

Column for Will County Sportsman February 2008

Just Paying Attention By Mark London

It used to be that walking unescorted from the WIBC wing to the ABC wing of Bowling Headquarters was as likely as late October baseball on Chicago's north side. Soon, the whole building may be empty. The USBC board has announced plans to move next to the BPAA Headquarters in Arlington, Texas, creating a international bowling campus, according to USBC President Jeff Boje. Why you ask? One reason is marketing the future of sport on national and international levels combining efforts and resources of both BPAA and USBC. Like other businesses wanting to expand and get to the next level, the status quo takes a beating. And we thought the ABC-WIBC-YABA merger was earth-shattering. You know, stuff happens.

But how can this happen? Why now? Well, why not now. All you have to do is look what's unfolded in the last 10 years. ABC Television kicked the PBA out the door and it landed at CBS. That lasted only two springs until ESPN picked up all the TV finals. Let's not forget the PWBA evaporating into thin air in 2003. Then there was the aforementioned merger a few years later. On top of that, Ebonite buys Columbia and its affiliate trade names and companies. Could anyone 25 years ago have imagined these events occurring? In 1983, PBA TV ratings were as strong as ever, more and more bowlers were rolling honor scores, ESPN begged for programs to fill its schedule, Columbia balls were virtually in every bag in America, and it was business as usual at Bowling Headquarters. Anyone care to predict where we'll be in 10 years? Hopefully, our sport will be around and stronger.

As my eight regular readers know, bowling on network TV has been a frequent topic over the years, whether it be announcers or some of the moments we've seen that fall somewhere in that gray area between pop culture and cult classic. The USBC and

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Strike Ten Entertainment are sponsoring "Bowling Clash of Champions," airing on CBS-TV May 10-11 featuring sixteen champions from various pro and amateur tournaments in the last year. The first round will feature a one-ball low count and out until four remain. The second telecast will feature the semifinal and final matches. This event takes place along with this year's USBC convention in Kansas City. Why is bowling back on network TV you ask? The USBC is more market-savvy than before and is going all out to attract new sponsors to all bowling events, not just PBA events. According to USBC VP of Communications and Marketing Tom Clark, network TV provides much larger audience than cable TV, showcasing bowling excellence to a broader audience. Go to bowl.com to read more about the event and what Clark's goals are for this event. Never would have imagined anything on this magnitude this ten years ago, either. Wanna hear the wildest thing about this? Fifty-one more pins in the wee hours one very early morning last May in Reno and I'm on that show. Gave me a pretty good chuckle, too.

So what has changed in the last ten years? Where do I start? A bunch and then someí .and then some more. Ironically, the one constant I have seen in this industry in the last 10 years is change. What I can't tell is has there been more change out of necessity to adapt to the present or more change for the future? Adapting much of this business to the 21st century technology age is certainly a Herculean task although some have been seen kicking and screaming toward the present. The days of unlocking the front door at the start of the business day and calling that marketing are long gone. Everyone knows there are simply too many more choices for the consumer, but the next step was locating the resources to do take the next step in this proactive process. Industry

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leaders realized something had to change otherwise things slip further into the abyss which we may not be able to climb out. The sport of bowling must be presentable and palatable to the masses to insure growth and interest years from now, while also helping the game of bowling. Thus, the USBC Masters finals at Miller Park and the recent U.S. Women's Open with its unique five TV-show length format are examples of this effort. The industry is searching for the next big thing for the higher level player. Cosmic or glow-in-the-dark bowling is fine for the casual bowler who likes the game of bowling, but seriously, it jumped the shark about five years ago. More media exposure showing the best at what they do is a step in the right direction. What remains to be seen is if anyone sees that step.

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Thoughts and ideas that Don Ladas and I used to debate in his office on Radio Hill were now available for public consumption. From the TV finals show announcer critiques to outside media exposure to Pro Shop 101, 201, and 401 tips, there was always something worth mentioning. The big issue of the February 1998 column was the new look PBA shows on CBS and the economic reality of how things progressed to this point. But the Top 25 TV Moments list has taken a life of its own. The same column you read in April '98 was seen by the rest of the world the following year in *Bowling* magazine. It took a few bows and arrows, but was good enough to serve as a history template to the reorganized PBA. Photocopies were distributed to new staffers explaining some of the rich TV history of this association. That may be why you see more older video clips on some TV finals and even more on YouTube these days. Thanks to all eight of my regular readers for keeping JPA fresh, fun, flip and entertaining.

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It's been a blast these last ten years. I'm just getting started so stay tuned.