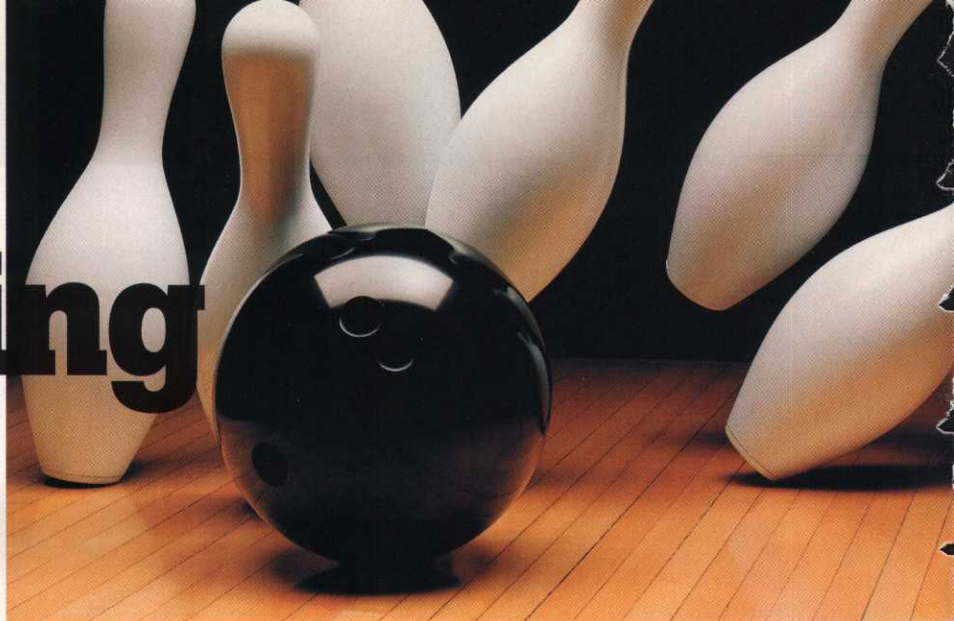


bowling



Every 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, snag 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 game, if you must) continues to lure folks of all ages, weights, classes and styles to its crashingly loud alleys. The smoke-filled hangout of ruffians that was the bane of parents in the 1950s and '60s has transformed into a megalane entertainment complex, complete with automatic scoring, waiters and late-night weekend bowling with neon pins under blacklight and rock-and-roll music blaring through sophisticated sound systems.

The professional bowlers have shifted, too, from the staid, polite, small-crowd days of the Professional Bowlers

A SPIN DOWN A WELL-OILED MEMORY LANE FINDS THE 'PEOPLE'S GAME' HAS GONE FROM NOSTALGIA TO NEON **BY MARK LUCE**

Association Tour on Saturday afternoons on ABC to more brash, emotional, high-stakes events, jammed with hooting and hollering fans featured on ESPN. In a way this isn't terribly surprising, given bowling's continued run as the top participatory sport in the country — 70 million annually — and the nearly \$10 billion a year in revenue the industry generates. Likewise, the cult status of bowling-related films "Kingpin" and "The Big Lebowski" has done nothing to hurt the sport's popularity.

It wasn't always that way. Back in the 1820s, after a mention of bowling in "Rip van Winkle," the game of nine-pins caused such a mania — and a succession of mountebanks quick to gamble on the game, fix matches and other nefarious deeds — that politicians outlawed the game. Being dunderheaded politicians, they only banned nine-pins; so, lore has it, American ingenuity simply added a 10th pin, and thus what we know as "ten-pin bowling" was born.

But it wasn't until the 1940s that the sport really became the people's

game. The advent of the automatic 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.

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