

# Local bowling group buys King Pin Lanes

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John Mayes reacts after throwing a gutter ball at King Pin Lanes Tuesday, March 11, 2015. Rich Saal/The State Journal-Register

Craig Rhodes, 53, was one of 11 people to take ownership of King Pin Lanes. Rhodes, who formerly ran Bowler's World pro shop inside King Pin, is the group's managing partner. [Ryan Mahan/The State Journal-Register]

Doug Hathhorn sends a shot down the lane during the Round the Town bowling tournament at King Pin Lanes, Sunday, Jan. 12, 2014, in Springfield, Ill. Justin L. Fowler/The State Journal-Register

Brian Kretzer bowls his last ball to capture the PBA Midwest Region Mary Teubner Memorial Open at King Pin Lanes. photo by T.J. Salsman

For Nick Frasco, 93, left, and John Mayes, 94, bowling is a game of life that combines friendly competition, social time and a little exercise. The two played during their regular league night Tuesday, March 11, 2015 at King Pin Lanes. Rich Saal/The State Journal-Register

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By Ryan Mahan

Staff Writer

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King Pin Lanes has a new ownership group, but none of the partners are strangers to local bowlers.

Craig Rhodes, Scott Rogers and nine other people bought King Pin Lanes from John and Debbie Benanti. The sale closed Tuesday afternoon.

Rhodes is the group's managing partner and will be the face of the business, located at 3115 Sangamon Ave. Rhodes has had a corner of the building since 1998 when he opened his pro shop — Bowler's World — inside the center.

"I've been working in the bowling business — and only in this market — my entire life," Rhodes said. "I've spent almost 40 years in the bowling business in some aspect. The day I walked into a bowling center and got my first job at Strike 'N Spare East, I was 14 years old and I lied about my age just to get the job.

"From Day One, I said, 'I'm going to own this place someday.' Well, it wasn't Strike 'N Spare, but 40 years later, I finally got there. Certainly not by myself and not without gobs and gobs of support, but this was the ultimate goal."

Rhodes was inducted into the Springfield Bowling Hall of Fame in 2006. Others in the ownership group who are bowling hall of fame inductees include Scott Rogers (2012), Randy Molitoris (1999), Jeff Naber (2001) and Jeff Smith (2010).

Rhodes' longtime employee in the pro shop, Brian Collins, bought Bowler's World and the business will remain at King Pin Lanes.

The pro shop wasn't Rhodes' only foray into small business ownership. He and Rogers co-own a pair of car washes in Riverton and Sherman. But Rhodes said that King Pin is very different from either of his two past experiences.

"It's a much smaller scale than at King Pin just because I've never had this magnitude of employees," Rhodes said. "We don't have as many employees on the roster now as we ought to have and we probably still have 15 employees (during peak season)."

While there are a few summer leagues, league play begins in earnest in August and September and most leagues run into April. King Pin has some seasonal employees who are laid off each summer.

Since 2007, Springfield has lost two bowling centers. Spillway Lanes closed in 2007 and AMF Laketown Lanes shuttered its doors in 2014.

And while the state of bowling has changed since he entered the business almost 40 years ago — league bowler numbers have declined both locally and nationwide — Rhodes, 53, remains optimistic.

“I think it’s an exciting time to be involved in the bowling business, especially at King Pin Lanes because it’s more of the traditional center that still has room to focus on family entertainment if we need to — which we will, obviously,” Rhodes said.

“We’re strong with our league play, we’re strong with our tournament play and we’re definitely not going to let that go. That’s our No. 1 priority, of course. But we’re not going to overlook family entertainment either. Where other centers focus on family entertainment only, they’re missing out on some aspects that King Pin Lanes already has and we cherish.”

Rhodes said King Pin’s weekends are full with tournaments every year from January into May. That, as well as a loyal base of league bowlers, makes King Pin a long-term viable business, Rhodes said.

John Thomas, a hall of fame bowler as well as the owner of E.E. Thomas Garage, said Rhodes has the potential to run a successful business.

“I think Craig’s got the personality to make it work if anybody does, then he has a supporting cast,” Thomas said. “And I’ll be there for him, too. He can count on me for free.

“I’ve known Craig since he was 16. This is his lifelong dream and he’s been looking forward to this all his life.”

The ownership group is comprised of: Craig and Josie Rhodes, Rogers, Sandy and Randy Molitoris, Peggy Harris, Jeff Naber, Jenny and Ken Roth and Lisa and Jeff Smith.

“I’d like to think that this ownership group that we have assembled is as good of an ownership group as could’ve ever been assembled for this locale,” Rhodes said. “Everybody brings something to the table.”

John Benanti bought King Pin in 1998. He suffered a stroke in 2014.

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