The rise and fall of the American bowling industry

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A curious decline

- After becoming an organized sport in 1895, bowling quickly ascended to become one of America’s most popular sports in the 1960’s.
- Since it’s peak in the late 1970’s, the sport has suffered a precipitous decline that continues today.
- This presentation investigates the possible reasons for its decline.
A very brief history of bowling

- Games resembling bowling has been traced back to ancient Egypt (c. 3200 BC)
Bowling in America

- English, Dutch, and German immigrants brought variants of the game to the US throughout the early 1800’s. All used 9 pins.

- In 1841, Connecticut and several other states banned “ninepin lanes” because there was too much accompanying gambling, drinking, brawling, and general mayhem. A tenth pin was added, and the sport began to resemble modern bowling.

- In 1895, the American Bowling Congress (ABC) was formed and the rules of the game became standardized.
Milestones

- 1905: Rubber bowling ball introduced
- 1917: Women’s International Bowling Congress (WIBC) formed
- 1948: Bowling appears on TV: *Bowling Headliners* from Rego Park Lanes in Queens NY
- 1950: ABC removes “whites only” from its constitution
- 1952: First automatic pinsetter installed
- 1959: Professional Bowlers Association (PBA) founded
Milestones

- 1960: Professional Women’s Bowling Association (PWBA) founded
- 1961: First PBA tournament televised from Paramus, NJ
- 1976: First AMF “Magic Score” installed
- 1993: ABC removes “male only” from its constitution
- 2003: PWBA folds
- 2005: ABC and WIBC merge to form the United States Bowling Congress
Bowling as part of American culture

- The founding of the ABC in 1895 is generally accepted as the starting point of organized bowling in America.
- In the early days of bowling, bowling was played on two or four alleys that were part of a larger establishment, usually a bar, pool hall, or athletic club.
- Men bowled; and women and children didn’t.
- To no one’s surprise, drinking and gambling were a big part of the game (and to a large extent they still are).
Typical “bowling center” c. 1920
Bowling centers and leagues

- After World War I, entrepreneurs start building stand-alone bowling centers which usually had between 16-24 lanes. All had bars and some added short-order food service.

- It was during the 1920’s that bowling began to become organized in the form of leagues. In 1920 there were 649 certified leagues; by 1930 that number grew to 5266.

- Participation (measured by certified bowlers) grew from 25,570 to 224,400.
The earliest competitive bowling matches were tournaments organized by the sport’s governing body. The annual ABC tournament drew thousands of bowlers, but at only 9 games was too short to be a true test of a champion.

The title of the “world’s best bowler” was usually settled outside the auspices of the ABC by a “challenge” match over several days. The winner was considered the world champion, not unlike the system used in boxing.
1905 ABC tournament - Milwaukee
The “World Champion”

- In 1906, Jimmy Smith of Brooklyn defeated Chicago’s Johnny Voorhies in an 11 game match and announced that he was “claiming the world’s championship” and would meet anyone to defend it.

- After being the undisputed champion for 15 years, Smith was defeated by Jimmy Blouin in a 60 game match in 1921.

- Chicago bowling center owner Louis Petersen then organized the “World Classic” to determine the “official” world champion.
“The World Champion”

- Blouin won the week-long 115 game tournament (Smith finished 4th) … and then in subsequent months defeated the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th place finishers in 60-game challenge matches to be crowned the undisputed world champion.

- It was not until 1941 that all of the best bowlers in the country would congregate again in a long-format tournament.
The first world champions

Jimmy Smith 1906-1921  Jimmy Blouin 1921-1926
Bowling continued to grow as a participation sport during the 1930’s. The number of centers increased five-fold and the number of bowlers quadrupled during the decade.

