

Column for Will County Sportsman October 2007

Just Paying Attention By Mark London

The words to describe this phenomenon have changed lately. Retro, classic, throwback, and old school are just a few examples. You have not been hearing things on the most recent Sunday ESPN bowling shows. That really is Bo Burton and Marshall Holman handling the Women's U.S. Open telecasts. The two do sound a bit different while describing the action from Reno these past few weeks, but not necessarily for the worse. I can still hear some of Bo's announcing habits he did for 23 years on ABC-TV's Pro Bowlers' Tour. One that comes to mind is quickly finishing a sentence as the ball hits the lane. Holman would finish a thought once a ball was halfway down the lane and start the next one soon after pins fell. The two do sound a lot more relaxed as they go through each hour-long show. A concern that may or may not have been addressed was with two former color analysts in the booth, who would take the lead. Having worked a few bowling telecasts and many other radio sporting events, there is always a lead announcer to paint an outline of what was happening, give the score, and direct us to watch commercial breaks. At the network level, announce teams are usually paired for audition or practice shows before doing a live or taped show, just to see how they sound and work together. The announce crew sits down with the producer and director to announce a previously aired show. Issues and concerns are addressed in that audition setting, just like the athletes they will be covering. I can't tell if these two did a practice show or not, but Bo seems to have been chosen as the lead announcer. Both still analyze, but Burton is the one leading us in and out of the commercial breaks.

One hurdle they may not overcome is being familiar with adjustments in the reactive resin era. Both did very well in their own eras, Burton in the rubber and plastic ball era and Holman in the plastic and urethane era. I know this is a small point, but

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some of those adjustments don't work as well in this era. But they are the ones having a director talk to them through an earpiece while not trying to stumble while saying something to us.

Another point about Bo's announce style was pointed out by Holman in the first show. It's something has been mentioned in this column a time or two. Burton said a bowler rolling at that moment on screen had a very extremely sound spare game, unlike some of the bigger hook players. The very next ball resulted in a missed spare. Holman could not resist mentioning what I have called on more than one occasion as the Bo Burton "Kiss of Death." If TV bowling in this country has an urban legend, this is it. Once Holman said this, you could tell Burton knew what was coming. Apparently, Bo is quite aware of this legend, even 10 years since his last ABC telecast. From time to time, a compliment or kind word about a bowler would not match what had just happened on screen. I'm sure if you scan the shows now on ESPN Classic, you can find examples of Bo and things unfolding not as he had mentioned. Some instances can be interpreted on the dark side. A friend of mine on tour in the early 90s had made the 24-player match play round for the first time. Those players names were always shown and mentioned during the Saturday telecast with an occasional compliment. This time, Bo mentioned how he liked this guy's game and thought we would be seeing more of him in the future. Turns out it was his only match play appearance ever. The last time I saw this friend, he made mention of this in a humorous self-deprecating way. Then I told him at least he's got another story for his kids. So this "Kiss of Death" thing can't be just me.

Since these shows were taped, there wasn't the old pressure of the show's pacing. The ABC shows could run over by a few minutes, but that was it. If a show did run long,

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bowling would not stop during a commercial breaks. The reason was the network had to start Wide World of Sports on time because most of that show was taped. The PBA telecasts on ESPN today can run over by as much time as is needed to show all the matches live. Since these quarter and semi finals were taped in August, they've had enough time to cut down or stretch them to an hour. What should be interesting to watch is how they will perform during the live finals Sunday October 14th.

Whether a separate women's tour is a viable entity in today's environment is the main issue with this unique format. Who would have thought of staging a major tournament in two separate segments two months apart would be reality today? Remember last summer's series of shows in the Las Vegas fashion mall? At least that got a few new sponsors to know TV bowling is still on the map. What bowling is facing is what other pro sports are facing. Sponsorships are getting tougher to obtain while the cost of chasing those monies continues to get higher and higher. Fewer big businesses are no longer headed by a single individual with a vision willing to stick with an idea for more than a year or two. If something doesn't cause a ripple in someone's bottom line pulse rate, it's tossed into the circular file of history. Thus, they are asking for more in return for their available sponsorship dollars. Marketing folk will tell you it's a new world out there. Unfortunately, bowling has been racing to catch up. Granted, any USBC event and PBA events are separate businesses, but in the eyes of sponsors they are one in the same. With this new generation of consumers, the process of how to reach them through their media of choice (computer/portable electronic device) is very different than it was only 30 years ago when television was the cutting edge media. Bowling must find a way to answer this otherwise there will not be high-profile exposure

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for the next generation.

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