

Talk Is Not Cheap!

A candid conversation between USBC Chief Communications Officer Tom Clark and Stars & Strikes Publisher Jim Goodwin

One of the best things about International Bowl Expo is the thousands of conversations that take place between people from all corners of the bowling industry. No one would argue that we must communicate to solve bowling's problems and move forward as a vital industry.

One of the highlights of this year's Bowl Expo was a breakfast 'town hall meeting' with leaders from several of the companies and organizations that represent big slices of the bowling industry pie. The conference was well attended, and the questions and answers from the audience, and a few members of the bowling press, were honest, and sometimes a little frank and revealing.

The meeting, held Thursday morning when Bowl Expo was winding down, was sponsored by the United States Bowling Congress, and was moderated by USBC's Tom Clark, who joined the USBC staff in April 2005 after spending five years as a sports assignment editor for USA Today.

Many interesting things were discussed, but I left the room with many more questions than answers. One of the things I wanted to hear more about was Roger Dalkin's controversial remarks to the Milwaukee paper (when he said, among other things, that USBC needed to "thin the herd" and that he expected USBC membership to continue to decline from 2.5 million to under 1 million, and league

business to fall from its present level of 47% to 20-25%.)

For the CEO of Bowling's governing body to make these statements is major news, which is why last month's Bowl O Pinion column covered the subject. During Bowl Expo, Clark told me Roger was upset by my editorial, but Dalkin never spoke to me directly about it, except when I asked for his explanations by email.

When Tom relayed Roger's feelings, the first thing I asked him was if he had read my column - he said he had not, so when we got home from Vegas, I emailed a copy to him, which sparked the email exchange that follows.

A few days later, I sent Tom another ques-

tion about the growing controversy over the format of the Women's US Open tournament, which is being sponsored and presented by USBC for the first time this month. (for more on this, see this month's Bowl O Pinion, and Fran Deken's Guest Column)

My US Open questions caused another flurry of emails, which make up part two of the exchange that follows. With Tom's consent, we decided to share these conversations to demonstrate that even when we don't agree, it is always good to discuss these issues.

Without talking about it, solutions would never be found - Thus, talk is not cheap.

-Jim Goodwin

PART ONE: DALKIN'S BOLD STATEMENTS

Jim Goodwin: Are we, as an industry, better served by ignoring comments like Roger's, or by writing about them to generate discussion and possible solutions to the challenges described?

Tom Clark: Of course I think it's fair game for you or anyone else to criticize the choice of words by someone in a position like Roger's, no matter what he says. It's also a very important time in bowling and I wish there was a journalist out there who could put everything together, look at the realities and the future and craft a piece void of opinion (of course there would be author bias in some ways).

JG: There is someone - YOU. As a publicist for USBC, that is your job one. In my opinion, a writer without bias is a writer without passion.

TC: I think it's a compelling story to tell and some large magazine or perhaps TV news show would get mileage from it. It's a hard story to pitch however, because we need to find someone with an interest in the topic and [someone who] is ready to listen and learn. People in bowling have been begging for strong leadership and vision and straight talk and I think more and more it's coming. Look at how the BPAA President spoke of the PBA during general session last week - that was straight talk. Our old model hasn't worked. Membership has dropped every year since 1979. People don't think bowling is a sport (22% of general population consider it a sport). The PBA struggles for sponsorship.

JG: And which organizations in this industry forgot their primary responsibility is to maintain the standards of the sport? ABC and WIBC caved in to pressure from BPAA and the ball companies to 'relax' the rules and regulations which led to the scoring epidemic and cost bowling its credibility in the world of sports. If ABC leaders had stood up to these influences, bowling would still get the respect it gets in other countries that have high standards, and league bowling would still be considered sport.

TC: The only thing growing is birthday

parties and cosmic bowling and the use of Superman or Bart Simpson or WWE leagues to get regular customers - this stuff isn't the way people should be introduced to the game or they'll never respect it as a sport. It's fine, but only if the sport side has a similar push of exposure.

JG: Agree. There is nothing wrong with these promotions, as long as the people know there is also a legitimate sport. Another example - I just reviewed the Wii Video bowling game for the BJ. The exciting thing to think about is that millions of kids will play this game, and many will want to go to a 'real bowling center' as a result. When this happens, will we have someone there trying to get them into a

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youth league or learn-to-bowl class, or will we just try to sell the parents a birthday party?

TC: We have to do something and I am proud of the vision of the USBC right now. Of course the hope is always that membership will grow. But my hopes are that the membership is "stronger."

JG: Two million is "stronger" than one million, and ten million is really strong. It seems as if decline has become a business strategy at USBC. The vision is great, but don't use it as an excuse to avoid responsibility and accountability.

