



**“Gone With the Times”**  
A Bowling Story

Written by,

Bowling Professor  
Bob Daubney



# **“Gone with the Times”**

## **A Bowling Story**

### **Part I**

The year is 1950, it seems like only yesterday that I graduated from grade school and began my days in high school. I can still remember my mother enrolling me in a military school called LaSalle located in Troy, NY. Tuition was \$40 per month and there was barely enough money for that. The first summer I got a job working at a dress factory earning \$43.50 for a forty hour week. I felt like I was rich with that amount of money coming in each week. One day, on my way home from school my freshman year, I was walking up River Street and I passed by a local bowling alley called the Bowl-O-Torium. I proceeded to walk in and I noticed people rolling balls down the lane at pins. There were 20 lanes, 10 on each floor. They had pin boys setting the pins which paid 10 cents per game for doing so. These pin boys would earn \$15 for one shift or \$30 for two shifts. I said to myself, “I can do this” and soon took the job. With the help of the pin boy job I earned my way through four years of high school. So that was my start in the bowling business, meager as it was, 57 years ago, as a pin boy.

After a year or so working seven nights a week and going to school during the day I decided to try my luck at the game of bowling. My first game was a whopping 86. I bowled often and learned to roll a hook and was averaging 150 my first year. I organized a small league of pin boys and we kept records and bowled against other pin boys from other lanes. It was new and exciting and a fun way to spend our free time. Then, one day a top-notch bowler came to our lanes to bowl a special match and I was selected to set up the pins. The bowler’s name was Morris Cramer and he rolled the biggest hook I’d ever seen. I guess I was hooked on the game of bowling after that day. For the remainder of my years in high school I went to school, set pins, and worked on perfecting my bowling game. I won the high average in my little league with 157. That was my first trophy and I still have it this very day. After bowling on a regular basis, I looked up that guy with the big hook, who at the time was the best bowler around. I found him working in his brothers clothing store in Troy New York. In the back of the clothing store he had a drill press and earned money by selling and drilling bowling balls for people. I introduced myself and he gave me my very first bowling ball for free. It was an Ace Hard Rubber ball with a new grip called a finger tip. I could hardly wait to get to the lane and try my new bowling ball.

In 1954, I graduated from LaSalle and realized I could not go to college and I decided to get a job. My last year at the lanes I started selling trophies to some of the leagues, it was the beginning of my life in sales. In the fall of that year I heard that the local bowling pro, who I had become friends with, had rented a lane in Albany called Clinton Square Lanes. I went down there and got a job cleaning the lanes at \$43.50 a week. I was also allowed to bowl all the games that I wanted during off hours for only 10 cents a game. Morris had a drill press there and he taught me how to drill balls. If anyone got me thinking of my potential in bowling it was Cramer. He sent me to school to

learn how to teach people how to bowl. I joined leagues and became an up and comer in the local bowling circles. During the summer months I got a job working with a local supplier who resurfaced lanes and sold pins and supplies to local lanes. It was not long before Morris closed the lanes and opened a new big center with 50 lanes. Bowling lanes started converting from pin boys to automatic pinsetters, and they were being built all over the area. They built them everywhere and they were all doing lots of business with two and three leagues each day. More women started bowling and there were lots of juniors bowling as well. I was hired on to a crew from A.M.F. and learned how to build and resurface lanes. The entire bowling industry was on the rise and there seemed to be no end in sight. After working for A.M.F. for a while I realized that I could never afford my own lanes and more importantly there was a need for a supplier. I opened my first freestanding store in Albany. After working as a pro in one of the centers I helped build in 1957, I began repairing lanes and building pool tables. I also began selling bowling and billiard equipment in my own store, which I rented for \$125.00 a month.

I ran my store there with the help of my family until 1968 when we moved to our new store in Colonie. In 1971 I rented space and started a billiard factory which built and repaired pool tables until 1985. It was 1985 that I closed the factory and concentrated on a new project, which was a 50 lane bowling center called the Bowlers Club, which is now scheduled to close in May 2007.

I am a hard worker and I study as I work in my business. I can not say enough for my family who helped me so much in my starting years. I did become a promoter and good businessman and am still learning up to this day in my Latham store now in its 45<sup>th</sup> year of business.

