



# 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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## The Teen Masters was Creative, Inventive, and Incredible

As we prepare to join the Generations Bowling Tour staff to start the new GBT in late September, we are winding down from a magnificent week at the Teen Masters National Championship, and anticipating an interesting three-day trip to Las Vegas to witness the new USBC Women's Challenge, also produced by TM owner Gary Beck.

The Teen Masters was terrific for several reasons, the first being the opportunity to meet some of the incredible youth bowlers who are so talented, enthusiastic about the game, and who are genuinely interested in enjoying bowling as a challenging and difficult sport. Congratulations to TM champions Jake Peters and Brittani Hamilton (see story p. 7).

CJ and I had the rare privilege of working with Gary Beck, Kirk and Mary Von Krueger and some of the PBA staff, John Davis and the good people at Kegel, and our friends from PWBA days, Pat Costello and staff at Boardwalk Entertainment Center, and George Smith and his television production crew, to help produce a really special youth bowling tournament, the first ever with its own televised arena finals.

The preliminary rounds of the event were held at the huge 80-lane Boardwalk center, and thanks to the vision of Gary Beck, it had the look and feel of a PBA tour event – a rare treat for the teens who participated. From the start, the teens were treated like pros, with big screen scoreboards, plasma leaderboards, and instant results game-by-game and after each round. Teen Masters logos were everywhere, leaving no doubt something special was happening.

PWBA Hall of Famer Pat Costello was our 'go-to' person at Boardwalk. She helps manage the center, runs the training program there, and coaches the University of Central Florida bowling team. The UCF campus is located just a few miles from the center, and her team members volunteered their services whenever needed all week. Many served as pinboys, pingirls, and foul judges at the arena built inside Universal Studios Sound Stage 33.

I imagine some of these great kids and their parents, many who came from small centers

in small towns, were overwhelmed by the huge Boardwalk center and the incredible arena at Universal. They will definitely have some stories to tell the folks back home.

We've been to many arena bowling shows, but this one was special. Built by John Davis and his great people from Kegel, located in nearby Lake Wales, the four-lane set-up for this event was awesome, and Davis and Beck deserve a lot of credit for thinking outside the box on this one.

The beautiful "Kegel Edge" synthetic lanes were separated by three ribbons of red carpet. This extra width not only gave the lane maintenance guys a comfortable place to walk, it made it possible for pinboys and pingirls to set pins from both sides of the pindecks simultaneously.

The pindecks, flat gutters, and kickbacks were the standard variety, except the decks had a 'peg system' that allowed the pinboys to raise steel pegs for exact pin placement. This was a throwback to the early 1900's, and all pins made today still have the holes in the bottom used by the pinboys of yesteryear for exact placement.

The approaches were also a new Kegel product. They were spacious due to the extra width and absence of automatic ball returns, and they were made of a special textured laminate, which provided players with an excellent slide surface.

Balls were returned manually on silent ramps built beside lanes one and four. Foul judges (UCF students) doubled as 'ball lifters'. When the ball reached the end of the ramp, they simply reached down, picked it up, and placed it on a nostalgic ball rail to send it back to the bowler. These custom built rails resembled the old Brunswick rails seen in many 'alleys' in the 1940's and 50's. The only thing missing was a towel rack and a big hunk of chalk. Davis even thought to include small electric fans on the player's ball tables to dry their hands.

The top 16 Teen Masters bowlers had the honor of bowling in the arena, with 8 girls and 8 boys going against each other in best-of-five matchplay on Friday evening and all day Saturday. The top two boys and girls advanced to the TV finals, taped on Sunday August 6. It will air October 16 on ESPN2.

What struck us as we entered the arena for the first time was the unusual quiet. Everyone was whispering without really knowing why. It sure didn't sound like

any bowling center or arena we've ever experienced, and it was a little eerie for a short while. One of the teens described it as "creepy". But the shock of the sudden silence soon wore off, and the strangest thing happened. We began to hear sounds we've never heard before!

It reminded me of the first few days after moving from the city to the country. Gone was the constant hum of the cars on the freeway, replaced by the chirping of birds and summer cicadas, and frogs in the pond.

In this arena, the whirring of the pin and ball wheels and the humming of the belts and pulleys were replaced by the murmur of the crowd in the grandstands, and the players talking to themselves under their breath. The sounds of the ball rolling down the lanes, and the crash of the pins, unmasked from the massive metal machines, was crisp and distinctive.

It was, to say the least, very cool, and we couldn't help but grin, knowing that we were experiencing something very unique. We felt a little like pioneers in a new environment, like we had been transported back to a time when bowling was the king of the American sports scene. Glancing across the arena, I imagined the ghosts of the Buds and Falstaffs sitting in the grandstands, enjoying every minute, and toasting us with their brews.

I had several chances to chat with Kegel founder John Davis during the arena competition. John personally supervised the design and construction of this special arena, and he couldn't stop smiling as he watched these young athletes compete on the lanes he and his staff built. It was Davis who revolutionized the modern lane-oiling machine, and I suspect he was smiling because he knows this unique arena set-up may be the next "big thing" in arena bowling.

Davis is a bowling history buff, and like me, he has a special appreciation for the sport as it was designed and intended to be played. I think he would agree that technology is wonderful, but it should be blended into the basics of the game. When it changes the game or diminishes the athlete's ability to perform, like some television productions we've seen, it has gone too far.

The new technology Davis brought to this arena was blended beautifully with the sport. The lanes and approaches were synthetic, but the lane surface was

designed to require less oil. The approaches were a textured laminate, and the bowlers had no visible slide problems.

At the end of the arena, behind the pindeck area, there were black curtains, and three giant screens that could easily be seen from the grandstands. The left and right screens were full color electronic scoreboards. The center screen, and another one above the grandstands at the opposite end where the bowlers could see it, streamed instant C.A.T.S. (computer aided tracking system) data after every shot.

The C.A.T.S. screens told the bowlers, the crowd, and the TV announcers (Randy Pedersen and Dave Ryan), the ball speed, the launch angle, the exact line and entry angle, and the rotation after every shot. At the end of the round, Kegel technicians printed out a report detailing all of this information for the media and the players frame-by-frame. It even included a color graphic tracing the ball path for every shot, which was especially interesting because two different oil patterns were used.

To say the least, it was a very interesting week, and we truly enjoyed meeting the kids, seeing our old friends, and being a part of a terrific event. And did I mention PINBOYS?! One told me he now had a special admiration for "all those old guys who sit around the center drinking coffee and talking about the good 'ol days."

Putting myself in the visionary category with Davis and Beck, I can see the possibility of many more arena finals using this concept in the future. The next will be the USBC Women's Challenge in Vegas, where a single lane will be used. Davis shared that the cost of this equipment was easily less than half of one using automatic pinsetters and ball returns.

I can envision a tour (PBA, GBT or a new PWBA) owning its own arena lanes, hauling them around the country in its own truck, and having all their finals in this type of arena setting, but it will require bowling center owners and communities that want something special and are willing to find venues and help raise sponsorship funds. Wouldn't that be something! If rock stars can haul their own lights and stages, why can't bowlers?