

## It's game time

Pool tables, pinball machines fuel trend in entertainment rooms

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When Gary and Tammy Kuhr decided to build a house in Westerville to accommodate their growing family, they knew they wanted to "go a little overboard" and build "a realistic dream home."

But they never thought their splurge would be part of a trend toward home game rooms.

"We stumbled across this model that had a very open family room with a loft," Gary Kuhr said. "And the loft is pretty large; there's a lot you can do with it."

"I wasn't thinking game room at all -- until I saw the space, and it hit me. I told my wife, 'Wow! A pool table would look great in this room.' "

The trend toward game rooms began almost a century ago as part of a movement to keep kids at home and out of trouble.

"The concept of keeping kids at home actually started in the 1920s and '30s,"

said E.J. Loferski, director of marketing for Brunswick Billiards.

"We can find print ads in various publications that specifically said, 'Buy a Brunswick pool table and keep your sons from going out and fighting on the streets.' "

People started staying in -- dubbed *cocooning* -- in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 terrorist attack.

"We saw a rise in family interest again in spending more time at home," Loferski said.



**A spectator's chair overlooks the pool table in the game room.**

"There was an uptick in media rooms a few years ago, and then game rooms came in beside it," said Ken Rupp, owner of Billiards Plus on Bethel Road. "I think a lot of parents want to keep their kids home, and the basement becomes sort of a neighborhood hangout.

"We're seeing people now making the whole basement an entertainment center -- more bars in them, too. We're selling air hockey, foosball, shuffleboard tables, those video machines that you see in bars, darts.

"Darts are huge right now. Darts for us are like the beginning stages of poker a few years ago."

Bill Hughes -- president of U.S. Amusement Auction, which has visited Columbus four times a year for the past 20 years to sell old arcade games -- said the trend to game rooms has been noticeable.

"It's been happening for several years now. In the industry, there are less vendors -- quite a few less, probably 50 percent less than 10

years ago. But on the other hand, home pinball has really come on strong."

As game-room equipment becomes more common in the home, manufacturers have responded by producing equipment with styles to match interior designs.

Brunswick, for instance, builds billiard tables to resemble mission or Arts and Crafts furniture. It also builds sleek contemporary tables with stainless-steel legs and laminated rails. And, of course, it has the traditional styles -- with oak, cherry or mahogany wood finishes, claw legs and inlaid wood and carvings.

"We're still selling (standard) pool tables to people who are finishing their basement -- that's major," said Tim Parker, manager at Billiards Plus. "But we've seen a rise in people

who actually design rooms for that purpose. I've dealt with more designers lately. Homeowners are hiring them. Not the majority, but the higher end."



SHARI LEWIS | DISPATCH PHOTOS

**Gary and Tammy Kuhr turned the loft of their Westerville home into a game room complete with a pool table, bar, television and dartboard.**



FILE PHOTO

**Dart boards are popular in game rooms.**

"The husband wants a pool table and doesn't care what it looks like," Rupp said. "The wife cares what it looks like."

That happened with the Kuhrs' game room.

"She let me pick out the pool table," Kuhr said. "And after we found it was a contemporary style, she picked out everything else."

After selecting a pool table, the Kuhrs expanded on the game-room theme by putting a liquid-crystal-display television on the wall.

"And then we saw that there's a little alcove in the loft that's the perfect spot for a bar, so we put a bar there with stools. And we hung two pendant lights above that. Then we thought, wait a minute -- we have a room for a dart board, too."

They completed the layout with a leather billiard spectator's chair. With a plasma television in the family room below, they have no reason to leave the house for an evening of entertainment.

The Kuhrs intended their game room as an adult refuge and planned to use their basement as a playroom for the kids. But the game room is so much fun that "my 6 1/2 -year-old is hounding us about playing pool," Kuhr said. "We make it a treat when he finishes his homework."

The Kuhrs pieced together their game room by shopping around and buying from several stores. But retailers want to make their stores one-stop destinations. To help homeowners figure out what games they want, what furniture style the games will mimic and how many games will actually fit in a room, some retailers are creating vignette areas in their showrooms that look much like complete room displays. Billiards Plus, for instance, plans to feature displays when it expands its operation in a few months.

Brunswick has created a game-room planner on its Web site.

"Does a pool table fit? What size? What about a bar? Click in and we have a planner that replicates the size of your room," Loferski said. "We've seen people come in with those printouts. It's really been a powerful tool."

A pool table, an entertainment system, a bar and video games are the most popular choices for creating a homeowner's ultimate game room, according to a survey conducted a few months ago by ReliableRemodeler.com, a home-remodeling resource.

Of the homeowners surveyed, 60 percent said they would want to include a pool table in a game room. Video games were the most popular activity for homeowners who already had a game room, with 47 percent saying they had them.

"People buy what they remember," Hughes said. "If they used to play pinball, they buy pinball. If they played Mortal Kombat or Pac Man or whatever they remember playing, that's what they buy.

"Pinball is especially hot. Addams Family games have gotten expensive. Theater Magic is very popular, too. A lot of games from Williams Manufacturing, a company that's now out of business, are popular. They made the best pinball machines from the late '80s to 2000."

For those who prefer to shop online, BMIGaming.com has a vast selection of all types of products for game rooms, some with hefty pricetags. For those who want to duplicate that sports bar feel at home, however, nothing beats the NASCAR Racing Video Game, which is already one of BMI's top sellers even though it's new and sells for \$6,475. The upcoming Wheel of Fortune Pinball also should be popular and costs \$4,375.

One game-room feature specific to central Ohio was popular long before the current trend began.

"Anything with the Ohio State logo on it is a home run," Parker said. "From dart cabinets to pool tables. We sell a lot of scarlet and gray tables, stained-glass lighting with Ohio State logos on them."