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BOWLING INDUSTRY

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Hello Good Times



All
Star
LANES

SERIOUSLY FUN BOWLING, CRAFTY
COCKTAILS, AND BIG EATS AT
ALL STAR LANES IN THE UK



Main bowling area at Brick Lanes location



Hello Good Times

SERIOUSLY FUN BOWLING,
CRAFTY COCKTAILS,
AND BIG EATS AT
All Star Lanes
IN THE UK



Bowling lanes at the White City location

By Paul Lane



nce upon a time, bowling in London meant warm beer and sticky carpets. But All Star Lane (ASL), a UK-based chain with five unique, boutique-style venues, made bowling swanky. With four of the venues located in prime locations within central London, and the fifth in the thoroughfare of Deansgate in the heart of Manchester, All Star Lanes is looking bright.

Graham Cook, the company's managing director, says, "All Star Lanes set out to offer something new in experiential leisure - harking back to the glory days of American bowling - and coupling the activity with handmade cocktails and premium food offerings. The original venue in Holborn, London, in 2006, featured a





The VIP lanes at the Holborn location



Reception at Brick Lane location



Mural in the restaurant at Brick Lane location

private events space complete with a separate bar and private lanes. This space has played host to countless corporate events, product and media launches, and personal celebrations over the years and is a key feature in all [of our] builds."

According to Cook, the idea was conceived by Mark von Westenholz and Tom Mullion, probably in a London pub. It was then developed with Dan Evans and Adam Breeden to become the All Star Lanes (ASL) brand. Tom went off to develop other ideas, Adam founded Bounce Ping Pong clubs and Puttshack indoor mini-golf, and Mark steered ASL through its infancy.

Cook says, "Regrettably, I can't claim to be one of the founding partners. I came on board three years ago, first as a consultant and then [as] director of people and operations. I took the helm as managing

director in July last year." But Cook came to ASL from a 15-year long career in food and beverage and leisure, having worked in operations and human resources for businesses such as Radisson Blu Edwardian hotels, special events company Leith's, and Selfridges food halls and restaurants.

Evans, an award winning architect and designer, was approached by Mark von Westenholz who had come up with the original concept. Evans' company, Sundae Design Studios, was originally a vendor of ASL, creating the visual language and design concept for the company. But through the close relationship developed during the conceptual stage, Evans also became a director of ASL.

Once a clearly defined concept was in place, a team of experts was put together. And, according to Cook, "The concept was a hit with investors straight away, and we were lucky to find a site within a key location quickly. This meant that from conception, the first venue opened its doors in two years, in 2006."

Nick Keppe, managing director of Bowltech UK, says, "All Star Lanes' wish to provide a bespoke style of boutique bowling means every center



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is different. Dan Evans meticulously blends theme and design to the highest standards, taking into account the location and demography. All the locations are prime city center sites in areas of very high foot traffic. The décor, as well as the food and drink offerings, are to the highest standard. The All Star Lanes directors have attended Bowl Expos, visited many locations in the U.S.A., and blended the positive experiences of their research with their own personal touches.”

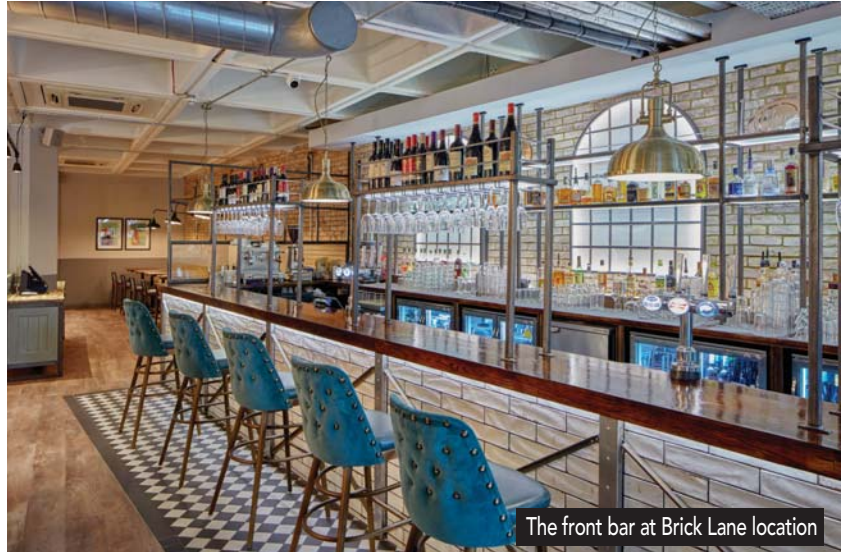
It may seem like a cliché to say that All Star Lanes is upmarket and located in more affluent upscale neighborhoods. Every detail of the business, from design, to food and beverage offerings, to customer service, is first class. The ASL concept of quality food and beverage, driven by bowling in unique boutique settings, enables the company to charge a premium price: the bowling charge per game can be as much as 30% higher than in most traditional bowling centers.