When World War II ended, there were 1,060,000 certified bowlers (75% male) in 4874 centers. The end of the War would usher in a three-decade long period of unprecedented industry growth.
Certified bowlers, centers, and lanes: 1895-2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Season</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>ABC</th>
<th>WIBC</th>
<th>Centers</th>
<th>Lanes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1895-96</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1906-07</td>
<td>6,075</td>
<td>6,075</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>47</td>
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<tr>
<td>1916-17</td>
<td>16,780</td>
<td>16,740</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>331</td>
<td>1,562</td>
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<tr>
<td>1930-31</td>
<td>224,400</td>
<td>215,000</td>
<td>9,400</td>
<td>2,327</td>
<td>16,600</td>
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<tr>
<td>1940-41</td>
<td>873,705</td>
<td>746,000</td>
<td>127,705</td>
<td>5,004</td>
<td>35,550</td>
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<tr>
<td>1950-51</td>
<td>1,972,723</td>
<td>1,430,000</td>
<td>542,723</td>
<td>6,638</td>
<td>56,004</td>
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<tr>
<td>1960-61</td>
<td>5,906,098</td>
<td>4,000,000</td>
<td>1,906,098</td>
<td>10,417</td>
<td>135,041</td>
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<td>1962-63</td>
<td>6,953,783</td>
<td>4,500,000</td>
<td>2,453,783</td>
<td>11,473</td>
<td>163,323</td>
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<tr>
<td>1978-79</td>
<td>9,009,579</td>
<td>4,777,436</td>
<td>4,232,143</td>
<td>9,061</td>
<td>158,387</td>
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<td>1990-91</td>
<td>5,634,738</td>
<td>2,922,829</td>
<td>2,711,909</td>
<td>7,904</td>
<td>151,952</td>
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<td>2000-01</td>
<td>3,132,345</td>
<td>1,759,096</td>
<td>1,373,249</td>
<td>6,309</td>
<td>128,836</td>
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<td>2009-10</td>
<td>2,176,716</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5,490</td>
<td>112,636</td>
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</table>
The Golden Age of bowling

- The 50’s, 60’s, and 70’s represented what might be called the “golden age” of bowling.
- Millions of Americans joined leagues and thousands of bowling centers were built.
- Professional bowlers were superstars, bowling appeared on television several times per week, and the industry was booming.
The Golden Age of bowling

- Until the 1950’s, center size was often limited by the availability of pin boys, whose social standing was probably just about the same as a caddy.
- The invention of the automatic pinsetter in the late 1940’s changed that, and bowling centers could now be as large as the market could bear.
- In the 1960’s, Edison Lanes in New Jersey had 112 lanes and the Showboat Casino Hotel in Las Vegas had 106.
The Golden Age of bowling

- In the 1950’s, more than 5000 bowling centers were built and ABC/WIBC membership grew from 2 million to almost 6 million.
- The period from 1960 to 1963 was astounding: 1066 centers were opened (about one per day) and ABC/WIBC membership grew by a million.
- It was not until 1978-79 that membership peaked at 9 million, but the rapid growth phase of the sport truly ended in 1963.
Professional bowling

- Over the years, many bowling centers developed their own tournaments:
  - 1921: Petersen Classic, Chicago
  - 1938: Landgraf Tournament, New York
  - 1943: Hoinke Classic, Cincinnati

- In 1941, the Bowling Proprietor’s Association of America (BPAA) introduced the “All-Star” Tournament, which quickly became the biggest tournament of the year. Today it is known as the “US Open,” and still the most coveted title among professional bowlers.
The rise of the superstars

- The All-Star ushered in an era where the top bowlers in the country were more famous than the top golfers and tennis players. As for individual sports, only boxers had a higher profile than bowlers.

- Bowling was first televised in 1948, and throughout the 1950’s bowling was a staple of sports programming.

- The next slide shows TV listings for Chicago, 1957, which had 4 stations at the time.
### SUNDAY, January 13, 1957

#### MORNING

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Program</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7:15</td>
<td>THOUGHT FOR THE DAY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:00</td>
<td>THE CHRISTOPHERS</td>
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<tr>
<td>8:30</td>
<td>SUNDAY FUNNIES</td>
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<tr>
<td>9:00</td>
<td>TV SHOWCASE</td>
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<td>9:30</td>
<td>MOVIE MUSEUM</td>
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<td>9:30</td>
<td>THE WIZARD</td>
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<tr>
<td>9:45</td>
<td>BIBLE TIME</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:45</td>
<td>FAITH FOR TODAY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:45</td>
<td>THE PULPIT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:45</td>
<td>CHRISTIAN SCIENCE HEALS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:00</td>
<td>OUTSTANDING DRAMA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:00</td>
<td>ADVENTURE THEATER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:00</td>
<td>ADVENTURE THEATER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:00</td>
<td>CATHOLIC HOUR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:00</td>
<td>RURAL HOUR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:30</td>
<td>LITE AND LEARN</td>
</tr>
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#### AFTERNOON