# The Good Times

## Part II

The bowling business was booming from 1968 - 1980. I just moved my Albany store from downtown to a new 3000 sq. ft. location at Fuller Road. We sold bowling & billiard equipment in the fall and winter months. Resurfaced lanes and built pool tables during the summer months. Business was great, the older centers were adding on lanes and new ones were opening up everywhere. The ABC reported a membership of 10,000,000 or more. In our area a bowling magazine started and we had two local bowling TV shows. The Weekly Eliminations were from 500 to 1,000 bowlers each week.

Columbia came out with pretty colored bowling balls which pleased the women and the kids. The professional bowlers organized and we had a tour with national exposure. There did not seem to be any end for growth in the game. Leagues were forming and they were bowling day and night. The price of bowling was going up and centers were putting in automatic scoring machines which caused the price of bowling to go higher. Bowling balls were still being made of rubber but the plastics and a new material called urethane was coming into the market. These balls hooked more and scores were on the rise. Proprietors started dressing lanes to accommodate the new balls and it was at this time I started to get interested on how the ABC was going to control scoring that was getting out of line with the talent of the person rolling the ball. Urethane balls were coming on the market, they hooked more and are still in use today in many centers throughout the United States. GE developed a new synthetic lane surface called BL-24 and they announced it at a convention in Las Vegas in 1976. Synthetic lanes were coming in and they were replacing many of the wood lanes. Regular wood lanes required more maintenance and yearly resurfacing. The great Bill Taylor wrote against the so called soft conditions. He stated that it would cheapen the game and I believe he was correct.

The women organized and we had a women's professional tour with shows being aired on national TV. In 1968 I joined the PBA and bowled a few tournaments but I decided to make my living by selling balls not rolling them. In 1971 I joined the Bowling Writers of America and at that time I was doing a 1 hour bowling show which lasted for 7 years. The proprietors felt by blocking the lanes scores would go up and bowlers would be happy. They were right to a degree but in the end the process hurt the bowlers and game in the long run.

Becoming aware of a potential problem I submitted a proposal to the ABC to consider changing the lane tolerances, because I felt a flat lane might bring the scores more in line. Proprietors and Industry lined up against the proposal and it was defeated at the ABC Convention. I do believe it created an awareness of the problem. In my mind ABC was correct, the proprietors would not comply with the ABC so the process continues as it does even today. There are thousands of ABC volunteers who

have the interest of bowling at heart and I have helped and supported them as I have for well over 50 years. In 1994 I submitted a proposal to have the lanes dressed with a 2 to 1 ratio oil pattern but ABC ejected that also.

Then came the development of Reactive bowling balls and scores went through the roof. ABC seemed to developed a policy of everything goes. Lanes are checked only once a year. All balls can be used and are very rarely ever checked weight & balance etc. High out of control scoring did not cause the demise of bowling but it was not a plus. With everything going good ABC could do very little to control scoring. The manufacturers were turning out more powerful balls which they were making lots of money from. It was a sign of the times but I did not know it at the time. In 1980 I bought a 50 lane center and was forced out when my landlord raised my rent from \$5,000 to \$15,000 per month. I closed the center and it was sold then I moved to my present store in Latham NY and have been there for 20 years and its still going good. I got out of the lane repair business and sold out my billiard table factory in 1985. When I owned my center I noticed the ABC membership was starting to decline. I was bothered by this so my writing was to explain what happened to the industry and our great game which went I with the times. From 1979 to present it has been down hill for Bowling and the Industry. Here is what happens time has a way of changing everything, nothing last forever the Bowling game and Industry was negatively affected by time. Also by the ABC passing balls that are too powerful and by the proprietors using a short blocking oil patterns. Membership went down, scores went up. Bowling centers are closing and other than areas in Nevada and maybe in the South it does not look good for bowling.

## **“Going...Going...Going...”**

### **Part III**

In 1979 the organized memberships peaked at some 10million men, women, and junior bowlers. Now it is 2006 a new combined organization called United States Bowling Congress reported a combined total of 2,728,590 membership for a drop of 70% from the previous reporting period. This is a drop over 26 years that required very serious consideration. I am a businessman having been in every aspect of the bowling business from 1950 to present. Seems to me there should be some major changes at the top of these organizations to get a new prospective on the current state of affairs. Here in the Albany area a 50 Lane center I sold in 1986 will close its doors for good this May. The land and the building will be put on the market for its real estate value. I live and run my business here in the Albany area so I must admit I might not be familiar with the rest of the nation. Only 4 years ago we had a 50 lane center close in Albany and is now a TV station. The year before that a 24 lane and a 14 lane center closed. So over the past few years we've had a loss of 250 lanes and no new ones have opened, this is generally a trend downward supporting the drop in membership. I have learned recently that for every center that closes the membership can expect a loss of 40% of the bowlers from those closings who leave the game not wanting to travel to another center.