Designer and co-owner of All Star Lanes
Dan Evans

as 30% higher than in most traditional bowling centers. It’s a case of positioning and targeting the business to the more affluent minority that can afford it. And that adds up to a big profit.

The challenge for designer Evans is to take advantage of the elements that exist when designing a facility located in an existing, and often quite old, landmark building. For example, the Brick Lane venue houses six lanes, a restaurant, cocktail bar, and a private room called The Lodge. The Lodge offers two bowling lanes, a cocktail bar with karaoke, and is located in an area that started out as a loading bay.



The front bar at Brick Lane location

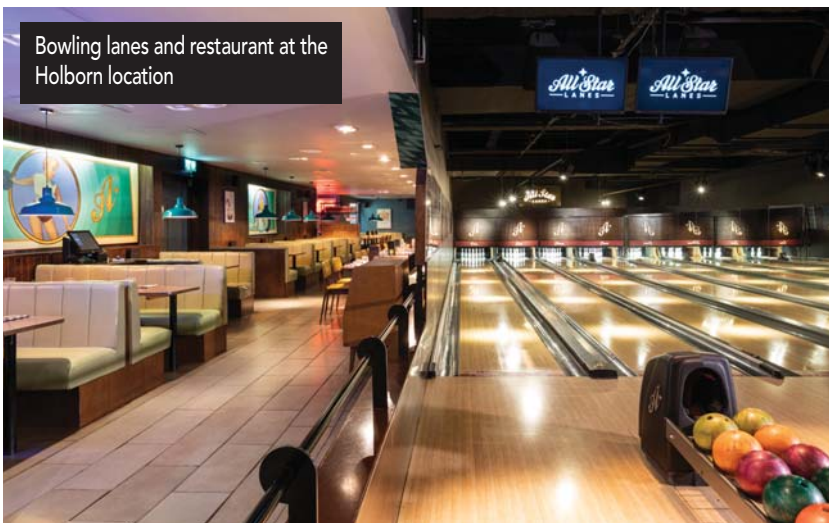
The Deansgate venue in Manchester occupies a unique space. This venue is located in the former Great Northern Railway Goods warehouse and has six lanes, a cocktail bar, restaurant, and a themed private room called the Jungle Room which has two lanes, a cocktail bar, and karaoke. Another semi-private, themed area called The West Wing has an additional two lanes. The warehouse is home to a number of attractions including a food court, casino, and an Odeon movie theater.

The Stratford and White City locations occupy modern shopping malls, yet still maintain unique styling associated with the ASL brand. The Stratford venue, located on the second floor of a mall, houses 14 lanes, a restaurant and cocktail bar, and a semi-private themed area called The Loft which has two lanes and a fully stocked retro-American fridge. Stratford has the most lanes of any ASL venue, which, Evans notes, “With lots of lanes, it loses a little of the brand essence of the business model, but I cannot argue with its success.”

The most recent venue, opened in 2018 in London’s White City, is located in the Westfield Shopping Center, a five story mall — the largest in Europe — on the ground floor and has external access through a beautiful outdoor terrace.

The White City venue features eight lanes, a restaurant, two cocktail bars, karaoke, and the outdoor terrace, plus The Midnight Lounge, a 1950s, Miami-themed room with two lanes, cocktail bar, and karaoke.

