

## It's Beginning to Look Revolutionary

*The times they are a-changin – finally. . .*

What an exciting time this is for the bowling industry. It's almost as if some giant voice in the universe is finally screaming, "We're mad as hell, and we're not going to take it any more!" Maybe it's the Bowling Gods?

No doubt, there is an uprising in our game, and it's out to overthrow the status quo. Just look at what is happening right now in our industry - The American Bowling Congress, founded in 1895, and the Women's International Bowling Congress, founded in 1916, have merged to form the new United States Bowling Congress. On the professional side of the game, the PBA has re-invented itself under new private ownership. The PWBA has ceased operation, hopefully only temporarily.

Bowling centers around the world are turning rapidly into 'entertainment centers', and there is a new building boom beginning for these type of centers.

League bowling, for decades the backbone of the bowling business, has been shrinking over the past two decades as open play recreational bowling is recently resurging. The price of a game of bowling is also rising. One myth that is being repeated in some circles is that open play is at an all-time high. Not true. Open play income may be higher than it's ever been, but open play traffic is still 20-30% less than it was 25 years ago, according to the Multi-Unit Bowling Information Group. MUBIG, an organization made up of large bowling centers and chains, keeps close tabs on those numbers.

Has league bowling reached the bottom? Not quite. It's likely USBC (formerly ABC, WIBC and YABA) membership could drop below three million members next season. If it does, that would be the first time it's been below 3 million since 1955, which is about the time the rise started as automatic pinsetters decame standard equipment universally. It peaked in the late 1970's at near 10 million combined members.

The numbers may sound alarming,

because they are, but the good news is that something is finally happening to do stop the decline. Denial is now officially over, and I think those who still believe in this industry are committed to bringing it back. Will it be as big as it was? I don't think so, but if we are paying attention to what history teaches, it could be better the second time around.

The late Dr. George Allen, who wrote several instructional and mental training books about 25 years ago, did an extensive evaluation of the industry as the numbers began to fall, and many of his conclusions and predictions have come to pass. Perhaps his most important observation was that "bigger is not always better".

George Allen recognized that the industry got too fat too fast, and his advice was to concentrate on quality, not quantity. It was good advice. Yes, we've lost 6-7 million league bowlers, but as silly as this might sound, we still have 3 million, and if we don't change the way we treat them, a lot more will leave the game.

Which brings us back to the revolution. These are very historic times for bowling, and the mere fact that USBC is now a reality says loud and clear that bowling's hierarchy recognizes that dramatic changes are needed to end the decline and build a better future.

If the present trend continues, the league bowler base could go as low as 2 million. It depends on how quickly new USBC programs can be implemented. According to Roger Dalkin, the new CEO of USBC, the programs that took 10 months or more to start under ABC/WIBC guidelines can now be started in 10 weeks or less. That is very encouraging.

Dalkin, speaking to the Bowling Writers of America membership March 15 in Baton Rouge, also spoke of a stronger relationship with the proprietors and the BPAA. "The proprietors are our best friends, and allies," he said. "I want to see a Mercedes in the garage of every proprietor. Why? Because if they are successful, we'll have a place to bowl. If they're not, they will sell their centers for land value or whatever, and we won't have a place to bowl". For Dalkin to say that is significant; because in the past, the relationship between the proprietors and ABC/WIBC was

adversarial at times.

USBC President Mike Carroll also offered words of support and expressed a strong desire to work more closely with bowling center owners and managers. Two of the four axioms Carroll cited for USBC success referenced a new partnership with proprietors. "We have the same customers as BPAA," he said, and stressed that partnerships and alliances with BPAA and other sports NGB's (National Governing Bodies) would be a key to USBC's success.

I also had the opportunity to ask Carroll if he was concerned that the current 'Sport Bowling' program comprised less than 2% of USBC members, and he said he was. "I think it should be 15-20%", he said.

Even the bowling media is marching to a new drumbeat. In Baton Rouge March 17, the Bowling Writers Association of America voted to hold its next annual meeting in conjunction with BPAA's Bowl Expo instead of USBC. That historic vote ends a 71-year connection with the ABC, and it wasn't even close. The vote was 31-12 in favor of holding the meeting at Bowl Expo in June 2006. It's only a one-year deal, but I believe the BWAA members who will attend Bowl Expo for the first time will wonder why it didn't happen sooner.

BWAA members also voted to explore the possibility of expanding membership to include members of the National Women Bowling Writers. A BWAA delegation will go to Tulsa next month to discuss a possible merger and explore ways the two organizations can work together.

This is another significant step toward progress. The way I see it is that if the professional writers of BWAA can work more closely with the NWBW writers, who mostly do newsletters and internet writing, then both organizations can become stronger. BWAA has about 250 members and NWBW currently has about 650. If nothing else, there could be more strength in numbers.

I don't know what the future holds for our industry, but for the first time in a very long time, I see industry leaders not only willing, but pro-actively trying to make much needed and necessary changes. When you consider that until recently many industry leaders wouldn't even admit there was a problem, that is very revolutionary.

