



# BOWL • • PINION

by Jim Goodwin

The editorial opinions expressed here are offered to provoke thought on important and sometimes controversial or provocative issues.

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## “Bowlergate”

What was so terrible about the infamous “Watergate” episode of American history? Was it the petty theft? No, it was the cover up that led to the downfall of a President. Bowling may now have its own Watergate. Let’s call it ‘Bowlergate’.

When I wrote a column a few months ago expressing the opinion that USBC was making a mistake by turning down Junior Team USA member Jamie Foster’s 299 and 300 games bowled in a sport league, I also mentioned that I would reserve comment on two 900 series (in non-sport leagues) rolled by New York teenager Robert Mushtare until they were either approved or denied by USBC.

On June 19, the United States Bowling Congress announced they have approved the two 900 series bowled by 17-year-old Mushtare of Carthage, New York. Mushtare rolled the 900s on December 3, 2005 and February 19, 2006 at the Pine Plains Bowling Center in Fort Drum, NY, both during pre-bowling sessions for his Pine Plains Junior/Senior League.

The approval of these scores followed a USBC rejection of a 900 by Mushtare of November 5, 2005, also in a pre-bowling session for the same league, because the league was not certified and Mushtare was not a member of USBC at that time. It has also been reported that Mushtare claims to have two additional 900s during uncertified practice sessions.

And I thought Superman was a comic book character with a new movie on the way this summer. Little did I know he’d turn out to be a bowler. Or is he?

Allow me to be honest, and sensible. What this young man claims to have done – three or four, or five 900s – is impossible. As a bowler, I know that. However, I spoke with an attorney friend about this and he said that if USBC had denied these scores and a lawsuit resulted, and the only evidence USBC had was statistical improbability, they would lose in court. In other words, if there was even one grain of sand chance from all the beaches in the world, it could not legally be called “impossible”. So hearing that, I still say it’s impossible.

And that’s about what the odds are that this actually happened. One in a gazillion, if there is such a number. The

good people at USBC headquarters are better with numbers than me, so they also know, even if they can’t say it, that this feat is ‘virtually impossible’. And I say if they didn’t find any evidence of misconduct, they didn’t look long or hard enough. I wouldn’t be surprised if some comes to light down the road.

I’ve spoken to a number of knowledgeable people in the past couple of days about this, and not one believes it’s legit. Jim Dressel, editor of the Bowlers Journal, had this to say on June 21: “Granted, the kid (Mushtare) is good – he averaged 211 on NY state’s youth bowling tour – but Jeff Carter averaged 267 for an entire league season and didn’t really come that close to a 900. . . only God can walk on water.”

I called BPAA President Jeff Boje, who is also a member of the USBC Board of Directors. Jeff said, “I’m sure USBC followed the rules and probably had no choice in approving these scores, but if there’s fraud here, this is a travesty for our sport. It goes to the very heart of credibility.”

Boje also offered the best analogy I’ve heard about how this compares to other sports feats. He said, “I was once a competitive swimmer. This is like going to the pool early on a Saturday morning and breaking a world record time. You might brag to your friends that you did it, but I don’t think USA Swimming would recognize it as a legitimate record.”

BPAA President Elect Joe Schumacker agreed with Boje’s assessment, and said he hopes this will bring the pre-bowling issue back to USBC’s legislative agenda sooner rather than later. “USBC had a chance to do something about this problem at their convention,” he said, “but they deferred it. I don’t see how deferring this issue will provide any more clarity.” Boje also pledged that he would propose some sort of immediate action to deal with pre-bowled scores at the next USBC Board meeting.

USBC Sport Bowling Director Jeff Henry also acknowledged in a phone conversation that perhaps rules needed to be modified, but pointed out that the amendment deferred had nothing to do with the Mushtare case, and would not have changed the outcome.

Over almost six months, USBC investigated the Mushtare score submissions, and at the end of the investigation, approved the scores. What Henry probably couldn’t say is that they couldn’t find any evidence of cheating or

reason to deny the scores, even if they wanted to; but according to Henry, they didn’t go to New York looking for evidence of wrongdoing – only to get the true facts.

Henry also said that the possibility of a lawsuit had the scores been denied had no bearing on their decision. “We get threatened with lawsuits all the time,” he said. “We can’t do our job if we worry about that.” I asked him if the possibility of a lawsuit was discussed anytime during the investigation, and he said, “it was not”.

So, what did USBC do? Henry told me that after several phone interviews with parties involved were conducted, he, Kevin Dornberger, and Chris Cooper traveled to New York to conduct face-to-face interviews with Mushtare and more than 10 others who had knowledge or witness to some or all of the 900 sessions.

“We examined every aspect of the claim and had a court reporter record the interviews,” he said. At the end of the day they found no violation of USBC rules. When asked, Henry declined to give his personal opinion of the case. I don’t envy him or anyone else at USBC who are now stuck with this dark cloud hanging over USBC headquarters. They can only enforce the rules in place, even if the rules are bad or inadequate. Their predecessors created this monster that is now eating them alive.

The press release USBC sent out is their usual matter-of-fact document, and I’m confident it was mulled over thoroughly before it hit the streets. Unfortunately, it makes them look a little foolish. Do they think anyone who knows anything about our sport is going to believe that their blessing of these scores makes them legit?

Actually, my hope is this episode could end up being a turning point toward starting the process of re-building bowling’s credibility. Maybe this will cause people in the industry to say “enough is enough”. I suggested to Henry that at the very least they should put details of their investigation on their website. I think they owe that much to their members.

To provide some historical context to this, I believe it goes all the way back to the 1970’s when the American Bowling Congress decided to get tough on scoring and rejected hundreds (perhaps thousands) of honor scores. The most famous rejection in bowling history was July 1, 1982 when they threw out Hall of Famer

Glenn Allison’s 900. Many believe this is the only legitimate 900 ever shot.

After the Allison episode, they continued to reject scores for several years while they experimented with ‘long oil’, ‘short oil’, and several other projects, and in 1991, ‘The System of Bowling’ was created to appease BPAA’s complaints that their ABC member customers were angry; and thousands left the game and their bowling centers.

Looking back, what has the system of bowling done? Has it made things better or worse? Since it has minimum parameters but no maximum, it certainly led to higher scores, and in most cases, automatic approval. But, is the sport better or worse since 1991? I think the answer is obvious. And Sport Bowling isn’t the answer either. Thus far, it appears to be a miserable failure, and it will continue to fail unless USBC finds a way to make it proprietor friendly.

In 1997, fifteen years after the Allison 900 and six years into SoB, the 900 pinnacle was reached by Jeremy Sonnenfeld, and it was quickly approved under the new SoB guidelines. Then, over the next several years, the 900’s kept coming. I predicted after Sonnenfeld’s there would be at least one per year. The current average (since 1997) is 1.3 per year and rising; and prior to Mushtare, there have been three in 2006. Now there are five this year, and we have six months to go.

And now ‘Bowlergate’; but what can USBC do? One possibility is that they can get out of the honor score business. Does anyone believe that giving cheap awards for honor scores has helped them? Goodness sakes – 7 million members have walked away since 1978! They have spent millions in membership money on these trinkets that decorate the junk drawers and back shelves of only about 2% of America’s bowlers. Has it been a good investment?

Mike Carroll and Roger Dalkin talked about this at the USBC Convention – the possibility of moving USBC from an organization that recognizes accomplishment, but does not provide monetary rewards, especially to only the very high average players. After this biggest ever black-eye for bowling, I say go for it, and the sooner the better.

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