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Bowling

Entertainment for All Ages

by Phyllis McIntosh

Art might seem to have little in common with bowling, a pastime long associated with blue-collar Americans. A bowling alley (the traditional name for a bowling establishment) is the last place one would expect to find an art gallery. But Lucky Strike, a chain of chic upscale bowling centers, proudly claims its passion for the arts. Its lanes and lounges in 22 cities nationwide are famous for their ever-changing video displays of works by dozens of emerging artists.

Lucky Strike's innovation is just one example of bowling's dramatic transformation over the past few decades. Once a no-frills sport played mostly by lower-middle-income workers in sponsored leagues, bowling has become the centerpiece of high-tech family entertainment complexes and fancy clubs that appeal to trendy urbanites.

As a result, bowling is enjoying a resurgence in popularity, especially among the young. According to the United States Bowling Congress (USBC), more than 70 million Americans bowl each year, which makes bowling one of the most popular participation sports in the United States.

The Golden Age of Bowling

Of all American pastimes, bowling is one of the easiest to pursue. Just show up at the neighborhood bowling center, rent the required shoes, use the balls provided, and pay a reasonable fee to bowl as many games as you like. The game itself—rolling a ball down a long wooden lane to strike club-shaped pins—appeals to all ages and is within the abilities of everyone from small children to people in their nineties.

The game has been popular for centuries. Objects discovered in an Egyptian child's grave suggest that a form of bowling dates back to 3200 B.C. Bowling likely came to North America with English, Dutch, and German settlers. An affordable sport, bowling grew in popularity during the early 20th century, even during the Great Depression. In addition to public bowling alleys, lanes were installed in church basements, lodge halls, college student union buildings, industrial plants, and private homes of the wealthy. President Harry Truman's installation of a bowling alley in the White House in 1947 helped establish the game as a national pastime.

Bowlers are required to wear shoes like these, which won't mar the floor of the bowling alley.



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During bowling's heyday in the mid-1960s, signs like this one called attention to bowling alleys.

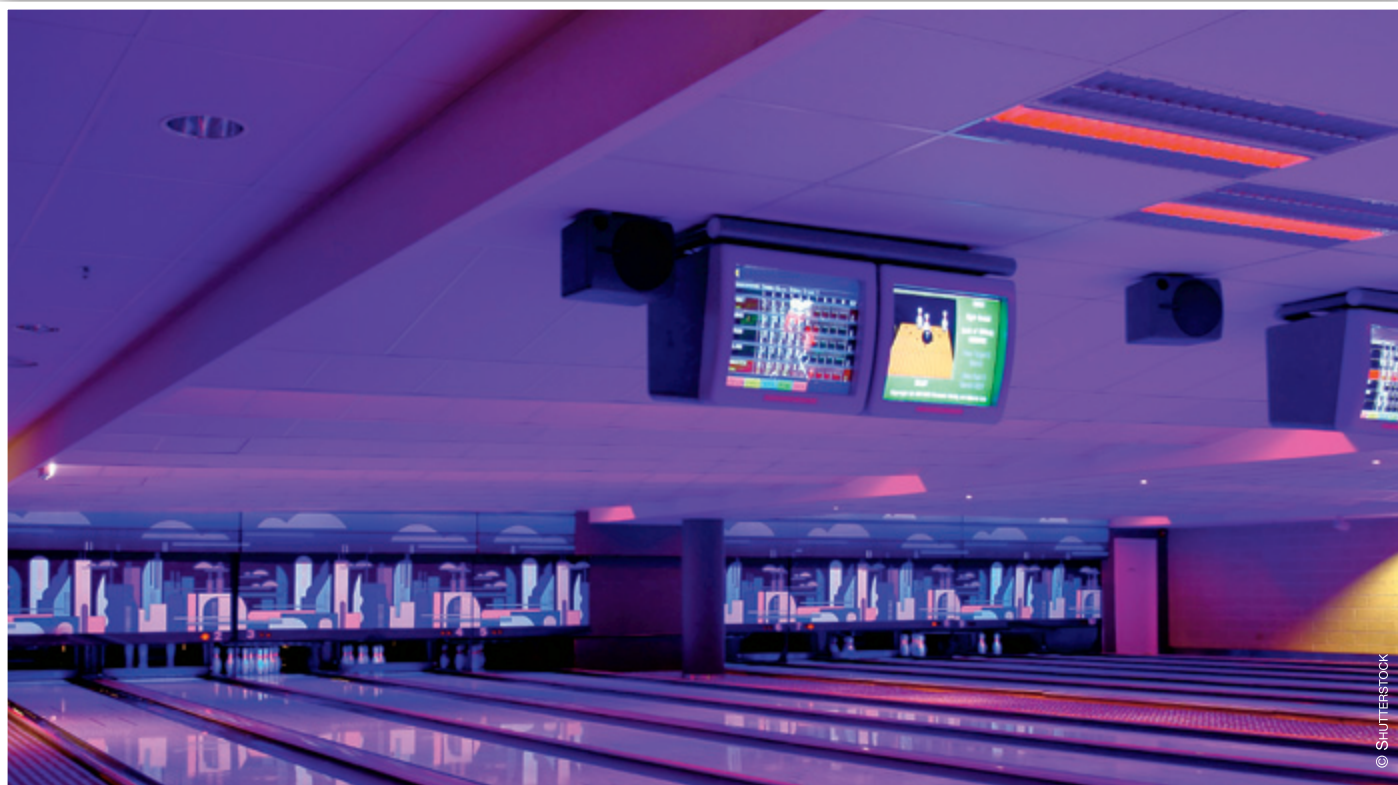
But it was the invention of the automatic pinsetting machine that revolutionized bowling and led to the sport's golden era from the 1950s to the 1970s. Until then, pins had been manually cleared and reset by pin boys, sometimes young troublemakers who contributed to the seedy image of the bowling alley. Automatic pinsetters improved the flow of the game and, by eliminating the need for pin boys, created a more wholesome atmosphere. New bowling centers sprang up by the thousands throughout the nation's suburbs, attracting young families with colorful decor, snack bars, and child care.