Over the years I believed that league bowling was the base of a center's income. Non league bowling was good during the season but couldn't be counted on for 52 weeks. Parties and weekend Galactic Bowling were good for business but it seems the leagues were the more important part of the business. I believe that you can only charge so much for bowling, but there has to be a limit which I believe we have reached in our local area. In our area we have a chain that owns and operates over 40% of our centers which charges what they want. Personally I prefer non-chain centers owned and operated by sole proprietors who could be in touch with their customers and catering to their personal needs. I believe the days of the big centers is past and in the future smaller centers who cater to customers with bowling, billiards, health clubs, snack bar and a upscale restaurant / bar. I believe the cost of insurance, utilities, taxes not to mention payroll etc. are just to great to afford even with increased income. So its necessary to offer more that may end up more income for 12 months after their expenses.

The high scores are out of control, the causes are the high powered balls and the short oil block patterns put down by the proprietors. An option that will ever bring scores in line is a 2 to 1 ratio of oil edge to edge at least 40 ft. down the lane. In 1958 I bowled a 300 game that same year ABC awarded 1,458 300 games. Last year there were 57,000 300 games. It's the same story everywhere.

High scores have not helped the game, all they did was to lessen the game's integrity and did nothing to increase linage. Actually that hurt the game with high power balls and easy conditions where no one needed to learn the game like they did

back in the days of rubber and plastic balls. All they have to do is buy a \$200 ball, find an easy house and they will score.

So here we are with the loss of the membership, the loss of centers. The PWBA is gone, the PBA changed hands and just last year a loss of 15% of their viewer ship. In the 2005 - 2006 season they had to lower the Tour's purse from \$40,000 to \$25,000 to try to stop losing money. There is a consolidation going on within the industry where companies are combining and consolidating to keep going in the shrinking market.

In 1980 bowling enjoyed a recreation market slice of some 25% today it is tough to get 5%. So this is the bad news as I see it today. Now to deal with what may have caused the decline and how bowling may look in the future. Cultural changes, computers and gambling all are contributing to the decline. Not much can be done to guard against these factors but I believe USBC, the proprietors and the equipment manufacturers can do a lot more to help save our once great game.

## “Causes and Future”

### Part IV

Concerning the new U.S.B.C. which is primarily an organization that is bureaucratic and regulates its members with rules and endless paperwork. There is a need for them to mandate conditions that are level and par to all bowlers not just the ones who roll a ball 17 to 20 miles per hour on short oil. A 2 to 1 oil ratio laid down edge to edge 40 ft would do the job. It then has to get a hold on the power of the ball, and make it so it requires more skill to roll a good ball and not just ball speed. I believe team bowling should be required for the professionals as well as the league bowlers. After all most bowling is team bowling. I would like to see bowlers called bowlers not players.

Now for the causes in the decline of your once great industry and game. First of all people have changed their way in which they want to entertain themselves. They are no longer the joiners they once were. I believe there is a true culture change in people regarding bowling. It has taken 25 years to occur but it has. There is very little anyone can do to reverse the culture change. There are other interests of this new culture. There are in my thinking, two major interests of this new culture. One being the VCR and the eventual DVD player, and the other is the computer. It's a fact that there is at least on computer in most everyone's home these days. Computers occupy people's time and they are used by everyone young and old 24-7. Gambling is a new huge industry in the nation. In the case of poker there are over 3000 sites where people play and gamble. I am sure many were bowlers in the past. Gambling which is now a trillion dollar business, takes a lot of money out of all industries including bowling. There is nothing anyone can do about the above stated problems other than work to bring some people back to bowling and keep what he have left.

I believe the days of people joining leagues that bowl 30 weeks or more is a thing of the past. What is now needed is shorter leagues offering all kinds of competition. Red pin bowling should always be offered in open play. In red pin bowling the red pin comes up as the one pin and if a strike is rolled in that frame a free game is awarded. The bowling centers of the future, like the business of the future must also be different. Bowling centers of the future would be privately owned and operated. They will have a diversified set of options that offer more to the customer than just bowling. These centers will need to incorporate a pro shop with a pro, a snack bar, an upscale restaurant bar, and a billiard room. Other possible additions would be a health club and outdoor and indoor miniature golf and a big arcade. A league should have the right to ask for certain lane conditions and they must be guaranteed the same conditions during the regular season. The lanes must be open 24-7 during the regular season as well. There should be places that people can afford with lots of specials on food and bowling. Bowling lanes should offer the standard lane conditions along with 2 to 1 flat oil conditions edge to edge and sport type conditions if requested, and more importantly these should come at no extra cost to the bowler.