TC: The potential for corporate partners and sponsorships are easier to gain because of improved perceptions, respect, effort to sell and opportunities to connect with this stronger membership (membership communications, internet marketing, TV, media). Then things like youth bowling initiatives, high School bowling, collegiate bowling, televised bowling glorifying the best players in the game, coaching, traveling clinics with great stars, youth championships and sustained national championships for amateurs and professionals can be better, be exposed much more and grow the sport. Grow the passion for the sport, an understanding for

what goes into being great; drive a reason for people to want to be coached; a reason for people to want to watch it on TV; a reason to actually practice bowling.

JG: AMEN! And what a boost it would be to have a Hall of Fame Week with two major tournaments like the men's and women's U S Opens or the Masters and Queens.

TC: All the while, the USBC maintains the rules and organizes the league bowling system thru associations, but can do both much better with funding coming from more than just membership dollars. The membership dollars now do not provide enough to invest into the game at rates

to make a great impact and save the sport. We need corporate support and the direction we are going now, the increased TV and the attitude of sport over just for fun, is our best chance.

JG: I think you and your entire department should be transferred to Strike Ten to allow USBC to concentrate on making and enforcing rules, and building and servicing membership.

TC: USBC needs a marketing and communications because our focus is the sport (high school bowling, collegiate, PBA Experience leagues, etc) - if we have the goal of Strike Ten to simply get people in the door, we will be publicizing birthday parties, as they do with the "Go Bowling" campaign. Again, that Strike Ten stuff is fine - it's just not governing body stuff.

JG: The things you describe *should* be Strike Ten stuff. "Governing body stuff" should be GOVERNING, not marketing.

TC: The national governing body needs a communications department - and I didn't even mention the extensive internet marketing efforts USBC has that utilize over 600,000 member email addresses to bring our membership together. How

many of those 600,000 members do you think open their email to read US E-Bowler, which has very solid news of the industry and USBC and includes coaching tips, etc.? About 100,000 of them. Maybe, just maybe, only that percentage of current league bowlers actually care about bowling beyond being a night out with friends. In terms of sponsorship sales, I agree with you that Strike Ten and USBC should merge for the good of the game to sell a combination of bowling center activation and media buys/access to membership packages - and we are. Frank [DeSocio] and I have formed a partnership on the sponsorship end.

JG: I didn't know there was a "US E-Bowler." Are you saying you do a blast email to 600,000? When did this start? And even if only 10% open your email, that doesn't mean they don't love the game. It just means they don't love email. Glad to hear you are working with Frank. Good luck with that.

TC: What does "servicing membership" mean to you? Giving them patches for 100 pins over average games and 700 series?

JG: Servicing membership means delivering a fair amount of value for a fair price. As for the Awards Program, I got in trouble ten years ago for recommending that ABC get rid of it.

TC: I think what would be more beneficial to the industry is an article written by a journalist given the benefit of time and resources to research properly the state of bowling today, the history of membership and put into context the vision for this new organization as Roger articulated at the USBC Convention, including input from many different areas of bowling and the industry.

JG: How can a "journalist" from outside the industry possibly write about this subject with the passion and historical perspective of a bowling writer like Jim Dressel, Bob Johnson, Chuck Pezzano, Dick Evans, or myself? At the BWAA board meeting, when you were talking about sending someone to the AP meeting, I noticed you said something about "reaching REAL writers" - do you not consider the people I just mentioned le-

gitimate, qualified writers and journalists? Your implication is troubling.

TC: "REAL" writers is of course not the best way to say it, but I mean mainstream publication writers reaching general population - primarily the ones that attend the Associated Press Sports Editors convention. Working press for daily newspapers - not special columnists for the sport or niche publication owners and writers. I thought this was a similar argument you made last year about the merger of the BWAA and NWBW since most of the NWBW writers weren't "real" writers? Maybe I misunderstood you. Yes, one of you guys should write it, and sell it to a major publication so maximum number of eyeballs see it and not just people familiar with bowling.

JG: I don't recall using that terminology, but if I did, it would have been accurate for most. In fact, if you have read some of the writing, you know that some can't even put two sentences together, which is why it made no sense to 'dumb down' the BWAA by merging. Now we have strength in numbers, but a much weaker membership, which you say is the opposite of what USBC wants. Only 8 former NWBW members (who were not BWAA members) attended the new BWAA convention. Mary Lynly from California was one of them. I asked her why more didn't come, and she said they will only go to the USBC convention and probably will never come. So, what was the purpose of the merger?

PART TWO: WOMEN'S U.S. OPEN

JG: I was making plans to go to Reno to cover the Women's U.S. Open when I noticed that there is a two-month gap between determining the top four and bowling for the title?! I understand your desire for TV coverage, but this is a major championship. No athlete in any sport should have to wait two months to vie for a title. Do you think (very expensive) television coverage is more important than getting this event covered by several print journalists, and for fans, family and friends of the players to be able to attend?

