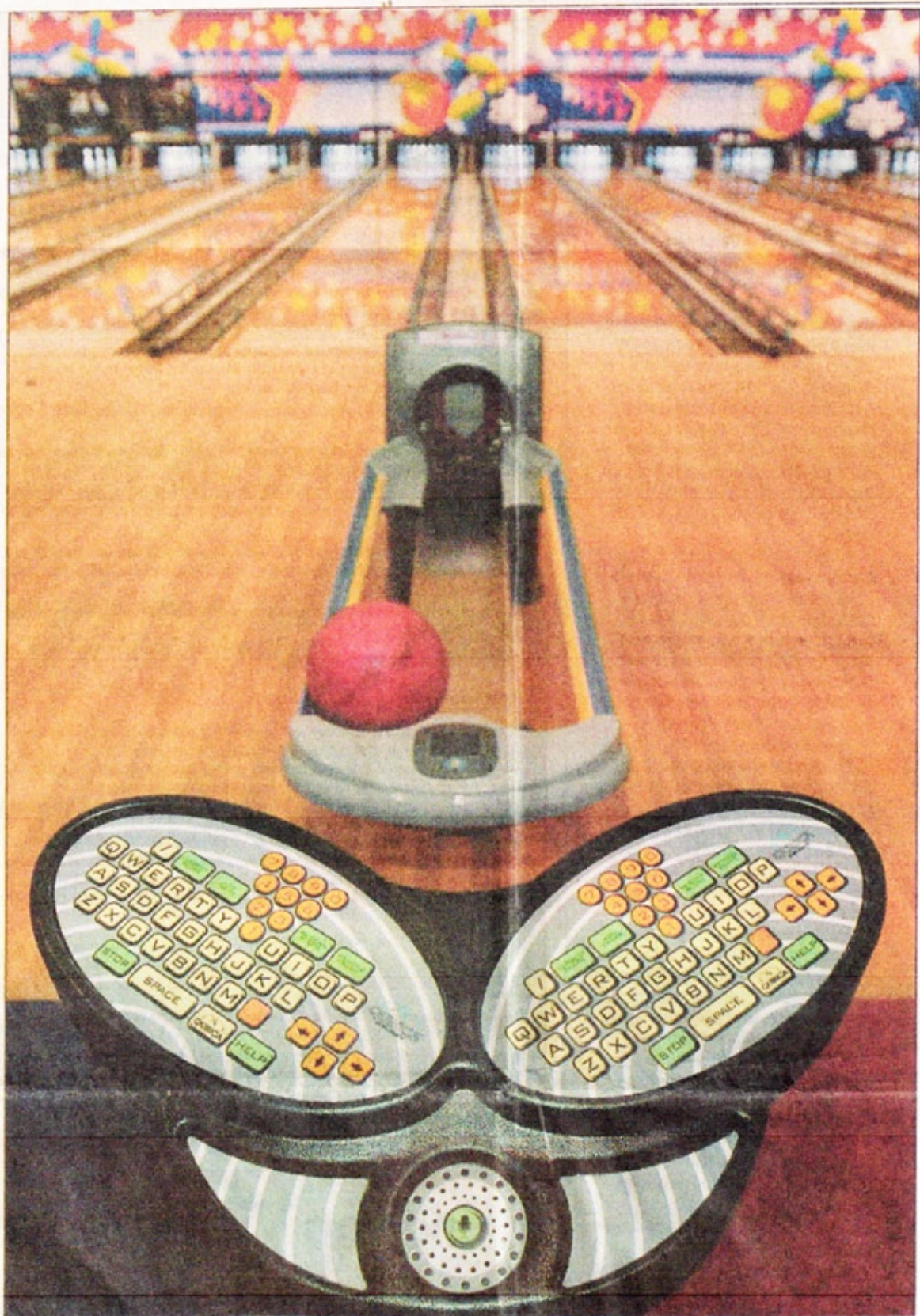


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... SECTION E

# SPORTS



With a new facility in Richmond, Bowl America hopes it is rolling a

# STRIKE!

BY VIC DORR JR.  
TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

Irving Clark hasn't steered Bowl America Inc. into a position of regional prominence by gambling with his company's resources. But some would argue that his latest venture is precisely that: a high-stakes roll of . . . well, a 16-pound Ebonite ball.

