

★ ★ ★ Ready to Roll ★ ★ ★

COTTAGE BOWL

Anxious to open again

By Jon Stinnett

There's really no other sound quite like it. Actually, it's more of a series of sounds, one that begins with the thump of a urethane-coated ball as it makes its first contact with a perfectly oiled wood floor. Its spin already imparted by its thrower, the ball now rumbles down the wooden slats, first approaching the gutter before making a precise arc back toward the center of the lane. At a distance of 60 feet, the sound of its violent collision with 10 carefully arranged pins says everything about the bowler's success on each throw.

These sounds are sweet music to the ears of Butch Cardoza and Natalie Clark; they have been for decades. No doubt the music rings even sweeter now, though, as the Cottage Bowl — the joint business venture of this father-daughter duo — prepares to reopen after two long closures that have brought a substantial loss of income, nearly a year of dreadful uncertainty and the ever-present notion that, if they can't open soon, they may never open again.

Actually, the Cottage Bowl isn't officially open now — they're not allowed to sell food or drinks, and no one's allowed to play the lottery machines, so opening to the public just isn't feasible yet, financially.

On this brisk Saturday afternoon, the Cottage Bowl is hosting a few die-hard league bowlers who are likely a bit rusty due to their latest forced hiatus from the sport. The alley has been closed since Nov. 18, the second of two closures in response to the Covid-19 pandemic that have lasted for about six months of the past year.

Each bowler wears a mask, and the alley showcases many of the kinds of changes that have been mandated to try to stop the spread of the Coronavirus: there are sheets of plastic everywhere, separating each lane and the tables around them.

Bowling balls are only re-shelved after the bowlers leave, when the entire area must be sanitized, and as yet there's been no public bowling session. Bottles of hand sanitizer are everywhere.

And yet, Clark will tell you that the news that they may be cleared to officially open soon fills her with the kind of cautious optimism that's been exceedingly rare lately. January was especially tough, she says — downright depressing, in fact.

"The uncertainty of not knowing, of being able to open being out of your control, of just sitting and waiting, it's been really tough," she says. "After Christmas, you tend to get the blues maybe anyway. But January was just really hard. We can see a light at the end of the tunnel, so we feel a little bit better now. But for a while we were hearing that it may be March or April before we could open. And that's really scary."

Clark says she grew up bowling in the alley when it was called the Bowling Green, and back in 2008, an opportunity to reopen the business as the Cottage Bowl with her father was too good to pass up. By 2019, she says, business had continued to improve, making it the best year of their ownership so far.

But operating a bowling alley is, by its nature, a seasonal affair. The alley does far more business in the winter months, as Oregon's weather pushes people's social and

recreational pursuits indoors. Thus, she and her father save money during the flush part of the year that will tide them over during the leaner summer months.

The lockdown threw this system into turmoil, of course, forcing Cardoza and Clark to burn through their savings and putting the very existence of their business in jeopardy. It's a situation that's played out just that way in other towns, including Tigard and Dallas, so they have good reason to worry.

"A lot of bowling alleys are family owned, and when they close, you feel it in your heart," Clark says.

And beyond just the financial implications of their shutdown, Cardoza and Clark say they're saddened about what the closure has meant for their regular bowlers.

"These people are amazing," Clark says of a group that has more than just this sport in common. "They're all anxious to get back, to bowl and to see their friends again."

Such is the nature of bowling here, Clark says, among a tight-knit group that has far more than just this sport in common.

"It's literally a family, a bowling family," she says. "That's what sets it apart from some other sports. They're competitive but very supportive of each other. They do things together outside of bowling. We don't have any family here, and these people became our family."

Her father agrees.

"Everybody is family down here," he says. "We know what grades their kids are getting; we know when they go on vacation, and where they went. It's pretty cool to have that kind of rapport with everybody."

As such, it probably shouldn't be all that surprising that two members of this bowling "family," Tangie Clark and Tiffany Williams, recently marshaled support for an auction fundraiser meant to help defray the costs of the shutdown and keep the alley "bowling" along.

"We wanted to make sure that this business would survive because many other alleys in the state have had to permanently close," Tangie Clark said. "This family does so much for the bowling family and other businesses that have parties and get-togethers at their facility. So we are off to a pretty good start and hoping that we can raise enough money to help them with their bills and whatever expenses arise."

The front room that typically houses many of the Cottage Bowl's get-togethers is currently stacked with items up for auction,

and Tangie Clark says there will be many auctions occurring over the next few weeks. An outdoor sale is also in the works for the coming months, where gift certificates will be available for purchase and those interested can donate to the cause via Venmo. More information is available at the group's Facebook page, entitled "Team Cottage Bowl Fundraiser."

For now, though, the sound of bowling balls striking pins at the Cottage Bowl acts as a harbinger of what Cardoza and Clark hope will be brighter days just over the horizon.

"It just really warms you up," Clark said of the support from the community. "You're feeling down, you get a little depressed, and then something like this happens. Love just fills your heart, and it brings you back."



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