TC: Yes, I think television coverage and the audience we hope to build over five weeks, including the added exposure for 16 TV finalists rather than 4 or 5, outweighs any negatives of this creative format.

JG: Is it OK to put a Major women's event in the same category with the ' Fashion Show exhibition and PBA summer series?

TC: Who is putting the U.S. Women's Open in the same category as the Women's Challenge or PBA Summer Se-

ries? I'm not.

JG: Isn't it a little hypocritical for USBC to preach about the integrity of the sport while designing a format like this for a major event?

TC: This event has complete integrity. An open field will bowl 32 games of qualifying on four different PBA Experience lane conditions to decide the top 16, which will enter into a single elimination bracketed format. Losing a measure of integrity due to television is normal in all sports, including bowling.

JG: Can you name a major tournament in any sport that has ever waited two months after the event was over to determine the winner?

TC: Entries are not as high as I'd hoped at this point, but without an incentive to enter early, I'm hoping that just means late entries like usual in bowling. Around 55 in now... I think players like Kelly, Liz and Carolyn have an advantage anyway - they're the best, have maintained their games and stayed competitive by battling in PBA Tour events because they had to, it was the only thing out there for them, and they certainly shouldn't be penalized for that. Those patterns have become the gold standard for bowling and are the staple of the USBC's effort to educate and provide regulated, credible scoring environments for league bowlers ... The patterns were used during Team USA try-outs this year, and the leagues have been available for most of the year....So I really like the fact we are using them at the

Queens and Senior Queens, where easily more than half of the field, maybe 3/4, is not very competitive. Historically, the U.S. Open has had a minimum average requirement to maintain the quality of the field. Now USBC has dropped that. I hope you are aware that allowing lower average bowlers who have very little tournament experience changes the dynamics and perception of the event. If 'Susie Q' crosses with Wendy Mac or Carolyn (or next to them) and doesn't understand lane courtesy or double-jumping, it diminishes Wendy and Carolyn's ability to perform at their best. It becomes a constant distraction that they have to deal with, and they do - but they sure don't like it. They tolerate it because they understand that prize funds are entry fee driven, not sponsor driven.

Years ago, I'm told, the Queens had a minimum, but it was dropped to get more entries; and it did - but the perception of the event was changed - the best players in the world don't put the Queens on the same level as the U.S. Open because of the format and quality of the field. That is also why the Masters is not seen as a test of talent on the same level as the men's U.S. Open. It's not as obvious on the men's side because of the depth of talent among men - there is no depth of real talent on the women's side.

That is why USGA makes its U.S. Open golf courses tougher - to enhance the perception among players and fans that it is a true test of talent. It shows respect for the best players.

I'm not saying all tournaments should have this policy, but the U.S. Open



Last summer Clark worked with PBA star Chris Barnes and Dave Ryan in announcing the Las Vegas Women's Challenge

Stadium, and will be able to promote those leagues on our shows. The Cheetah pattern, by the way, will be the one used on all the TV shows.

JG: This is supposed to be a major athletic competition for the best women bowlers in the world - not a social gathering.

TC: I'm not sure what you are referring to. Of course our number one priority is to have the best possible field for the U.S. Women's Open. The best players, not missing any of them. But if you think people enter U.S. Opens in other sports, tennis, golf, bowling of previous years, with their only realistic intention to win the event, you are wrong. It's just the reality that many players in all sports in Open events enter for various reasons - to see where they stack up, to test their own games, to get the experience of playing with the best, to experience the event, etc. In this specific case, this is a historic occasion. There is pride on the line for a lot of women, who believe in women's bowling at an elite level and will want to participate even if they don't think they can realistically win the U.S. Open.

JG: Obviously, I'm referring to the

should. Obviously, most of the women who bowl in any event know that they can't beat the top players. The question is - should 'semi-casual' bowlers be allowed to bowl with or beside players who have earned their status through years of sacrifice, hard work, practice and 'paying their dues,' when they have not? That's why the PBA has an exempt field.

If we are going to have a SPORT, then the organizations that operate tournaments have got to put the game and the players at the top of the priority list when designing formats and rules. I don't see that happening here. As you said, your #1 priority is television coverage. You also said it is to have the best quality field. You can't have two #1 priorities. In my opinion, you have put the cart before the horse.

TC: I never said my number one priority was television coverage.

JG: When you said "I think television coverage ... outweighs any negatives of this creative format", I took that to mean that television is the most important element of this event, which strongly implies that it might be your number one priority. My apology if I misunderstood your meaning.