During bowling's heyday in the mid-1960s, more than 12,000 bowling centers flourished in the United States. Their business was dominated by competitive leagues formed by co-workers, groups of friends, and members of various organizations, who bowled one or more times a week for a 35-week season and participated in tournaments. Most bowling alley proprietors restricted casual bowlers

to times when lanes were not filled with league bowlers.

Television, too, helped fuel the growth of bowling in the 1950s and 1960s. Networks began broadcasting Championship Bowling and the Pro Bowlers Tour, as well as bowling-centered game shows, such as *Celebrity Bowling*, *Bowling for Dollars*, and *Make That Spare*.

By the 1980s, however, the dynamics of family life were changing, and bowling began to decline in popularity. As more women went to work outside the home and children became more involved in after-school activities, Americans were busier than ever. Fewer people were willing to commit to a bowling league that required weekly participation for two-thirds of the year. At the same time, a growing number of spectator sports and other leisure time opportunities meant there was more competition for a family's entertainment dollars. Instead of heading to the bowling alley in their free time, many younger Americans opted for outdoor activities such as jogging, tennis, and skiing.



Recent Trends in Bowling

Even though today there are fewer than half as many bowling centers as there were in the mid-1960s, bowling is experiencing a 21st-century renaissance. The industry has redefined itself, shed its blue-collar image and emphasis on leagues, and embraced modern design and technology to attract different segments of society.

Popular bowling activities now include:

- **Cosmic bowling.** An exciting innovation that has changed the image of the sport, cosmic bowling transforms the bowling center into a virtual disco with loud music, computer-programmed lighting effects, fog machines, and balls and pins that glow in the dark under ultraviolet lights. Not surprisingly, teenagers and young adults flock to late night cosmic bowling sessions.
- **High-tech gadgetry.** Features such as electronic scoring and flashy graphics that track, for example, the speed and path of the ball appeal to tech-

savvy bowlers. Through websites and social networking sites like Facebook, bowlers can keep track of special events at their local bowling center and reserve lanes online.

Thanks to the technology of the Nintendo Wii video game system, it is now possible to enjoy virtual bowling at home, complete with the sound of a ball striking the pins. While such home entertainment may take away some business from bowling centers, it also fosters interest in experiencing the real game at a modern bowling alley.

