very Saturday for four years, my brother and I spent our mornings at the illustrious All Star Lanes in Salina, Kan. There, when not sucking down sodas and munching candy bars, we bowled on a team in youth leagues. Our routine was routine: at the lanes early for video games and pinball, snap the shoes, check our averages and the standings, feebly attempt to talk to girls, and take a few practice rolls to prepare for battle.

The competition was surprisingly fierce, as young rollers learn from an early age the art of the psych-out. We scored on our own — spare is 10 plus the next ball, strike 10 plus the next two balls — and there was no better thrill than a string of XXX to close out a narrow match.

While those days are relegated to nostalgic haze and a handful of retro bowling patches atop my bookshelf, the sport (or sportswriter's nostalgia for it) continues to lure folks of all ages, weights, classes and styles to its pin-spotter by Fred Schmidt, a Pearl River, N.Y., engineer tired of tracking down “pin boys” when he wanted a few frames, still ranks as one of the greatest inventions of 20th-century leisure. Once bowling equipment manufacturer Brunswick perfected Schmidt’s machine, the company introduced the contraption at Farragut Pool in Brooklyn, and an American industry was born. Today the lanes still have the groovy shoes, and you still have to search for the perfect-fit ball if you don’t have your own. But be prepared to drop about $40 to $50 for a family of four. Many lanes will now put bumpers in the gutters to help the little ones enjoy the sport.

It’s a terrific social activity, and one needs not be a sculpted athlete to enjoy it.

Mark Luce lives in Lawrence, Kan., where he totally dominated eighth-graders at a bowling party last year.