

Schenectady Gazette Article April 9, 2018

ALBANY -- Longtime manager Mike Lucey didn't want to dwell on it as the dreaded day was getting closer. But the Playdium Bowling Center closed its doors for the final time, leaving the city of Albany -- which played an important role in the development of pro bowling -- without an alley.

Soon, the familiar site at 363 Ontario St. will be torn down to make room for an apartment complex.

For bowling enthusiasts in the Capital Region, the loss of Playdium is a sign of the times, as more and more bowling establishments disappear from the scene.

Beginning in the late 1950s and running through the 1980s, there were literally dozens of bowling centers each in Albany, Schenectady and Troy. Now, there are only a precious few lanes combined for all three municipalities and their corresponding bowling organizations.

But for the 72-year-old Lucey, the closing of Playdium is personal.

"I started working here when I was about 15 years old," Lucey said. "Back then, my job was to chase pins, empty the ash trays and clean up the place. I lived right down the street, so it was easy for me to get here. Except for my stint in the Army in 1969, I've been here ever since."

Lucey's job description increased quite a bit over the last 50 years. "I ran the pro shop for a while, I coached the junior program and I worked the front desk. I also helped out in the snack bar, and I worked back in the pit keeping the machines in order," he said. These days, he also ran the place in the absence of owner Neil Luther, who is recovering from one of several strokes. Luther bought Playdium, which originally opened in 1940, in 1983.

Lucey was a very capable bowler in his prime. He once carried a 219 average, when averaging 200 was considered special. He rolled several perfect games and has a high triple of 803.

His best memory of Playdium was winning the Pepsi Challenge, a huge scratch tournament. He also was a member of the team that represented Playdium in the prestigious Albany City League, which matched all-star teams from each bowling center in the city.

"What I will miss the most are my paychecks," Lucey said with a chuckle. "But I'll also miss all the people I've met and bowled with all these years. I remember bowling on the same team with [Kenny Hall](#), and we had a blast back in the day. The closing of Playdium is definitely bittersweet.

"It's probably good for Neil Luther now. He deserves to retire. For many others, it's not that great. A lot of people loved this place."

Hall, a former PBA touring pro who operates his own pro shop at Spare Time Latham, remembers Playdium very well.

“One of fondest memories was bowling with Mike Lucey. We all loved him. I called him UM, for Uncle Mike,” Hall recalled. “We bowled in a league called the Wednesday Night Classic, and it was the biggest league in the city of Albany. We had some great times there.”

Hall, like Lucey, has personal ties to Playdium. “When I was about 19 years old, before I went out on the PBA Tour, we used to have what they called action matches every Thursday night,” he said. “We’d have between 12, 15 guys locked in the bowling alley all night. We bowled jackpots and stayed up all night. There were also some unbelievable fights in those days, and some other things I can’t talk about, but it was quite the scene. The winner of the pots would usually buy breakfast at a joint just around the street. It was amazing all the money that changed hands. It was pretty cool.”

Hall opened his first pro shop at Playdium; his first wife is Luther’s niece, Kim. “I was even on the same team with Neil for a while,” Hall said. “But my pro shop was very tiny and dark down in the basement. I could come and go as I pleased, but I eventually had to move on.”

Mark Hilton, the night desk man at Sportsman’s Bowl and a member of the Schenectady Bowling Association Hall of Fame, also remembers Playdium fondly. He rolled the first perfect game there after Luther bought the place.

“I bowled in a league there for a couple of years. It was the Wednesday Night Classic league. It was a great place. A lot of great bowlers competed in that league. I had a lot of good friends there,” Hilton said. “We used to have so many great bowling centers like Action Lanes and Schade’s and The Bowlers Club. When we used to have those traveling leagues. Those were the best days for bowling.”

## **PART OF BOWLING HISTORY**

Albany and the surrounding Capital Region communities have played an integral role in the growth of bowling, especially pro bowling.

The very first Professional Bowling Association Tour event, the 1959 Empire State PBA Open, was held at now defunct Schade’s Academy in Albany. The late Morris Cramer, who owned several local centers, including The Bowlers Club, was the tournament director of that first PBA Tour event.

Three years later, another former Albany Bowling Association center, Redwood Lanes in Colonie, hosted the first “live” PBA Tour telecast, the 1962 Empire State Classic, won by Fred Lening. Legendary announcers Chris Schenkel and Jack Buck called the action on ABC.

The Empire Classic closed out its local run in 1963 at Boulevard Bowl. Joe Donato of Schenectady and Skip Vigars of Colonie were just a couple of the national-caliber standouts who competed in leagues here but tested their game on the PBA Tour.

The PBA Tour returned to the Capital Region as the Parker Bohn III Empire State Open in 1999 at The Bowlers Club, and remained there until 2002. The PBA50 Tour, then called the PBA

Senior Tour, also appeared in the area at Clifton Park Bowl in the 1990s. Numerous PBA Regional tournaments were also held in the area, predominantly at The Bowlers Club.