Springfield-based Bowl America will open a multimillion-dollar, 40-lane bowling complex Friday in western Henrico County. The 37,200-square-foot facility on Pouncey Tract Road is the first built-from-the-ground-up project undertaken by Bowl America in more than 10 years and the first new bowling center built in Richmond since AMF's Hanover Lanes in 1995.

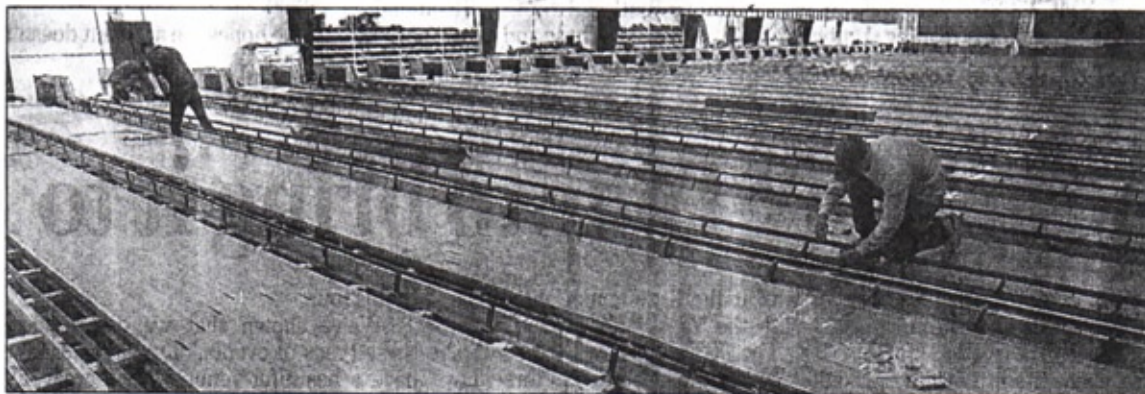
It joins an array of upper-middle-class entertainment and dining options available in and around the Short Pump Town Center. And it does so at a time when the sport's lifeblood, league play, is displaying symptoms of anemia.

None of which seems to concern Clark, Bowl America's 72-year-old general manager. "My feeling is that [the Short Pump facility] is absolutely a no-brainer," Clark said. "There's just no way — none — that it's going to be a bust."

He pointed to Short Pump's robust residential and commercial growth and its relatively affluent lifestyle. Another factor: The closest competing facility, AMF's

Computer stations allow bowlers to set up their games on Bowl America-Short Pump's scoring system.

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LINDY KEAST RODMAN/TIMES-DISPATCH

Like other modern bowling centers, Bowl America-Short Pump offers bumper rails for children.

# Strike

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Shrader Lanes house, is about 6 miles away. "Location, location, location," Clark said.

Bowl America operates 18 other venues, all on the East Coast. Twelve are located in Virginia, three in Richmond. Clark said the firm is "always looking" for new markets for expansion. Looking, yes, but not recklessly searching. "If we're not convinced that we can succeed, then we're not going to go there. It's that simple."

This is the extent to which the firm is convinced about the Short Pump house: The assessed value of the 4.18-acre parcel of land is \$1.8 million. The assessed value of the building's shell is \$1.5 million. And according to the firm's most recent quarterly report, nearly \$5 million in contracts "relating to the construction and equipping" of the facility had been issued by October, 2005.

Still, some question the timing, if not the prudence, of the investment. The United States Bowling Congress measures conscientious participation in the sport by tracking membership in organizations such as the American Bowling Congress and the Young American Bowling Alliance. USBC statistics show a significant decline over the past nine years. Youth and adult memberships combined have slipped from nearly 4.5 million in July, 1997, to just under 2.9 million last summer. The number of bowling centers, too, has fallen: from 6,986 in 1997 to 5,740 last summer.

A recent Tuesday night visit to King Pin Lanes, a house on the western outskirts of Midlothian, seemed to verify those numbers. One bowler, Michael Griebe, said his league has lost four teams within the past year.