- **Kid appeal.** Bowling proprietors go to great lengths to promote the game among kids. Bowling centers have become such a favorite venue for parties that more than 10 million children a year celebrate birthdays there, according to one industry analysis.

To enable young children to enjoy the game, bowling centers use padded bumpers to prevent the ball

This bowling center, with its special lighting effects, is set up for cosmic bowling.



Top: Modern bowling centers like this one offer comfortable surroundings and many entertainment options.

Above: A young bowler releases the ball in an unconventional way as part of “crazy bowling” activities that appeal to kids.

from rolling into the gutters beside the lane and ensure that it reaches at least some of the pins. Bowling balls with cartoon figures embedded in them are guaranteed to catch the eyes of little ones.

- **School sport.** Bowling has found its way into schools. The Bowling Proprietors Association of America offers in-school bowling kits with plastic balls and pins and carpet strip “lanes” to encourage teachers to include the game in their physical education classes. Additional encouragement comes from bowling centers that offer after-school programs and sponsor high school bowling competitions.

At the high school level, bowling is one of the fastest growing team sports for both boys and girls. According to the USBC, more than 5,000 high schools in 47 states offer bowling as a competitive sport. Some 50,000 student bowlers participated during the 2009–2010 school year.

More than 175 colleges also field competitive bowling teams. The National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics has decreed bowling an “emerging sport,” an important step toward elevating it to a championship college sport.

- **Family entertainment centers.** A step up from the fancier new bowling centers are family-oriented complexes where bowling is one of many entertainment options. These facilities offer an array of activities, such as laser tag, indoor playgrounds, go-karting, climbing walls, arcade games, skating rinks, and amusement park rides. Some, such as the huge Palace Pointe complex in Roxboro, North Carolina, include multiple movie theaters and facilities to host large parties, class reunions, and corporate banquets and meetings.

- **Bowling lounges.** Especially in large cities, upscale nightclub-style bowling centers attract a sophisticated young party crowd, as well as celebrities and corporate executives. Such venues have dress codes and feature swanky decor, fine dining, dance floors, live music shows, and separate VIP bowling lanes and lounges. In the words of one club manager, “We are a nightclub that just happens to have bowling lanes.”

One of the most posh clubs is the 90,000-square-foot Bowlmor Lanes, which opened in 2010 in New York City’s Times Square. Its 50 bowling lanes are divided among seven lounges with New York themes, such as Central Park, Chinatown, and Coney Island (site of a famous amusement park). Other amenities include a concierge and a sports bar and restaurant featuring four levels of seating, a giant media wall with 29 high-definition screens, and gourmet cuisine prepared by a celebrity chef.

Today’s Bowler

Clearly, bowling has come a long way from the smoke-filled neighborhood lanes where leagues once reigned supreme. Today, most customers are casual bowlers. Leagues, which once accounted for more than 70 percent of a bowling alley’s business, now generate at best 40 percent. Leagues are simply unheard of in the trendy new bowling lounges and clubs.

The typical modern bowler is a young, college-educated professional and just as likely to be female as male. More than 60 percent of bowlers are under the age of 34, according to the Bowling Proprietors Association of America;

46 percent are girls and women. And all that focus on birthday parties has paid off—children participate in bowling at a higher rate than any other population group.

The 21st-century bowling complex is no longer the “poor man’s country club,” as the traditional bowling alley was once called. It is more likely to be the suburban family’s well-appointed playground or the young sophisticate’s newest nightclub scene.



Getting ready to take her turn, a bowler selects a bright pink bowling ball.

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A bowling ball makes contact with the headpin.

