

By KATHLEEN MEGAN | The Hartford Courant

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Geoffrey Marques, 6, of Wethersfield, puts on his game face at a birthday party for his friend Owen Barnett on Saturday at Fun Squared on the Berlin Turnpike in Newington. (TIA ANN CHAPMAN / HARTFORD COURANT / September 21, 2008)

The kids dance and spin, drop to the floor in a break-style push-up and jump back to their feet.

It's not a dance club — though there is a disco ball and pulsating laser lights. It's bowling.

But at this moment, Xavier Childs, 8, and Marcelo Araujo, 9, are a little too excited to focus on bowling. They are wheeling around on their lane, watching their shadows, noticing the effect of the black light on white clothing.

Bowling at the duckpin lanes on Costello Road, just off the Berlin Turnpike in Newington, on a Saturday night is decidedly not your mother's bowling experience. Gone are the days when bowling meant smoke-filled alleys with bowlers seriously focused on strikes and spares, drinking stale coffee and eating cardboard pizza. Gone, too, is that '90s concept of bowling as recreational slumming.

Also missing, in this case, is the old name: T-Bowl Duckpin Lanes. The lanes are now called Fun Squared because there's also laser tag.

These days, bowling is heading away from a serious recreational sport — though there certainly is still plenty of that on the weekdays in league play. It's now bowling as entertainment, with bowling centers — not just alleys — offering multiple activities.

Kim Bisson, who owns the Newington facility with her husband, Richard, said that when they bought the alleys in 1981, their chief business was leagues and teams. But in August, they completed a \$1.3 million renovation, replacing some lanes with a laser-tag arena, adding new video games and party rooms, and ramping up the music and light show on weekends. The center has played host to reunions and wedding and birthday parties.

"Today, people like the entertainment feeling," said Bisson. "They like the lights and the Disney effect. They want bowling, but they want something else offered.

"Let's say we've brought bowling into the 21st century."

John Berglund, executive director of the Bowling Proprietors' Association of America, based in Texas, said the sport is definitely becoming more entertainment-oriented. In the early 1980s, he said, about 70 percent of the business in bowling centers was league play, with 30 percent casual play. Now, he says, slightly less than 50 percent is league play with the rest casual play, and the leagues are still trending downward.

But people are also willing to spend more on a night of entertainment, Berglund said, and so food and drink offerings have improved (at the Newington alley, pizza dough is fresh from [Stew Leonard's](#)) and they may participate in other activities.

Whatever the strategy at Fun Squared, it seems to be working. Last Saturday night, the place was jumping, mostly with families and children like Xavier and Marcelo, who were as excited about the atmosphere as they were about bowling.

Xavier, who had come with his father, [Chris Childs](#) of Hartford, and Marcelo, who had come with his aunt, Evelyn Collavo of Waterbury, eventually did settle down and focus, but both said the music and lights made it more fun.

Xavier and Marcelo weren't the only ones who punctuated their bowling turns with a few dance steps. Gloribel Rodriguez, 9, of Hartford, turned a few graceful steps each time she picked up a ball.

Her mother, Anna Rodriguez, said the lights and music made it "more exciting, more motivating. It helps you concentrate."

Jeff Krawczyk of Wethersfield, there with his wife, Lisa, and children, Haley, 5, and Chase, 3, said the bowling alley offers entertainment "you don't have to worry about." With all the kids and families, he said, there's no concern that you might disturb a serious bowler in the next lane.

"It's just a free-for-all," he said.

Carlos Tirado of Newington said that bowling is an economical way to get out with his wife, Sylma, and children, Carlos, 4, and Gabriel, 2. The boys bowled while the parents happily watched.

It cost him \$24 for two hours of bowling — compared with \$50 to take his kids out to the movies, where they also want refreshments.

Visit www.courant.com/bowling for more photos of 'laser-light' bowling entertainment at Fun Squared in Newington.

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