

Column for Will County Sportsman January 2008

Just Paying Attention By Mark London

One of the most unlikely nationally televised 300 games was rolled 20 years ago this month. To this point, there were only two games that came close to achieving this rare feat, a 300 in the title match. The first was the legendary Don Johnson 299 game in the 70 Tournament of Champions. The second was Mark Roth's 299 five years later to win the first of his 34 career titles at the -75 King Louie Open. The 1988 Quaker State Open TV finals had four familiar names, but the top seeded bowler was unknown to most. The first three matches were competitive with only the first match higher scoring. Defending champion Brian Voss defeating Steve Wunderlich 258-248 followed by a Joe Berardi 196-171 win over Voss, then a Mark Roth 223-212 win over Berardi heading into the title match. Waiting was top seed and Dallas area native Bob Benoit. First thing one noticed about his approach was his slower pace to the line while cupping the ball nearly to his forearm at the height of the backswing. This allowed him to get more finger rotation though the strike ball release producing more hook and a faster rotation rate. By using a 15 pound ball, he was able to produce a stronger roll by matching the rotation to speed. His original style was more traditional which did not work as well at the PBA level by the early 80s with the newer urethane balls. Now Benoit was to bowl for his first title against the man known even at this point in history as the grandfather of the modern game. What was about to unfold would be something beyond unbelievable, perhaps unthinkable.

Much to Bo Burton's surprise, Roth started the match. By doing this, Benoit would finish first, putting pressure on Roth to beat that score. During the match, Burton talked about what Benoit had done to improve his rev rate by first dropping to a 10-pound

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ball, then going up and stopping at 15 pounds all the while cupping the wrist to get the fingers to stay in the ball longer while applying a faster roll rate. By the eighth frame, Roth was down by 25 and needed to strike out and hope for a Benoit miss somewhere to close the gap. Roth nearly left a split in the ninth and converted the 10-pin for the spare as Benoit readied for his ninth frame. Many during the week had doubted Benoit's rise to the top during the round robin match play. However, this new style was working very well. As Benoit stood on the approach on Lane 40 at The Forum Lanes in Grand Prairie, Texas, Bo Burton turned prophetic, "I believe the test is over to see if Bob Benoit can be a professional bowler. Now the test is to see if he can take all the money with a possible \$100,000 with four more strikes." The ninth frame strike was perhaps the prettiest, with the bottom of the 6-pin brushing the kickback before taking out the 10-pin. Chris Schenkel mentioned Benoit now had his ninth strike in a row while not making reference to the match. That was left to Burton, "Chris, that strike locks up the match!" There were no close calls or gift strikes to this point, nor would there be in the tenth. Ten. Flush. Eleven. Flush. Before the twelfth ball, Burton once again waxed poetically, "There's really nothing left to think about at this point. Just keep your eyes on your target and hope the Dear Lord wants you to have it." The crowd noise was unmistakable once the ball touched the lane surface. Once all ten pins fell, sound was felt as well as heard. Benoit, rising from one knee after delivering the final ball, shook his two fists in front of him in triumph, then began to walk off the approach. He was met by many well wishers, none more enthusiastically than the many family members in attendance. Once Chris Schenkel arrived for the post game interview,

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Benoit's shellshocked look on his face was hard to hide. The look lingered once he was told the \$100,000 bonus did not go away with Pete McCordic's TV 300 game the year before. ABC Sports chief Dennis Swanson then presented the True Value Hardware Stores sponsored check.

Bob won four more titles through the mid 90s, but to have quite splash on that first one is truly priceless.

Amongst the family members in attendance on that day 20 years ago was a brother who has become more well known in his own right. Bob's brother Rick has been the Brunswick ball representative on the PBA Tour since the late 90s, helping numerous players (even a few regional players like myself) with his cutting edge insight of ball angles and reaction. If you have logged onto his website, brunswickinsiders.com, you have seen a small sample of his work.

The Benoit TV 300 was one of those extremely unique moments, it was hard to rank my Top 25 TV list. Top 10? Most definitely, but exactly where should it be placed? If Benoit's game won the Tournament of Champions for example, then it would probably take the top spot. The criteria also includes outside media buzz created after the event. That's why the Ballard ball is at #2. The McCordic TV 300 game was the first in 13 years, the first for \$100,000. His last strike was shown on almost every sports segment on your local TV news that night during , including all the multiple overnight reruns of ESPN SportsCenter. Part of me is surprised it wasn't parodied on *NBC's Saturday Night Live*. So that leaves the #4 spot. Why not? His first game on TV he did what? The #4 spot it is.

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Does this mean there will be a revised list this year? Maybe. One factor that did not exist during the last list is YouTube. So many clips have been posted online that have not been seen since their original live airings, history is being rewritten. If there is video, it happened. If there is not, it didn't, especially if it posted on somebody's website. Whether it appeared on television seems to be less important. But hey, that's why TV is in the title. It had to appear on national TV to make the list. Hope that clears it up.

Next month, a look back at something. Shocker, right? But what that something is might surprise you even more than how it continues to surprise me. Stay tuned.