

## IS IT REALLY THE U.S. WOMEN'S OPEN?

The bowling world is buzzing about the 2007 U.S. Women's Open, sponsored by the United States Bowling Congress at the National Bowling Stadium in Reno; but quite often, things that buzz may also sting. I hope this tournament is a great success and will lead to bigger and better things for the

### GUEST COLUMN

by Fran Deken

If anyone knows the proud history of the Women's U.S. Open Tournament, it's PWBA and USBC Hall of Famer Fran Deken. From the early 70's until she became LPBT tournament Director in 1982, she bowled in ten U.S. Opens as a professional. In the 80's and 90's, she served as U.S. Open Tournament Director for a dozen events.

She is also a former President of the Bowling Writers Association of America, Tournament Coordinator at the fabled Las Vegas Showboat Bowling Center, and Director of Operations at the National Bowling Stadium, where this Year's Women's U.S. Open is being held. She currently serves on the BWAA Board of Directors.



top women bowlers; but I think there are too many factors working against it to allow this to happen.

Let's start with the entry blank. Almost as soon as the tournament was announced I got on the internet and went to bowl.com to look at the entry blank so I could find out how the tournament worked. All the entry asked for was name, address, and money. There were no rules, no prize list, and no format on the entry blank. Why would anyone enter a tournament without knowing all the facts? Several weeks later this information was added to the website and entries were mailed out to high average women bowlers throughout the nation. However, the rules, format etc. were not included in this mailing.

Perhaps this is why there are so few entries (less than 60 in mid - July, only a month before the event)

The biggest drawback may be the format, which calls for four 8-game blocks of qualifying, then a cut to the top 16 bowlers. The top 16 are then divided into four groups by their qualifying position and will then bowl a one game match against a designated opponent, loser being eliminated from the tournament. The top eight follow the same procedure, then the winners of the four

groups will return to Reno two months later for the live televised finals; which are again one game matches against a designated opponent, loser being eliminated.

Basically, after 32 games of qualifying, a bowler will bowl only four more games to win the U.S. Open, and she will only have to beat one opponent, not everyone in the field. Her average at this point means nothing; just get the win! I call this the 'instant gratification' format, and it brings to mind the High Roller Tournament motto – 'in a one game match, anyone can win.'

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An added kicker to this 'instant gratification' format, and the second obstacle to a successful U.S. Open, is that qualifying will be held on four different PBA lane conditioning patterns, and then the matchplay will be contested on the fifth PBA pattern.. This will serve to promote the USBC's new PBA Experience leagues, which is all well and good, except that these leagues are not available in all cities and towns as yet.

Women did not know until May that they needed to be practicing in these leagues, so if one could find such a summer league that would only allow approximately six games on each condition before the tournament. Because of this slight problem, the USBC will run sweepers at night during the U.S. Open so that bowlers can get in some practice on the next day's condition; this is after you've already bowled eight games of qualifying, and you get to pay to participate in the sweeper. Why not just run a practice session each evening, sort of on the order of going to the driving range after a tournament round of golf?

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The men's U.S. Open consists of three rounds of qualifying, one round semi-finals for the top 25% of the field, then 24 games of round-robin match play for the top 24, followed by the stepladder format for the top four. That's more than 50 games to determine who's the best. The senior men's U.S. Open has the same format with a few less games in each qualifying block.

This same format has been used in the women's U.S. Open since the first one was held in Kansas City in 1971, until the last one staged in 2003 in Detroit,

where over 300 women competed for the title. The U.S. Opens are an offshoot of the historic BPAA All Star tournament, a 100 game event for both men and women, held from 1941-1970. The whole idea of this demanding format, is that over so many games, the cream rises to the top; and history has shown this to be true.

It appears that the format for the 2007 U.S. Women's Open was developed primarily for television. I will be very happy to see women competing on television, but I believe the women are being short-changed. Perhaps I would not feel that way if the tournament had a different title; but since it's called the U.S. Open, then the bowlers should be treated with the respect a U.S. Open participant deserves, and the tournament format should reflect that respect.

Separating the finals by so many weeks from the qualifying also makes it difficult for foreign bowlers to compete; although the rules state that the USBC will pay the expenses for the return to Reno of the top four bowlers. For these players, jet lag might be another obstacle to overcome in a one game match. International bowlers in the U.S. Open have always added color and flavor to the tournament, with Shinobu Saitoh of Japan winning in 1982, and several others contending over the years.

The separation also forces many media people looking to cover the tournament to make a choice and either forgo seeing the qualifying, or pass up the finals. How can they justify the expense of going to watch qualifying if there won't be a winner at the end of that time? Will the average bowling fan lose interest in the results with such a long wait? I realize that we wait a few weeks for the NFL Super Bowl, but that's really not the same thing since it's a separate event. This is more like having playoff game end in a tie, and waiting eight weeks for the overtime. That would be unacceptable to players and fans alike.

Apparently, the only thing that seems to matter is television. An entire format has been designed to produce television shows, and while that's good for women's bowling, it's not good for a U.S. Open, which should be one of the premier titles in the sport.

How can you "grow" a sport that doesn't seem to respect itself or its top bowlers?