

Kingpin Success Could Return Real Megabuck Bowling

If the Kingpin Million Dollar Challenge Tournament scheduled for October 22-30 in Reno is successful, true 'megabuck' bowling could be restored, and a new era will begin for bowlers who are attracted to 'the long-shot big prize'.

When that first million dollar check reaches the hands of the Kingpin champion, everything changes, but will it be enough to get any attention from the national sports media? The Kingpin owners are banking that it will.

Kingpin managing partner John Gumas said in a press conference at Bowl Expo, "Our objective is to excite and unite the industry". Gumas, president of San Francisco based Gumas Advertising, and his partners, Dave Woodruff, Pete McDermott and Darren Mullahey now say not only will the inaugural event happen, but they are committed for a "3 to 5 year"

run of the event. "We've invested way too much for this to be just a one-time event," said Dave Woodruff in response to tough questioning from the dean of bowling journalists Chuck Pezzano.

The press conference, held during Bowl Expo in Orlando, was well attended by the bowling media and Kingpin's new sponsors, which now include the Reno Tri-Properties (Silver Legacy, Circus Circus and Eldorado Hotels), the USBC, Brunswick, Columbia, Track, Storm, Ebonite, Hammer, Lane 1, Dexter, Bowlers Journal, and the National Bowling Stadium.

The two-year planning process for this new event is nearing D-Day, and overall, the Kingpin team has done a decent job of getting their message across. In addition to the four non-bowling partners and their support staffs, they have hired a few bowling people to guide them. Two of bowling's 'nice guys' are among them - PBA champions Dave Husted, who will serve as their "Commissioner", and Frank Ellenburg, who is the Kingpin 'Director of Operations' a.k.a. 'the tournament director'.

Also on the new staff is PR director Joan Romeo, who did a very good job with the media conference in Orlando, and statistician Bob Markiewicz, inventor of the 'Brackman' bracket and event software, who will handle all on-site stats and results during the event.

I had a chance to meet with the partners privately and attended the press conference in Orlando, and I'm im-

pressed with their sincerity and desire to make the event a success. Will it be successful? In some ways it already is. Will it make money? Needing approximately 1700 bowlers, it is very unlikely the first year. With the backing of BPAA, maybe next year. Only 750 had entered as of June 30. On August 15, all those who have put up a \$195 deposit will be asked to pay the balance of their entry package price and their entry will become official.

Honestly, when my friend Frank Ellenburg first told me about this event knowing it had been tried before, I was very skeptical about the possibility of its success. I said then that the two obstacles to overcome were the location and the entry fee. The National Bowling Stadium is a beautiful facility, but it is very expensive to fly to Reno from most cities. The \$695 entry fee, compared to the \$200-\$250 for events like the Mini Eliminator and High Roller, may also prove to be a problem, especially for sponsors who back several top bowlers.

When the High Roller was at its peak, the entry fee was \$1100 and first place was \$200,000 to \$250,000, so maybe the \$695 and \$295 re-entry is about right, especially when you consider that the top seven prizes total over \$1.4 million, and the total purse is set at a minimum of \$2.2 million. How many bowlers who break even or profit a little could be a key to the future.

The format of the Kingpin, announced as 'revolutionary', is very similar to Steve Sanders' Mini Eliminator format, where Frank Ellenburg has been the tournament director for many years. One interesting twist is that in addition to the age and gender divisions, there is a 'wild card' spot on the television show. The runner-ups in all six divisions will bowl one game to win the spot and have a shot at a million bucks.

Also interesting, and I salute the owners for doing it, is a clear women's division. A woman will be among the seven finalists, and don't be surprised if she wins the big prize. Anything can happen in a one game shootout.

USBC is backing the event, and even waived its rules to accommodate certification of the tournament. The partners previous clients list is also impressive - The National Hot Rod Association, the PRCA National Finals Rodeo, R J Reynolds, Wrangler, Daimler-Chrysler, Anheuser Busch, Harley Davidson, Hewlett-Packard, Ford, General Motors, Miler Brewing Company, Coca-Cola, and many others. Sounds like bowling is about to go big time.

A few things troubled me about my initial contact with the Kingpin team, but after meeting with them in Orlando,

I have a better understanding of the enormous task these guys have taken on. Selfishly, I thought they should have reached out to the bowling publications like this one and a few others sooner, but I realize that was not a priority. Maybe next year.

I also wonder what they were thinking when they chose the image of a 70-something old man with a plastic ball and house shoes in their advertising. When I asked that question in Orlando, I got a 'no comment' answer. I suspect we won't see those images next time. I also hope they choose better colors for their promotional materials in the future.

The other major aspect of the event, which is what attracted the USBC and other sponsors, is the 60-minute television show on NBC Sports. The show will be taped on October 30 and aired Sunday afternoon November 13 at 2:00 p.m. EST. I'm sure it will be a major expense this year, but perhaps NBC or the partners can sell advertising to pay for most of it in future years.

My understanding is that the show will be a dose of reality TV mixed with the sport of bowling. It will be as much about the life-changing experience of winning the million as it is about the 7-player one-game final match.

The show will be produced by 12-time Emmy Award winner George Veras, and my understanding is that the production company will visit the homes of the seven finalists in the few days following the final match. The taped show will then build toward the climactic moment when one of the bowlers will become an instant millionaire. Warm and fuzzy followed by high drama - a winning formula.

Obviously, there will be some 'acting' involved, because the six people who don't win will have to pretend it hasn't happened yet - just like the 'reality' shows we've seen so much of in recent years. But there's nothing wrong with that, especially when you consider that all of them win at least \$50,000. Of course, the bowling public will know the winner, but I think they will watch to get to know the contestants and witness the moment of winning.

Will it catch on? Will the partners take big losses for a few years to finally find success? Will it change the bowling landscape? Will it excite and unite the industry?

It just might. And if it does, will we see changes to the Mini Eliminator and High Roller? Will the Kingpin move to Vegas? Will all those PBA guys who don't make the top 64 go back to the once thriving 'megabuck tour'?

You have to admit - the prospects are very, very interesting.

