

# INTERNATIONAL **BOWLING INDUSTRY**

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Jodi and Jason Altman, proprietors of Gage Bowl in Los Angeles, love their new online reservation system.

## **DON'T MAKE THEM WAIT!**

### **Bowlers want to book online**

**INVESTMENT, INNOVATION, AND IMAGINATION AT BISON BOWL**

**GREAT LAKES JUNIOR GOLD TOUR TURNS 10**

**6 LEADERSHIP LESSONS OF PARENTHOOD**





Sander van Muiswinkel and Bas van Oldenborgh, proprietors of Bison Bowl, have a lot to smile about.

# INVESTMENT, INNOVATION, AND IMAGINATION



Bison Bowl in the Netherlands comes through the pandemic

By Paul Lane

**T**he Bison and Olround Bowling Group owns and operates five entertainment centers in the Netherlands, and includes bowling as one of the main attractions. The centers are in the Dutch cities of Utrecht, Haarlem, Veenendaal, Nijmegen, and a recently opened center in Maastricht. The addition of the Maastricht center positioned the Bison and Olround Bowling Group as the largest chain of entertainment centers in the Netherlands to include bowling.

The first bowling business was the 20-lane Nijmegen started by Ben van Oldenborgh, Bas van Oldenborgh's father, in the early 1970s. Bas took over management of the business in 1998 from his father, who passed away in 2002.



Bas and his cousin Sander van Muiswinkel became partners. Quickly they acquired two outlets in 2005 — Bison Bowling in Haarlem and Utrecht. They also entered into a 50% ownership of the Olround Bowling center in Nijmegen in 2008. Their fourth center, in Veenendaal, was acquired in 2014. The most recent, fifth center opened in the historic center of Maastricht in 2021. As the company grew, Bas and Sander split business duties: Bas covers all construction and investment aspects of the business, while Sander oversees all legal, financial, and administrative activities. General manager Valentijn Stronks handles the day-to-day operations.

In addition to bowling, there are other attractions like arcades, private party rooms, a dance floor, a nightclub (in the Haarlem center), and bars and restaurants across all five centers. The Bison and Olround Bowling Group have always enjoyed a special relationship with the Bowltech Group and its CEO and founder,



Hans Krol. A few decades ago, Ben van Oldenborgh partnered with Krol in a business venture called Bobol & Pinco that marketed red wine in boxed sets containing six bottles shaped like bowling pins. Later, in 2002, after Ben van Oldenborgh passed away, Bowltech acquired the sole rights to that business, enabling Bas to focus on his bowling business. With support from Bowltech and in-house technical skill, the new center in Maastricht features QubicaAMF's XLi Edge Pinspotters and BES X Innovative Scoring & Bowler Entertainment System.

The food and beverage side of the business has continued

to grow exponentially. Bas said, "With sport bowling struggling to grow the number of registered sport bowlers, we need to focus on an A-level food and beverage service to grow our business and increase the time spent by our customers in our locations. This ranges from small snacks at the lanes and the bar to extensive all-you-can-eat buffets, focused on grilling meat, fish, and veggies at the dinner table," added Sander. "Picking and cooking your food on tabletop hotplates with friends and family is fully in line with the experience we want to offer with our bowling and Prison Island attractions."

"Drinks and snacks are an integral part of bowling as a leisure activity," added Sander. "Prison Island, on the other hand, is not. You need all your attention and your hands and feet to play. However, practically all bowling and Prison Island customers are restaurant customers, too, taking advantage of several packages that include food and beverage to complete their visit to our centers."

League bowling has an interesting twist at Bison and Olround Bowling: most of the league bowling is promoted and managed

**"Today, roughly 60% of our revenue [comes from] food and beverage sales."**  
*~ Bas van Oldenborgh*

## FEATURE

by local bowling clubs who rent lanes from the center. Organizing bowling leagues as a club activity enables the clubs to increase membership. The Bison and Olround Bowling Group does not promote Learn-to-Bowl (LTB) programs in their centers. Instead, the bowling clubs organize and conduct their own LTB programs, which is a valuable tool for them to develop new members for the club. This, in turn, introduces new customers to the centers.

