

Monday September 8, 2025

Spare Change

By Johnny Campos

End of an Era: Landmark Lanes Closing in Peoria

For decades, Landmark Lanes in Peoria was a place where bowling history unfolded. The 50-lane center opened in 1979 by the late G. Raymond Backer and went on to host 20 PBA tournaments over the years.

Those events produced moments that have become part of the sport's lore.

Bowling general manager Vince Pollard, who has run the center for the past three years, found out on Monday, August 25th, that Landmark Lanes would end operations on Tuesday, September 23rd, pending the sale of the complex.

That was very sad news for Pollard, whose history at the center has been very personal.

He met his wife Tricia at Landmark. The Pollard family also has the youngest 300 shooter ever in Peoria and one of the oldest. His son, Vince Jr., bowled his first 300 game there when he was just 12 years old. His father, Darnell, rolled his only 300 at Landmark at age 69, giving the family three generations of bowlers with perfect games.

So, for the Pollards, the building wasn't just a bowling center. It was family.

"I have been in this building since the first brick was put down 46 years ago," he said.

Vince Sr. also witnessed the very best in professional bowling at Landmark.

Joe Hutchinson's 1980 AMF MagicScore Open victory at Landmark remains the most-watched PBA telecast ever with 22.7 million viewers. That TV finals was held just prior to the telecast of a gold-medal performance by speed skater Eric Heiden in the 1980 Winter Olympics.

Bryan Goebel defeated Norm Duke, 296-280, in the 1994 True Value Open. Goebel was trying to earn a \$200,000 bonus from True Value for rolling a televised 300 game but left the 3-6-9-10 on his fill ball. Duke's 280 remains the highest losing game ever in a televised match.

Earl Anthony (Pollard's all-time favorite pro bowler) won PBA tournaments at Landmark in 1981 and 1983. He also had other Peoria ties. In 1980 he married Bradley graduate Susie Shelley, who used to work in the BU sports information department.

Walter Ray Williams Jr., the PBA's all-time leader in titles and earnings, made his first TV finals in Peoria in 1983 and won his first title at Landmark in 1986.

Wayne Webb won three of his 20 titles at Landmark Lanes. Amleto Monacelli, another PBA Hall of Fame bowler, also won in Peoria.

And Landmark Lanes was known as a very high-scoring, well-maintained center, which produced several PBA records.

"That place was a model bowling center for producing high scores," said Lenny Nicholson, a former PBA lane maintenance director. "It had great lane installation, proper resurfacing and recoating by knowledgeable people, the best lane machine, and a knowledgeable lane man.

"They never politicked for high scores. The ball just rolled so nice and true, and everything was just top notch."

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In the 1995 event, Charlie Standish rolled three 300s in a six-game block, Dave D'Entremont threw three treys in eight games — four in one week, and Mike Aulby set a PBA scoring record by averaging more than 251 over 42 games, a mark that still stands. D'Entremont beat Aulby for the title that year.

Duke also set other scoring records here in the 1994 event but finished second in back-to-back years and never won a title at Landmark.

In 2001, the final year that Landmark hosted a national PBA event, it was the first tournament held after 9-11. There was supposed to be a tournament in Wichita, but it got canceled. So, Landmark stepped up.

The event, won by Kurt Pilon, also will always be remembered as a tournament with a somber telecast, with some local firefighters presenting the colors, followed by a not-so-great rendition of the National Anthem sung by Grammy-winning artist Koko Taylor (who forgot some of the lyrics).

Yet, even as its national spotlight faded, Pollard worked to keep Landmark relevant for bowlers of all ages. He brought in a PWBA regional just one day before learning the lanes would be shut down.

"My long-term strategy was to get a PBA regional here and then bring the national tour back to Landmark," he said.

Pollard hosted this year's Frank Vincent Memorial Doubles events, added the Mega Baker Marathon, and had planned on launching a major high school tournament next year.

On Wednesday nights, he had restarted a youth program to give young bowlers a chance to grow in the game — the same way Vince Jr. once did.

Long-running events, such as the Brothers Tournament and the Tournament of Champions, also will have to find new homes.

The traveling Bill Mastronardi Masters League had a few more dates scheduled at Landmark but had to re-work its slate to fill the vacant spots. The league will bowl at Landmark one last time on Monday night.