## **STATE OF THE GAME**

Currently, the three major bowling associations in the Capital Region have lost numerous bowling centers for various reasons.

The Schenectady USBC is down to just three -- Sportsman's Bowl, Boulevard Bowl and Towne Bowling Academy -- after losing Rolling Greens, formerly Scotia Lanes, a year ago. Burnt Hills Lanes, which burned down; Ballston Spa Lane; the original Rolling Greens on Hamburg Street, which closed after its roof caved in during a snow storm; and Mont Pleasant Lanes closed within the past decade.

In Albany, The Bowlers Club, Redwood Lanes, Sunset Recreation, Albany Bowling Center and Action Lanes are just some of the establishments that have shut their doors within the last two decades. Olympic Lanes in Menands, formerly Tri-City Lanes, also will close at the end of the year in favor of an apartment complex. That leaves Del Lanes, East Greenbush Bowling Center, Westlawn Lanes and Town 'n Country Lanes as the only Albany USBC lanes remaining.

Although the Troy Bowling Association has lost a couple of centers, it still has 10 members, many in rural areas.

The United States Bowling Congress, the national governing body for the sport, declined comment. Through the 2016 season, the USBC had 1.49 million members and certified 48,964 leagues nationwide.

## **TALENT REMAINS**

The bowling community in the Capital Region still has a loyal base, however, and its talent base remains among the best in the nation. The old TV Tournament Time bowling show was one of the first televised bowling programs, and the Huck Finn Capital Region Bowling Show recently ended a 13-year run as the only local bowling show of its kind.

Schenectady County Community College's women's bowling team recently won its fourth consecutive National Junior College Athletic Association national championship, and the SCCC men have three national titles. [Liz Kuhlkin](#), a 24-year-old Schalmont High School and Nebraska graduate, was an NCAA Player of the Year. She owns the national record for highest three-game series for a woman (890), owns a Professional Women's Bowling Association title and is currently a member of Team USA. Brian LeClair, who runs a pro shop at Boulevard Bowl, was named the PBA50 Bowler of the Year this past season.

"I've been all round the world bowling," Kuhlkin said. "I've been all over the United States, but I've also been to Asia and Europe. I've seen how different areas and countries intertwine in their bowling communities. I have to say that I am so honored to be from the Capital District. Growing up, I was fortunate enough to have the Capital District Youth Scholarship Tour and the

Northeast Junior Scratch Tour to prepare myself for Junior Gold and college bowling. Now, as an adult bowler, there is somewhere to bowl every weekend, whether it's within the community at your home center or within a 30-minute drive.

"The Capital District is a very rich area of talented bowlers and competition that no doubt has been very special in my heart and has helped mold me and develop me into the player I am today," she added.

Steve Renzi, president of the Schenectady USBC for 10 years and currently its treasurer, is adamant that the sport will rebound from its doldrums.

"During my tenure as president, I believe the sport has gone through significant changes," he said. "Some may say that it is going in the wrong direction, some say it is in the right direction. I am in the court that believes that it is in the right direction," Renzi said. "The sport of bowling has been transitioning as it copes with the changes in our society. Bowling is still one of the biggest activities participated in by people across the globe."

Renzi pointed out that people have many more ways to recreate than they did in the past: "In Schenectady, we have seen a slight decline in USBC membership. However, it is significantly less than at the national level."

The Schenectady USBC, which recently merged the local junior and women's organizations into the same umbrella as the men, currently has more than 1,600 members. Renzi sees the merger as an impetus into a stronger base for local bowling.

"I believe the sport of bowling is strong in our local community," said Renzi, who maintains that bowlers should continue to be sanctioned by the USBC. "It is important that the sport of bowling celebrate its past, live in the present and prepare for the future," Renzi said.

Carol Judge, general manager of Spare Time Latham and the executive director of the Northeast Bowling Proprietors of New York, said that even though bowling leagues and bowling centers are in the decline, the game itself still thrives.

"Seriously, it breaks my heart to hear places like Playdium and Olympic closing," Judge said. "Bowling is so important to me, and the people who bowl are important to me. There are fewer places for them to bowl, and often when their home lanes close, they don't continue. It's very difficult to see them close. I met my husband at Olympic. He worked in the pit, and I so did I when I was 17."

But Judge said the sport is in transition. "Bowling is completely different than it used to be. It's more recreation," she said. "There are still a lot of leagues in the area, but they have [fewer] places to go. Bowling as a recreation probably is the most popular it has ever been in history. In most centers now, there are huge game rooms with laser tag and lounges. It's all tied into one business now. It's like going to Price Chopper and you have one-stop shopping. Bowling is like that. You can eat your Sunday dinner here."