Bowling Chatter

alley — a single bowling lane

approach — an area at least 15 feet long on which a player walks to the foul line to throw the ball; spots or arrows embedded in the floor aid the bowler in aiming the ball. The term also can refer to a player's movement from start to release of the ball.

frame — one of 10 segments of a bowling game; each player gets two throws per frame to try to knock down all the pins.

gutter ball — a ball that rolls into the depression, or gutter, on either side of the lane; a gutter ball hits no pins, so no points are scored.

headpin — the frontmost, or number one, pin in the pin formation

lofting — throwing the ball well out onto the lane instead of rolling it; this is frowned upon by bowling proprietors.

make a spare — get all the pins down with two throws of the ball

on the nose — a head-on hit on the headpin; usually results in a split

pocket — most desirable location for the ball to hit the pins to maximize chances of getting a strike; usually between the headpin and the pin immediately to the right or left of it

snake eyes — a split in which the two pins farthest apart remain standing; most difficult to convert to a spare; also known by various other names, such as “bed posts,” “goal posts,” and “fence posts.”

split — situation in which the first ball knocks down several pins, creating a wide space between the pins that remain standing

strike — getting all pins down with the first throw of a frame so that a second throw is not necessary

turkey — three strikes in a row

Websites of Interest

Bowling Fans

www.bowlingfans.com

This website for and by bowling fans includes expert bowling tips, numerous articles on different aspects of the game, eight forums where bowlers can exchange information, and links to other websites about bowling.

International Bowling Museum and Hall of Fame

www.bowlingmuseum.com

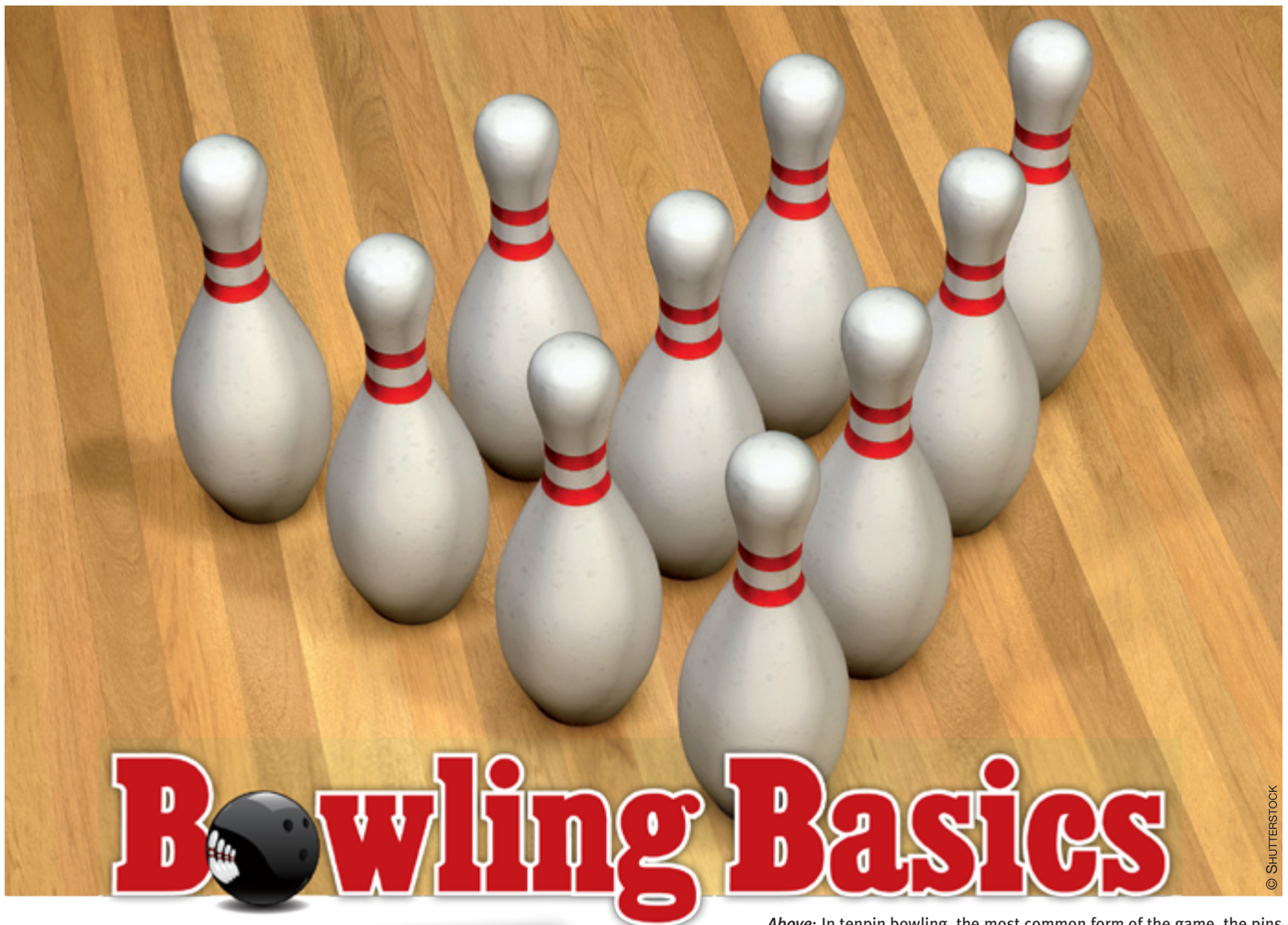
Official website of the Museum and Hall of Fame in Arlington, Texas, this site includes an introduction to museum exhibits about the history and modern development of bowling and lists professional bowlers and other bowling personalities in the Hall of Fame. An interactive feature lets website visitors find out who from their hometown has bowled a perfect game.