"We were initially told that operations for bowling would cease that day," Pollard said, recalling the August 25th meeting. "Luckily, my manager at the time went to bat for us and was able to give us 30 days. The leasing people we have in here needed a 30-day notice. Now our last day will be September 23rd."

Sale of the complex to the owner of Connected restaurant, located across the street from Landmark, is still pending. But Pollard said the sale is expected to be approved within the next 30 days. Until then, nothing is certain.

"If the sale is not approved, the bowling alley would still shut down, is what I've been told," he added. "We have no more leagues and have lost all of our tournaments. We couldn't survive only with open play."

There is, however, a sliver of a chance that the lanes could remain open.

"There is another possible buyer," Pollard said. "And if they buy it, they will keep the lanes open. But even if that would happen, we would still have to close for a few months. We would probably have a reopening next summer."

If the sale does go through, the complex would be converted into an events center. It would include pickleball courts, volleyball courts, and possibly some additional racquetball courts (there is already one in the health club, which will remain in operation regardless of the sale).

"Where the movies used to be will be turned into rooms for events," Pollard said.

The center will be sold eventually, however.

"Ray Becker Jr., whose family still owns Landmark, is just tired and wants to sell it," Pollard said.

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But for the time being, he had to inform his employees of the situation.

"After I got the news, I immediately told the staff who were here," Pollard said. "Then as the rest of them came in, I gave them the bad news. Once everybody knew, the word started spreading pretty fast. I think some people thought it was a hoax — fake news. After the PWBA event we had on Sunday, nobody saw this coming."

The fact that the building might be sold, however, was not a surprise to Pollard.

"I knew the building was up for sale," he said. "We had a couple of people, including Bowlero, looking at it, and it's been for sale before. We had people looking into it, making serious bids. But for them to actually close it down from being a bowling alley, that never entered my mind."

After telling his staff, Pollard had to call the league secretaries to break the news that there would be no league bowling this season. Seventeen leagues were on the calendar, representing roughly 250 to 300 bowlers who have now been displaced.

"The hardest thing was having to tell my seniors," Pollard said. "That was the biggest hit." Several leagues, including the TNBA, have moved to other centers, and some bowlers have filled vacant spots at other area houses.

The Peoria centers remaining include Mt. Hawley Bowl and Christian Center Lanes. Other area centers include Plaza Lanes in Washington, Potter's Alley in Morton, Linn Lanes in Canton, Sunset Lanes and Striketown Bowl in Pekin, Maple Lanes in Roanoke, Minonk Bowl in Minonk, Lacon Lanes in Lacon, and Spoon River Bowl in Wyoming. Bowlers might even find spots to bowl at Bloomington centers Twin City Lanes and Pheasant Lanes.

Pollard's next call was to Joe Ward, who ran many tournaments at Landmark and had a match-play singles event scheduled for September 20.

"He said he wanted to get as many people here as possible, so he ended up changing it into an open doubles tournament," Pollard said. "And it sold out quickly. That will be the official farewell. It's going to be a long day. That night is my GM farewell party. We're going to have the community come out from 9 to midnight and celebrate the last moonlight bowling."

Pollard plans to start his busy day by addressing the bowlers prior to the doubles event.

"It's going to be very emotional," he said. "I want to thank the community for all the support that they've given throughout the years." Longtime friend Tony Wysinger will team up with Pollard in the doubles event.

Pollard said he is not sure what he will do after his time at the center ends.

"I have to let these wounds heal from bowling," he said. "So, I do not think it will be anything in bowling. Customer service is my forte. So, I'll hook on somewhere."

Even though he will move on, Pollard will still feel the sting of having the center close during his tenure.

"It's really hard because I've carried this torch on my back for three years, and in some parts of me I feel like I let my community down," he said. "It was on my watch. I think about all the managers that have been here, going back to Gary Smith and Rick Thomas. I've been through all of those generations of managers and have seen how things have worked. And for it to be on my watch, I have to carry that on my jacket for the rest of my life. And I never saw it coming."

The shutdown is also affecting others who were housed in Landmark. Anthony Schnack, who runs the Bowlers Mart Pro Shop inside the center, said he was blindsided when he received his 30-day notice to vacate.