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12:00</td>
<td>AMATEUR HOUR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:00</td>
<td>SHEENA OF THE JUNGLE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:00</td>
<td>WESTERN FILM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:30</td>
<td>ALL STAR BOWLERS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### EVENING

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1:30</td>
<td>MOVIE TIME</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:30</td>
<td>ISLAND OF DESIRE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:00</td>
<td>HEADLINE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:00</td>
<td>PENNY JACKPOT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:00</td>
<td>CHAMPIONSHIP BOWLING</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**MOVIE TIME**

1. **BOWL THE PROFESSOR**
   - Paul Kravitz vs. Ruth James, Gymnasium

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**SUNDAY CINEMA**

1. **Long Count**
   - With Frank Lovejoy. A Broadway character is involved in the murder of a young prize fighter.

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**DINNER THEATER**

1. **Beverly Gardens**
   - With Bette Davis. A man is accused of murder.

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**SCHOOL OF THE ARTS**

1. **Land of the Lost**
   - With James Stewart and Mary Beth Hughes. A wandering cowpoke rides into a ranch house, 178 minutes.

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**NEW CARRIAGE**

1. **Lone Wolf**
   - With Louis Hayward. Mike is a weak-and-ready guest runs into the murder of a beautiful bride.

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**ADVENTURE THEATER**

1. **Last of the Wild Horses**
   - With James Stewart and Mary Beth Hughes. A wandering cowpoke rides into a ranch house, 178 minutes.

---

**CATHOLIC HOUR**

1. **The Castle**
   - An officer and his men are on a suicidal mission to Italy during World War II.

---

**RURAL HOUR**

1. **Rush River Romances**
   - With Roy Corrigan.

---

**LITE AND LEARN**

1. **William Earnshaw presents a high school freshman English course.**
Andy Varipapa starred in a series of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer shorts, this one from 1948.
Connie Schwoegler, 1949 All-Star Champion. This ad appeared on the back cover of *Time* on February 27, 1950.
Ebonite ad featuring Rocky Marciano, 1955. He was the world’s heavyweight champion at the time.
Bowling on television

- A number of other television shows without professionals started to appear in the 1950’s and 1960’s, including *Make that Spare*, *Celebrity Bowling*, and *Bowling for Dollars*.
- Bowling became part of the fabric of the nation: Everyone knew that Ralph Kramden was the anchor bowler for the “Hurricanes,” and his bowling talent was held in high esteem.
- TV bowling truly came of age soon after professional bowlers became organized in 1959.
The Professional Bowlers Association

- Akron attorney Eddie Elias founded the PBA in 1959 and the first tournament (the Paramus Open) was held the same year.
- By 1965, the tour was sponsoring 32 tournaments per year, and the first “Firestone Tournament of Champions” was held in Akron, OH, where Billy Hardwick won the $25,000 first prize ($170,900 in 2011 dollars).
- By comparison, Jack Nicklaus earned $20,000 for winning the 1965 Masters.
Sport’s first million-dollar man

- Not Joe Namath, Willie Mays, or Arnold Palmer ….
- Don Carter signed a 10-year $1,000,000 endorsement contract with Ebonite in 1964.
The Pro Bowler’s Tour on ABC

- Ran from 1961 through 1996, January through April, usually from 3-4:30 on Saturday afternoons. It was the lead in to ABC’s Wide World of Sports.
- By the early 1970’s, ratings for The Pro Bowler’s Tour were higher than golf, tennis, the NBA, and the NHL.
- The serial nature of the show let fans see many of the same bowlers, week after week.
The two biggest stars of the 1970’s – Earl Anthony and Mark Roth
The decline

- By 1979, ABC/WIBC membership peaked at a little over 9 million. Although there were 21% fewer centers than in 1963, the number of lanes had decreased by only 3% over the same period.
- Starting in 1980, and continuing essentially unabated since then, bowlers, centers, lanes and leagues have decreased significantly.
The decline

