

# How darts became a fashionable night out

Old-style games with a modern twist are hitting the bullseye with a new generation



'Social darts' at Flight Club's original Shoreditch bar © Charlie Bibby



It started with a record-breaking circumnavigation of the globe — [in a fire engine](#). Steve Moore, a futures trader in London, had wanted to mark the passing of his father with a suitably grand gesture. When he arrived back home, after 265 days on the road, he needed a new project.

While drinking with friends on a rainy afternoon in Devon, Moore had an epiphany: he would return darts to the British high street. “People were going crazy in the pub, we couldn’t believe it,” he says. “We set ourselves a challenge there and then — let’s bring it back, but in scale and for a new audience.”

With a little help from friends and family, Moore and co-founder Paul Barham opened Flight Club four years ago. The first site was between two key markets — the hipster stronghold of Shoreditch and the Square Mile’s office party crowd. More have since opened in London, Manchester, Birmingham and the US. At the time of writing, more than 111 million darts have been thrown — a statistic that is updated in each of Flight Club’s bars on a rolling, real-time ticker.



“We are booked months in advance,” says Moore, pointing at the groups of young office workers who are throwing darts in the original Shoreditch bar on a Monday afternoon. “Even with three large London venues, demand is crazy. We are like a badass bar crossed with a fairground. It just goes off.”





Moore, 42, admits that the sport needed some rebranding first. Darts, which a few decades ago had been a popular televised sport, had become a bit of a joke: “two fat guys” smoking cigarettes and throwing darts in the back rooms of pubs. But he saw the potential for an activity to bring people together for a laugh and, crucially, with a crowd confined in a tight space with plenty of time to drink. “We had to make it easy and more relevant. It needed to be a group activity — 16 players, not two — as we saw that as being the most fun.”

Certainly, on a warm evening when I visit, the latest 750-capacity Flight Club in Victoria seems noisily full; large groups of all ages are clustered around darts oches across the first floor of a former office block (which, in a sign of changing high-street trends, had been destined for an outpost of the now collapsed Jamie Oliver restaurant chain, Moore says). A DJ plays loud music around one of the biggest freestanding bars in Europe, and people spill out into a garden that features a disco-playing phone box and a recreation of the shed where Moore planned his posh darts empire.

Flight Club has proved a good earner for Moore. Each of the bars makes on average a 35 per cent margin on earnings before interest, tax, depreciation and amortisation. The clubs will make £30m in revenue this year, he says.



But can places like this give the high street an edge over digital rivals? “The high street is drab,” he says. “Every bar and restaurant is closing down — but this is about bringing that sense of community to smaller towns. That’s where the long-term future should be.”

In fact, British town centres are set to welcome a fresh wave of similar concepts, from the reinvention of bingo for a millennial audience (Hijingo) to shuffleboard (Electric Shuffle), a version of the US bar-room sport where players push weighted discs along tabletops.

These will join already established brands such as Swingers, Junkyard and Puttshack, all of which offer variants of cocktail-bar crazy golf, and Bounce, which has pepped up ping-pong.

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Steve Moore, Flight Club

This is a new lease of life for city-centre recreational activities. In the late 1990s, gangs of twentysomethings flocked to venues such as the Elbow Rooms in Shoreditch and Islington — vast, dimly lit halls full of pool tables. Karaoke bars moved from the less dodgy doorways of

Soho to join the mainstream. But many of these establishments quickly disappeared amid the subsequent high-street boom in casual dining.



With those restaurants now struggling, gaps are appearing again on the high street. Entrepreneurs like Moore are hoping to keep life in town centres with competitive but communal experiences tooled for younger crowds. The high-street entrepreneur Luke Johnson has also come to the party, after his Risk Capital Partners acquired bowling company All Star Lanes out of administration in September.

Johnson, who believes that the company — and the bowling concept — is fundamentally sound, despite its administration, has plans to invest to grow the chain once again. He believes the rise of recreational town-centre activities is down to a dramatic shift among twenty- and thirtysomethings, who don't drink alcohol as much as earlier generations. "[They] still want to socialise and go out, but if drinking is not the centre, then unisex sports can work," he says.

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**Much of the momentum** behind the new high-street hang-outs has come from Adam Breeden, who helped set up All Star Lanes in 2006 (stepping down in 2010) as well as Bounce and Puttshack, and whose Social Entertainment Ventures will launch Hijingo, a revival of bingo for an 18-30 audience, in March next year.

"It's about great design, great food, great drinks, great vibe," he says. "The philosophy for me was if you took all the ping-pong tables [or darts] out, it would still be a compelling night out."

Bounce was an important test of demand in the market, he says. "Who the hell was going to play ping-pong? We learnt that people loved ping-pong but just don't talk about it. It turned into a great economic model, [as] you can fit more table-tennis tables per square foot than a bowling lane."





Flight Club co-founder Steve Moore © Charlie Bibby

Making these venues popular with women has been important, says Breeden. Moore agrees. “On a Saturday afternoon, it’s a very strong female demographic. Our archetypal customer is a 27-year-old called Lucy, but if you focus on her then everyone comes.”

Decent food and drink add an extra element, while technology keeps the scoring simple. Players are filmed, with instant replays and a “stories” feature that sends highlights for them to post on social media.



The next Puttshack will open in the City this month and will be aimed directly at an office crowd. According to Breeden, the rise of remote working means that colleagues need a replacement for the traditional “water-cooler” conversation point. He adds that the increased focus on wellbeing and inclusivity at work means office parties are less likely to involve simply going to the pub with a credit card behind the counter.

“It is a mistake to think that corporates only want serious things,” says Breeden. “Company cultures have shifted dramatically in the last 20 years. [Now] it’s less serious and it’s all about employee engagement.”



Breeden has recently raised £30m to fund Puttshack's expansion, and says he has a large bank of investors who can see the "billion-dollar vision" of his ambitions. Early backers of his businesses include Mark Sainsbury, whose family founded the supermarket chain, and tech entrepreneur Alex Chesterman.

But what happens when a trend becomes untrendy? Previous attempts to revitalise bingo halls and pool rooms have come and gone, with some retail experts giving such new concepts not much longer than five years after the initial burst of excitement.

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Breeden says that bars need to be broad in appeal — attracting families at the weekend, office parties during the week, young groups of friends on a Friday and Saturday night. He has plans to open seven more Puttshacks next year across the UK and US, 12 in 2021, and then 45 in the following two years. As well as plans to

expand internationally — a market that is “wide open”, he says — both he and Moore already have an eye on the next concept: “The UK is really pioneering from a new concept development perspective,” he tells me.

Next for him is Hijingo, which he describes as “nothing you have seen before . . . a sort of combination of a TV in-studio quiz experience with a rock concert and a West End stage show . . . It will be very tech-enabled.”





Ping-pong venue Bounce, which Adam Breeden also co-founded © Charlie Bibby

Moore, meanwhile, is launching Electric Shuffle, initially at Canary Wharf. The characteristics will be familiar: a bit of tech, good food and drink, a confined space and games designed to appeal across ages and genders — and to bring a little fun back to the British high street.

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