"I didn't see Landmark closing within the five years that I moved here," said Schnack, who relocated from Rockford to operate the shop. "But I'm staying in the area. We're looking at a couple of locations and hope to start moving in by the middle of the month. We are trying to trim down our inventory. So, technically there are no sales. But people can buy any of our closeout stuff at a pretty good discount."

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Landmark Lanes will be remembered not only for the champions it crowned and the records that still stand, but also just as much for the families who built their own stories there.

From Earl Anthony's titles and Joe Hutchinson's record-setting TV audience to three generations of Pollards leaving their mark, the center was more than a stop on the PBA Tour — it was a home.

Its closing leaves behind not only empty lanes but countless memories of strikes, spares, and the people who made Landmark a true landmark in every sense of the word.

When the last ball rolls down the lanes at Landmark on September 23rd, the echoes will carry more than the crash of pins — they'll hold memories of perfect games, televised triumphs, friendships forged, and lives forever changed.

For Vince Pollard, his family, and the thousands who called Landmark home, its closing marks the end of an era that can't be rebuilt in concrete and lanes. Whether the building becomes a sports and events complex or somehow sees bowling again one day, Landmark's place in the sport's history — and in Peoria's heart — is already secure.

Personal Landmark Moments

Like the Pollards, my family has had a few landmark moments at Landmark Lanes.

The first time I entered the bowl was during the 1984 Professional Bowlers Association Winter Tour, when I was the Press Director on the PBA road staff.

I later came back in 1989 as the PBA Assistant National Tournament Director, and in 1991 as the PBA National Tournament Director.

So, working in several PBA tournaments at Landmark, I got to know some local entries who would eventually become my teammates and friends.

Little did I know then that I would move to Peoria and bowl at Landmark Lanes on a regular basis.

I met my wife Jeanine there during the 1990 PBA stop. She had volunteered to work in the tournament office in the hopes of meeting PBA star Brian Voss. And she ended up with me! (Insert your own joke here.)

We're still together, 35 years later.

I bowled a couple of 300 games at Landmark, but the one I'll always remember happened in 2011.

I had bowled a trey a couple of weeks earlier at Linn Lanes during the Father-Son tournament with my son Andre. My wife was there as well, but my daughter Amanda was away in college.

Less than three weeks later, Amanda was on break and went to see me bowl league at Landmark. That's when I bowled a 300 in front of my entire family. That was special.

And we will always be thankful that Andre's first job was at Landmark Lanes. He suffered a brain aneurysm when he was 12 and had lost all of his memory. We took him out of school when he was 16, but he had to have a job.

So, Mark Stoner gave him a job as a porter at Landmark, even though Andre was not into bowling back then.

He caught the bug pretty quickly and asked me to show him how to bowl.

Andre practiced every day and got pretty good very quickly and started dominating the area youth competition.

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Then in November of 2012, Jeanine and I watched him bowl his first 300 game at Landmark Lanes. I think Jeanine was more nervous than he was!

Andre and I have both won titles in the Tournament of Champions in the men's division at Landmark Lanes – 15 years apart.

Team Bio Freeze, the 2009 champs, was the most fun team I have ever bowled with in the area. We had great team chemistry and rolled through the competition in every round. Team members included Paul Swanson, Jack Dries, Tony Sherlock, Brett Walker, Bob Michael, and Paul Lippens. What a team!

At one of the Landmark PBA stops, I met Bill Mastronardi, one of the local PBA members. He told me that if I ever needed a job after the PBA, he could help because he was in the Human Resources Department at Caterpillar.

True to his word, he got my foot in the door with an interview, and that led to a 20-year career at Cat that lasted until my retirement 10 years ago.

I also met Wayne Raguse, the long-time bowling writer at the Peoria Journal Star, at the PBA events. So, he recommended me to work at the paper as a part-timer back in 1996. That job lasted 25 years and included a 20-year run as the paper's bowling writer.

By the way, former Journal Star writer Jane Miller also met her future husband at Landmark the same year I met my wife. Mike Sands was working in the press room at the time, and ended up marrying Jane upon her retirement from the paper in 2013.

So, Landmark has been a big part of three different careers for me, and my family will always have fond memories of our time at the center.



Vince Pollard, Landmark Lanes Bowling General Manager

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