- Certified bowlers: Down 75.5%.
- Certified centers: Down 39.4%
- Certified lanes: Down 28.9%
- Certified leagues: Down 80.1%
- ABC cancelled *The Pro Bowler’s Tour* in 1997.
- Women’s pro bowling tour folded in 2003.
- PBA tour has only 14 tournaments scheduled in only 7 different cities in 2011-12; there were 38 in 1979.
The “declining social capital” theory

- The decline in league bowling was so dramatic that Robert Putnam used it to title his 2000 best seller, *Bowling Alone*.
- He spent only three pages on bowling, but his point was that while people still bowl, fewer are joining leagues .... Following along in his premise of declining social capital.
Sport participation 2010
(Participated at least once per year, age 7 or older)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Sport</th>
<th>Participants (millions)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Exercise walking</td>
<td>95.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Exercise with equipment</td>
<td>55.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Swimming</td>
<td>51.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Camping</td>
<td>44.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Bicycle riding</td>
<td>39.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Bowling</td>
<td>39.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Basketball</td>
<td>26.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Billiards</td>
<td>24.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Golf</td>
<td>21.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Tennis</td>
<td>12.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The “negative perception of bowling” theory

- While popular to play, and while retro bowling shirts are cool, it is not so cool to take bowling all that seriously.
- Just ask someone, “Is bowling a sport?”
- Or look at how bowling is portrayed in TV and in the movies.
20th Century Fox released a “serious” bowling movie on April 27, 1979.

Worldwide gross: Less than $1 million.
These movies were more popular
The Big Lebowski, 1998
“Thank you for a memorable afternoon, usually one must go to a bowling alley to meet someone of your stature”

– Hobson
Television

- *Cheers*, 1984, “From beer to eternity” – Diane saves the day during grudge match against Gary’s Old Town Tavern. She despises the fact that she is a good bowler and begs not to have to play.

- *Family Matters*, 1990, “Bowl me over” – Steve Erkel a nerd to the core, turns out to be a great bowler.

The “demise of professional bowling” theory

Pro bowling reached its zenith in the 1980’s:

- The purse for the US Open was $500,000 in 1988.
- Bowling was on TV all year long between ABC (winter), ESPN (spring and summer) and NBC (fall).
- Top players routinely earned endorsement and incentive contracts worth $100,000+ per year.
- Intercollegiate bowling became more and more popular, a great training ground for future pros.
- For non-PBA members, the “megabuck” tournament craze began with first prizes worth more than $200,000.
The state of pro bowling today

- After being cancelled in 1996, The Pro Bowler’s Tour lasted one season on CBS before being relegated to ESPN.
- In 2000, on the verge of bankruptcy, the PBA was sold to a group of Silicon Valley executives (led by Chris Peters, Microsoft retiree at age 38) and became a for-profit enterprise.
- Bowling appears on ESPN on Sunday afternoons in the Fall (?) and Spring, often on tape-delay. Viewership is usually in the 700,000-800,000 range, yielding a Nielsen rating of less than 1.
The state of pro bowling today

- Purses for non-major tournaments are in the $15,000-20,000 range, down from $40,000 just six years ago.
- Many very qualified bowlers are choosing not to turn professional and choose other careers.
- Those who are professionals must supplement their income by owning pro shops or travelling around the world to seek out tournament opportunities.
Wither pro bowling?

- What is interesting that during pro bowling’s demise, sports such as pro golf and tennis have flourished.
- A likely explanation is the explosion in corporate sponsorships in golf and tennis that are non-existent in bowling.
- Does an executive at Goldman Sachs really want to take their clients to the hospitality tent at the bowling center?
The “bowling has become too easy” theory

- Among the top 5% or so of bowlers, scores have increased dramatically since the 1960’s.
- In the 1950’s, the odds of any game bowled by an ABC member being a 300 were approximately 650,000 to 1.
- By 2010, those odds have decreased to approximately 3000 to 1.
300 games per ABC member, 1907-present (log scale)
Does this matter?

- My own opinion is that it does not, but there is a sense among top-level bowlers that scoring is now more dependent on equipment and power rather than accuracy … e.g. bowlers do not need to work on their games as they did in the past.

- This is very stark when compared to golf … Equipment continues to get better and better (ostensibly to make the game easier) but handicaps are statistically unchanged since 1980.
Summing up

- It is likely that the decline of the bowling industry has been some combination of all of these factors.
- Future research needs to be targeted on uncovering the relative weight of each.