Bowling centers are closing all over the area, the ones that are left can still survive if they start to pay close attention to the needs of the customer. With the cost of insurance and equipment, it will be very difficult for centers to continue. The upside is that because

of this there will be fewer centers so the ones that do remain may be O.K. Scores are much too high and are caused by high power bowling balls and short blocked oil patterns. Last year there were 57,000 perfect games bowled. Twelve people bowled 900 series. A young man in Troy New York averaged 250 for the entire season. This has to stop, the game is becoming a joke. A few suggestions on league bowling, in the football format there should never be pre bowling, it just is not the same as competitive bowling. In regard to scratch league there must be a reasonable cap so that lower average teams have an equal chance to win. Handicapping must be 90% of the highest bowler in the league or cap if necessary. In order to start getting scores back in line there is a need to start putting more oil patterns on the lane. U.S.B.S. must tighten up on bowling ball specifications. High power balls and short block oil patterns are the source of high scores.

On the bowling balls , at the risk of repeating myself there seems to be an unintended conspiracy between the manufacturers the U.S.B.C. and the proprietors which have ruined our game for many years. The day cores were put in the center of the balls, the scores rose and have not stopped to this day. Some of the materials used to make the cores seem to have the properties of metal which if were used in the past bowlers would be banned from bowling. Most of the ads imply that the new balls go longer, hit harder, and are stronger. I tried to read the specifics that U.S.B.C. uses, you had to be an engineer to understand them. The bottom line is the balls are constantly made stronger and used on easy lane conditions which provide the high scores. The balls are out there and they are not coming back. The only alternative is to put more oil on the lanes to bring scores back to a more normal environment. A 2 to 1 oil ratio of oil between the both edges laid down about 40 feet would be fine. Egos are inflated and the 48" yard stick used by USBC has to go. The PGA tested a golf ball that went 30 more yards on the average and it banned it from use. This has to tell you they are protecting the integrity of their game. A man in Texas last year averaged 267 for the entire season, I rest my case.

It is now 2007 and I doubt whether I will write on this subject anymore. I still work in my store 7 days a week. I still teach at local centers and will continue to do so as long as I can before it is time to say goodbye to bowling for good. My store sponsors all bowling T.V. shows and I teach classes of 16 bowlers each, 3 times a year besides doing private lessons. In my own way I am trying to continue to help any way that I can and will do so for as long as I can. Last year I had two operations a stroke and I am still going. In the last 25 years bowling has lost 7.5 million bowlers. The job now is to stop the losses and take good care of the 2.7million bowlers remaining. U.S.B.C. lower your dues, bring scores back to a normal level and make sure the conditions are fair to everyone. With the times the bowling organization and the industries are fading out and when and where it stops no one knows. The time to act is now, before it is too late. After 45 years in business, our bowling department in my store still grosses 200,000, selling to men women and juniors. That is a big number these days.

With all do respect, as I stated earlier with just a high school education, I consider myself a self taught intellectual in the fields of bowling, billiards, gambling, and business. It just took me 50 years of self learning and study for me to write such a statement in bowling. Some of my personal accomplishments in these fields are:

Bowling In 1974 as a member of a three man team which held the national high three game series. I also am a member of the Albany Bowling Hall of Fame. Gambling two top 30 finishes at the world series of poker and the winner of a High Low tournament at the

Gold Coast in Las Vegas. Billiards a high run of 86 balls in straight pool. Business being in business for 50 years, now rated in the top 5% for longevity in the business world.

In closing I envision fewer bowling centers, fewer manufacturers and their distributors. The number of bowlers will continue to decline with many more becoming recreational bowlers. The centers will have less competition from these closings, but will remain profitable as long as they care for the customer and diversify their income stream. USBC will bring back the integrity of bowling. Bowlers will demand good, normal conditions. The entire bowling industry will hum along at a slower pace.

By Bowling Professor,

Bob Daubney

1950-present

Bob Daubney's Bowling, Billiards, and Awards, Inc.  
601 New Loudon Rd.  
Latham, NY 12110  
Tel: 518-785-3555  
Fax: 518-785-2695  
E-mail: [daubney300@aol.com](mailto:daubney300@aol.com)  
Web: <http://www.bobdaubney.com>