



BOWL • • PINION

by Jim Goodwin

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

Agree or disagree, we'd like to hear from you:

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WTBA Takes Charge With Bold Project

I recently had the privilege of visit the incredible Kegel Training Center in Florida to write a story for Bowlers Journal International Magazine about the World Tenpin Bowling Association's 'Regulation Bowling Ball' project. It was a very interesting day.

While doing the interviews for the story with Kegel's John Davis and other members of the WTBA Technical Committee, I was thinking how complex this project is, and about all of the implications it could have on the future of the sport.

Then, I had a second thought - maybe its not so complicated. Maybe the beauty of the concept is that it is a relatively simple solution to bowling's credibility problem.

Over the years, some very smart people have said that bowling's lane conditioning rules need to be changed, and they have been changed several times, but it didn't solve any problems - quite the contrary. Others have preached that heavier pins are the only answer, and pin weight was increased, but not enough to make a difference in ridiculously high scoring by amateur league bowlers.

There are numerous complex components and subcomponents that make up what we call the bowling environment, but the three primary facets are pins, lanes and balls. What John Davis and his associates have concluded is that if you build a ball that doesn't flair or flip

or have the dynamic weight blocks or particles in the shell material, then the lane oil pattern required to support it will be much simpler, and bowler's skill levels will be a much more important factor in who wins and loses. In theory, the luck factor will be lessened, and bowlers with superior physical strength will have less advantage than they do now.

There is a bit of science involved in the equation, but it's not rocket science. It's more common sense and logic than complex science. The beauty of the theory is its simplicity - A bowling ball that has less dynamics and surface that doesn't need much oil. Less oil means less carrydown, less maintenance, less breakdown of the pattern, less confusion for the players, coaches and ball drillers. Less cost for equipment.

So, in theory, less is more, but that probably won't stop the ball companies from objecting. They have sold millions of exotic balls in the past couple of decades, and now they are in a significant slump. It seems there haven't been any new 'ultimate weapons' in quite a while, and the high performance ball market is saturated.

What the builders of bowling balls must be worried about is the potential 'ripple effect'. They might be

concerned that if the concept catches on, the elite bowlers in international events will influence up-and-coming players and ball sales will decrease even more.

Initially, that could happen, but we are only talking about a small group of international



John Davis

elite players - perhaps 500-1000 worldwide. And if the concept does 'trickle down' to league bowlers, won't that create a demand for these 'regulation balls'? In the U.S., it will probably only affect USBC Sport Leagues, which is less than 1% of the certified USBC league bowler base. However, if the PBA embraces the concept, that could have a profound affect.

WTBA STEPPING UP and OUT?

World Tenpin Bowling Association events conducted internationally for more than 120 bowling federations globally currently use ball specification rules established by the United States Bowling Congress. Their endorsement and approval of the regulation ball project in effect says that they may want to establish their own rules for balls.

For the past decade or more, the USBC rules (or lack of) have become problematic in WTBA competition. International bowlers and national team members have been forced to drill dozens of balls

for each player to be competitive. Kegel President and WTBA Tech Committee chairman John Davis told me that at one WTBA event with about 600 bowlers, over 5000 balls were checked in.

Not to mention the cost of the equipment itself, the cost to transport and ship the balls is enormous, and federations or individual bowlers without big budgets are put at a distinct disadvantage. Bowling is a relatively inexpensive sport for most, but for international elite players, it has become very expensive, even to the point where some can no longer afford to travel and compete.

We will learn much more about this bold project at Bowl Expo in Las Vegas June 25-30. John Davis and several members of WTBA will be there to give an update, and you can bank on the fact that a lot of behind-the-scenes discussions will happen between all parties involved.

Is this the answer to bowling's credibility woes? It could be part of it, just like USBC's Sport Bowling is a part. The question is, who and how many will sign on to the idea, and who will oppose it? As John Davis said, "it won't happen overnight". Problems that took decades to mature cannot be solved in days or weeks.

But - it's a start for WTBA, and we salute them for having the courage and vision to go forward with what could be a significant step toward a better future for bowling worldwide.