



FROM SELLING TO REINVESTING A FAMILY CHANGES COURSE

By Stephanie Davis



By February 2025, the Munson family was preparing to close a chapter that had lasted nearly 60 years.

Dan, Patty, Bob, and John Munson had spent most of their lives at North Bowl Lanes in Plattsburgh, New York. Their father first bought into the business in 1966, eventually becoming sole owner, and all four children grew up working at the center before taking over operations themselves.

Now, Dan is 70, Patti is 68, Bob is 65, and John, the youngest, is 58. Their children had largely gone in other directions, so selling seemed like the right move. A buyer emerged, but after more than 16 months of negotiations, the financing fell through just as the deal neared completion.

At that point, the Munsons decided to reinvest instead of waiting for another buyer. After closing for a month to make major upgrades, North Bowl reopened with a very different outlook on the future.

BACK TO THE PLAN

The siblings traditionally worked from five-year plans, alternating customer-facing improvements with infrastructure projects such as roofing, heating or air conditioning. "Cosmetic is what sells," says John Munson, co-owner of North Bowl Lanes. "People see that."

Once North Bowl was headed toward a sale, the family stopped looking as far ahead. They weren't eager to spend on a business they expected someone else to own. When the deal stalled, that changed.

The siblings looked at what was creating the most frustration in their operation and what could open the door to something better. At the top of the list were the machines behind all 32 lanes.

A BLACK CLOUD

The aging pinsetters had become one of North Bowl's biggest frustrations. On a busy night, equipment problems could generate 50 to 60 trouble calls. Someone had to be behind the lanes every hour the center was open, and the family worried about what would happen if their longtime mechanic were unavailable.

"It was a black cloud hanging over our head," John says. "We worried about it all the time."

So, in 2025, they replaced the old machines with QubicaAMF EDGE String pinsetters, a change John says quickly showed up in both reliability and operating costs. John saw the difference one busy Saturday when he called the center and learned someone had gone behind the lanes only twice all day: to turn the lights on and off. No trouble calls.

"It's taken away 90% of the stress we had with the business," John says. "It's been life-changing."

Parts expenses have dropped more than 90%, while electricity costs are down about 21%. With New York utility rates rising during the same period, John estimates electricity usage has probably fallen 30% to 35%. The difference is visible behind the lanes, too. Parts once filled a back wall, a separate room and a tractor trailer behind the building.



New Pinsetters, Loud Reaction

North Bowl shared the upgrades on Facebook to build excitement — and the community responded with plenty of enthusiasm.



North Bowl shared a behind-the-scenes look at its new pinsetters on Facebook, and the community responded with plenty of enthusiasm.

"We got rid of all of it," John says. "Now our parts bench is literally six feet long. That's it."

A DIFFERENT WAY TO WORK

As the Munsons reinvested, they also changed how they worked in the business. They put a management team in place so the center could operate without all four siblings covering regular shifts. Dan and Patty moved toward retirement, while John and Bob stayed involved working with the managers.

That shift gives John and Bob more time to focus on where the business can go next. "Think of the time and effort you put into your machines," John says. "Now we're putting time and effort into making money."

"We've gone from, 'What fire are we putting out?' to, 'What can we improve on to make more money?'"

SOMETHING NEW FOR GUESTS

The guest experience received attention too. North Bowl reopened with BES X scoring and later upgraded to QubicaAMF's BES NV scoring system, giving guests more ways to play beyond a traditional game.

John had noticed younger kids often losing interest by the fourth or fifth frame. BES NV's interactive games give them something else to chase, like building a monster or crushing a castle with each shot. Guests can also take photos at the scoring console and see their faces appear in on-screen animations, a feature John says has been especially popular with guests.

"There are so many options, but when the staff gets busy, they don't always have time to explain everything to the guests," John says. "I like that the system asks who they're with and why they're visiting, then helps point them toward games they might enjoy. As much as I preach and preach, I know when I'm not there, half the time that may not be happening. And those games are what sells."

During the slower summer months, North Bowl included the interactive games in its regular hourly price to get guests trying them. Now the family is experimenting with how to price that added experience during the busier season, including testing a \$5 increase in the hourly rate.

ONE THING LEADS ANOTHER

At North Bowl, one investment often helps fund the next. A snack bar upgrade opened the door to more food business, and after hiring a restaurant general manager with country-club experience, the center expanded its catering operation. That revenue helped fund a lounge remodel and bar improvements.

The family hopes that growth can now help pay for new kitchen equipment and an upgraded menu. It's an approach John sums up simply: "Don't be afraid to spend but do it in an intelligent way with numbers."

With more time to focus on catering, events and other opportunities, John and Bob are enjoying the business again. "I like coming to work," John says. "Everyone is having fun. The love of the business has come back."

FIVE YEARS AGAIN

The decision to reinvest meant something to the community, too. Word had spread that North Bowl was being sold, and John remembers the reaction when the family told league officers they had changed course. Some had tears in their eyes. "They were so happy our family was keeping the business," he says.

At one point, the siblings had considered selling the property for another use but couldn't bring themselves to do it. "We knew our parents would not be happy that we were taking this out of the community," John says.

The Munsons remain open to the right buyer and the right price, whether that person comes from outside the business, their management team or perhaps another generation of the family. For now, they're enjoying the business again and have put North Bowl in a stronger position for whatever comes next.

And after putting their plans on hold while waiting for a sale, the Munsons are back to something familiar.

They're working on another five-year plan.