"We are always the more expensive center in every geographic area but strive to outperform other centers with our service level, maintenance level, atmosphere, and food and beverage offering. We feel we are more successful because we take one extra step. Our staff is committed to turning every customer's visit into a lasting memory — top-shelf brands for any beverage, high-quality food, and extensive buffets. We do not offer a bowling lane or a bowling game: we offer an experience. We are there, visibly present, reactively if needed, proactively where we can. At Bison and Olround, a visitor is not just the renter of a bowling lane for an hour or so, but a guest who is welcomed at entry and pampered during their visit," explained Sanders.

## PRISON BREAK EXPLAINED

One new, prominent revenue-producing feature in Nijmegen and Maastricht is the Prison Island attraction. Unlike escape rooms, Prison Island offers fully automated "prison cells" with a unique challenge in each individual cell that requires both mental and physical skills. Sander explained that in Prison Island, capacity in each cell ranges from two to five participants. In contrast to an escape room, customers do not just book one cell per team. All cells are open to all players who can play the cells in teams while monitoring and comparing their team's score on several screens displayed in the grid of cells. Typically, a visit to a cell takes two to five minutes. After that, one could play the same cell again to improve the team score or move to another available cell. All cells reset automatically after a team leaves the cell. 100 to 120 players can roam freely in the Prison Island grid simultaneously. Generally, during a one-hour visit, each team will play an average of 10 to 13 cells.

Corporate team-building events and party bookings have always been strong in the Netherlands. "With the addition of Prison Island to the business, we believe we are offering an even more compelling mix for corporate groups to spend hours in our locations," says Sander. Birthday parties are an important part of the business, too, with a variety of birthday packages designed for different age groups, but especially for the under-18 crowd. "We offer options ranging from unwrapping presents during an alcohol-free champagne party, to face painting, to a magic show by our own staff," recounts Sander.

Over the years, Bas and Sander have developed a marketing mix that produces the best results for them. A mix of national and local advertising, collateral print, promotion, social media, and public relations. National marketing, including advertising, design of logos, collateral print, and promotion material, is ahead of office function. Social media marketing is the responsibility of the local center managers.

The company's overall marketing strategy is the message that Bison and Olround offer leisure and hospitality for all ages, all professions, all layers of society.

They primarily focus on marketing visibility in public spaces: commercials in movie theatres; the wrapping of local busses; posters at bus stops; banners on or around our locations; and sponsorships with local sports clubs with etc. Sander says that being mentioned in editorial content can be more effective than







being mentioned in editorial content can be more effective than advertising in the local newspaper.

Employees are the essential piece to the overall success of the business. “We have been lucky,” notes Sander, “to [have hired] all our management level employees from within our own ranks.” Other employees are recruited mostly by word-of-mouth from the student community currently on staff and

“Our centers should be locations where people love to spend their entire night out.”

~ Sander van Muiswinkel



during university introduction weeks. “When hiring employees who deal directly with customers, we look for an open attitude, [lively] facial expressions, and an outgoing personality,” says Sander. “We have on-the-job training, with several other training programs like first aid, de-escalation skills, etc. We also provide barista training for our bar staff since the quality of our coffee is so important here in the Netherlands.”

Bas and Sander are progressive thinkers and dynamite marketers with modern ideas who have incorporated many innovative concepts into their business. But they hold true to their core business values and beliefs in the demand for a traditional bowling experience.

Even with the interruption of COVID-19, Bison and Olround Bowling Group did not sit idle while waiting for the go-ahead to reopen their centers. Instead, they focused on the construction of their newest center in Maastricht, including self-installing the bowling equipment. And, of course, planning for the successful reopening of their centers. They are long-term thinkers and planners and are in it for the long haul, standing with their core values and lots of energy. ❖



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.