Evans says, “All Star Lanes makes the most of



Bowling lanes and restaurant at the
Holborn location

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today's light and sound technologies, including DMX-controlled, LED special effects lighting, especially in the private rooms." All Star Lanes has an uncommon problem not seen in many BECs. Each ASL must tactfully and efficiently keep the flow between the lanes and the restaurant smooth. "Technology and highly trained employees, and used extensively to move people through the system," says Evans. "With so few lanes, and the evening business being driven by bowling and dinner combinations, we cannot have people taking too long to complete a



Bowling lanes at the Manchester location

game, or decide they want to play an extra game when we have reservations stacked up, or linger over food when their lanes are close to being available. We must always be ready to move the next party onto the lanes or to their table for dinner," he added.

For ASL, the private party business is one of the keys to its financial success. "We have a team of four marketers and eight events sales



Graham Cook

managers. The events sales managers make calls to companies and organizations to sell corporate parties and corporate team-building events," says Cook. "We are also blessed with a large following of loyal corporate guests who we keep updated with offers and promotions made through our database. Occupancy and utilization of our private rooms vary in time and number of

people, from a children's afternoon birthday tea to a full-day, corporate event with an evening drink reception, to private parties that often go into the wee, small hours."

Due to the custom nature of each of ASL's venues, it was an important part of the planning and design to



Nick Keppe, managing director of Bowltech UK

have access to rare and different equipment. From the beginning, ASL partnered with Bowltech UK because they had access to the most brands. Bowltech's director Nick Keppe recounts, "The first All Star Lanes introduced the concept of the VIP private lanes to London way back in 2006. Bowltech UK was pleased to be selected to supply not only this first center, but every center since, [because Bowltech UK has] the ability, as an independent company, to select and provide exactly what the client is looking for." The mix of equipment in all five centers varies: from AMF pinspotters to SES string machines; from subway ball returns to retro-style, overlane ball returns. In keeping with the desired American retro look, even the ball hoods and racks were old Brunswick Astro or Gold Crown units which were completely refurbished. The



Karaoke booth at the White City location

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one constant has been the installation of Steltronic scoring and System 300 lanes for all of the centers.

"I am confident in saying that All Star Lanes were the innovators of this new era of boutique bowling which has since blossomed everywhere. Their most recent [center] in White City, London, is without doubt one of the finest, with its Miami-style theming, three cocktail bars, and fantastic food offering. In keeping with modern trends, this was also the first of their centers to install SES string machines, though they do not rule out reverting to conventional, free-standing pinspotters for their next center," added Keppe.

In a business that's driven by customer service, ASL has to stay current with HR trends. With over 300 employees in five venues, that is a tall order. "We are lucky to have a strong brand in the marketplace, and have worked hard on our employee



is determined by the people we work with," he added. "Passion and attitude come above experience when hiring, as we have the ability to train people with the skills they need to excel in their chosen field. We have a central recruitment manager, but venue management makes the final call on all hires within their venue."



While staying solid financially, significant changes to the original concept and business model were due in part to the maturing of the business. The high-end business model allowed the company to expand and offer new entertainment. "We have stayed true to our original concept, albeit the size and shape of our more recent openings have allowed for us to dedicate more space to restaurants and bars and, of course, a greater number of lanes," says Cook. "Whilst boutique bowling remains at the heart of our proposition, we now offer add-on activities, such as karaoke and video gaming. The popularity of our food has been such that we are now offering guests the ability to sample our menu at home, with a food

proposition, ensuring that we not only pay competitively, but provide a great work environment, and a genuine opportunity to learn and develop," offers Cook. "This has meant that we often attract talented individuals from across the business spectrum, bringing a wealth of experience. When we do need to advertise, we rely on industry press and hospitality recruitment online job boards. The experience for our guests

delivery kitchen operating out of all our five venues," adds Evans.

Without a doubt Cook, Evans, and the team at All Star Lanes have developed a winning formula for designing and operating high-end, boutique-style venues offering quality food and beverage in conjunction with bowling. And they clearly demonstrate that branding does not have to take a cookie-cutter approach in terms of facilities design. All Star Lanes has succeeded in building a chain of centers, each of which are unique in every aspect, yet still manage to keep the brand concept firmly in the forefront. ❖



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.