Another, William Smiley, said "things do seem to be dropping off a little bit." Smiley offered his league as evidence. "We haven't been able to put a full league" — 10 teams, in this case — "together for a couple of years now."

But while league traffic appears at best stagnant, open bowling — think birthday parties, first dates and Friday night entertainment for a family of four — seems to be thriving. King Pin can point to a 70 percent increase in open play since Jan. 1 of last year.

Insiders say this development might not be as encouraging as it appears. League play requires a substantial investment of time and money. Some leagues offer 34-week schedules. Summer leagues typically offer eight- to 12-week schedules. Open play requires little commitment and carries no guarantee of a return visit.

Said Griebe: "If you're going to run a bowling house, you have to have leagues to make money. Period. There's no getting around it."

Clark said the Short Pump house will respond to this trend by embracing the sport's birthday-party, gaggle-of-friends, family-fun constituency. Amenities at the new facility include five party/meeting rooms, a cutting-edge



ALEXA WELCH EDLUND/TIMES-DISPATCH

**Rick Davis (left), Bowl America superintendent, General Manager Irv Clark (center) and Fred Kunkel, a superintendent with Emerald Construction Company, look over plans for Bowl America-Short Pump, which will open Friday.**

## The local lineup

Bowl America's Short Pump facility, scheduled to open on Friday, is the first new bowling center built in the metro area in 10 years. The local lineup now includes 15 houses, 14 tenpins and one duckpins:

Facility	Lanes	Address	Phone
AMF Hanover Lanes	56	7317 Bell Creek Road, Mechanicsville	559-2600
AMF Shrader Lanes	50	8037 Shrader Road, Richmond	747-9620
AMF Sunset Lanes	32	6540 W. Broad Street, Richmond	282-0537
AMF Walnut Hill Lanes	32	2147 S. Crater Road, Petersburg	732-5321
Bowl America-Eastern	36	5018 Williamsburg Road, Richmond	222-5183
Bowl America-Midlothian	52	7929 Midlothian Turnpike, Richmond	320-7115
Bowl America-Short Pump	40	4400 Pouncey Tract Road, Glen Allen	360-8222
Bowl America-Southwest	40	11532 Hull Street Road, Midlothian	744-1500
Fort Lee Bowling Center	24	1100 Lee Ave., Suite 119, Fort Lee	734-6860
Holiday Bowl	24	11400 Jefferson Davis Highway, Chesterfield	748-5635
Hopewell Bowling Center	12	115 South 15th Ave., Hopewell	458-2181
King Pin Lanes	32	200 N. Otterdale Road, Midlothian	378-7838
Oaklawn Bowl	16	4300 Oaklawn Blvd., Hopewell	458-5913
Plaza Bowl (duckpins)	24	523 E. Southside Plaza, Richmond	233-8799
The Bowling Alley	16	2300 Boulevard, Colonial Heights	526-3862

game room, wireless Internet access, a light-and-sound system that can create a disco-like environment and a kitchen that offers catering as well as conventional service.

"Don't misunderstand," Clark said. "We're still going to be a bowling center. We're never going to move away from the fact that what we do, first and foremost, is cater to bowlers."

But given the changes apparent in the public's participation patterns, he said, "we realized that we had to be able to do parties, too."

Local bowlers seem intrigued by the new house, if not blindly enthusiastic about it. Jay Linari, a twice-a-week competitor in leagues at Shrader and Sunset, said Bowl America has chosen "a prime location. They ought to do really, really well out there."

But he expressed a concern: "I can't help wondering if they'll pull people" from near-West End facilities such as Shrader and Sunset "and maybe shut down a lot of the stuff that's already going on here."

Clark promised a clean, airy, comfortable venue with the latest



ALEXA WELCH EDLUND/TIMES-DISPATCH

**Cheryl Clatterbaugh organizes the rental shoes at Bowl America-Short Pump, the area's newest tenpins facility, which is scheduled to open Friday.**

equipment, diversions aplenty and an attentive staff. "It's the kind of place where people will want to go," he said.

Yet to be answered, however, is this question: Where people want to go, will leagues want to follow?

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