United States Bowling Congress

www.bowl.com

As the national governing body for bowling, the Congress provides programs and services for amateur bowlers. This official website contains information about tournaments, leagues, and bowling as a high school and college sport, as well as news features about bowlers, such as an Ohio man who has knocked down 3.5 million pins in his 60-year bowling career.

PHYLLIS MCINTOSH is a freelance writer whose work has appeared in many national magazines.



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Above: In tenpin bowling, the most common form of the game, the pins are set in this triangular formation.

Left: Using the standard grip, a bowler selects a ball from the rack. Bowling balls range in weight from six to sixteen pounds; here, weights are marked on each ball.



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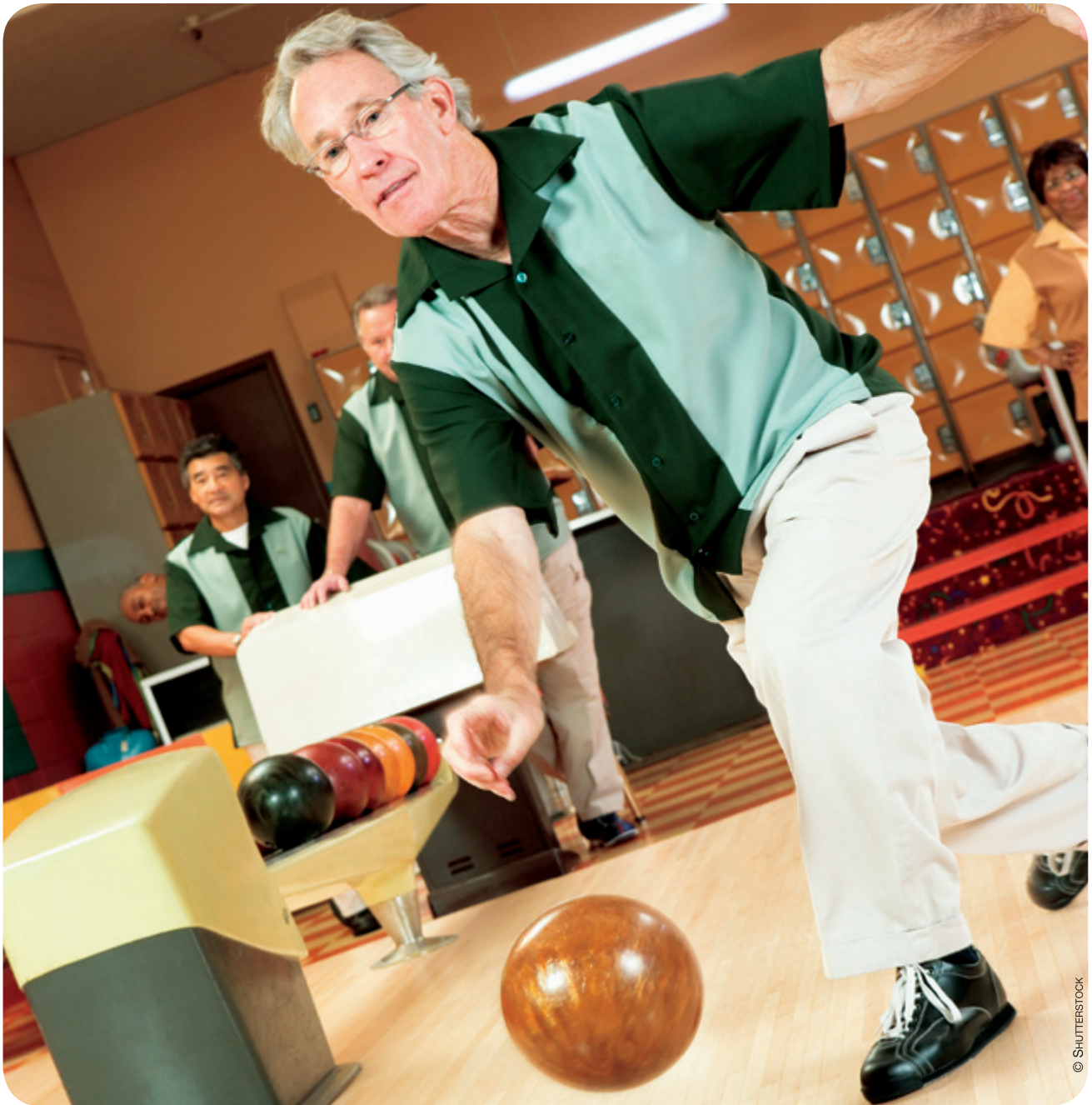
The most common form of the game is tenpin bowling, played by rolling a 6- to 16-pound ball down a 60-foot-long lane, or alley, toward 15-inch-high pins arranged in a triangular formation. Holes in the ball for the thumb and two fingers enable the bowler to control the ball and aim it more accurately. Avid bowlers own their own bowling balls, with finger holes drilled precisely to fit their hands.

