for both the federations and the proprietors of bowling centers. ❖



Paul Lane is former Director of Marketing and Marketing Services for AMF Bowling, Inc. He has been the director of 18 AMF World Cups, an officer in national and international trade associations, and a pro bowler during a career that spans more than 60 countries and 50 years.