A game consists of ten frames, and each player gets two throws per frame. The fewer throws it takes to knock down all ten pins, the better the score. Knocking down all the pins on the first throw, called a *strike*, scores the highest. Next best is a

spare—getting all pins down in two throws. A strike in all ten frames is a perfect game, with a score of 300 points.

In regional variations of bowling, the rules are basically the same, but the size of the balls and pins may differ. Duckpin bowling, popular on the East Coast, uses small, squat pins and a lightweight ball that fits into the palm of the hand. In candlepin bowling, played mainly in New England and parts of Canada, the ball is also small and without finger holes, and the pins are taller and lighter than regular bowling pins and are straight in shape.

Knocking down all or most of the pins requires considerable finesse, as well as physical force. Where bowlers stand in their approach to the alley and how they release the ball determines whether the ball rolls straight or curves and how close it comes to hitting the pocket—the spot between the pins that gives a bowler the greatest chance of getting a strike. The second throw of a frame is especially challenging when the first ball has left a wide gap between the pins that remain standing. The ball must hit just right on one or two pins in order for the bowler to “make that spare.”



Some bowlers, like the team pictured here, still wear traditional two-color bowling shirts.

THE BOWLING SHIRT: A Fashion Icon

Just as bowling has become popular once again, so too has its paraphernalia. Especially in demand is the bowling shirt—a boxy-cut, short-sleeved style with a distinctive two-color pattern and the name of a team or company emblazoned on the back. Standard bowling apparel, especially for league bowlers in the 1950s and 1960s, the shirts were also adopted by young hipsters in the early days of rock and roll. Popularized in the 1990s by such bowling-themed movies as *The Big Lebowski* and *Kingpin*, the shirts are currently associated with various television celebrities.

Some bowlers still wear authentic team shirts. But many other Americans, bowlers and non-bowlers alike, simply

enjoy the retro look and fun logos of fictitious team names or league sponsors, such as Big Daddy's Hot Rod Team, Betty's Diner, or Danny's Pizza Joint. Numerous websites offer a wide array of men's and women's styles, even shirts for children as young as two. And dozens of originals are available on eBay.

Another bowling accessory—the roomy bag that bowlers use to carry their own ball and shoes to the bowling alley—has become fashionable as a style for women's purses. Bowling shoes, too, are promoted as trendy and comfortable street wear. Bowling, it seems, never goes out of fashion!