

## **BNN Interview: GARY BECK**

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**By Jim Goodwin**

*A few years ago, my wife CJ and I had the privilege of doing the publicity for Gary Beck's Killer B Promotions, and we were allowed to attend the Teen Masters National Finals in Orlando in 2006 and in Las Vegas in 2007 where we worked alongside Gary, Kirk and Mary Von Krueger, and many more to stage the national finals. This year, when we learned that the 2015 TM National Finals would be at the beautiful new South Point Plaza Arena immediately following Bowl Expo, we decided to extend our trip to find out how the TM is doing today. We were very impressed with the progress and some of the interesting new aspects of the event. We learned one thing for certain ... we are all a bit older and wiser, and we still have a strong passion for the sport, and especially for the young people who will hopefully love it as much as we have for all these years.*

**BNN: I have known you for a long time, and I know you are a guy who pays attention to the business world, both inside and outside the bowling industry, so I know you have paid attention to the fact that companies like Apple and Starbucks have earned loyal customers by creating a culture surrounding their products and services. Is that what you now strive to do with the Teen Masters program?**

**GB:** Absolutely, we have a culture. We have a tribe. We have first and foremost a group of kids who are willing to set their egos aside. They want it to be all about them; not in the selfish 'I want attention' way, but in the 'I want to learn more about me' way. They do that by putting themselves into a competition that is both mentally and physically challenging. And when they emerge from the other side, they are definitely different people.

**BNN: How are they different?**

**GB:** They learn that they are capable of more than they thought they were. They learn that they are able to persevere when things are not going as planned.

**BNN: I know you tell them to do that – you sit them down with their parents for a half-hour in a squad meeting before they start competition. But do they truly listen to your message and look within themselves for solutions? Or, does it take a while for them to know that they really are responsible for themselves and their results and behavior? And do the parents listen to your message that their kids need positive feedback? As a former school teacher, I know how important these things are to you and your mission.**

**GB:** It is all about having them look at themselves in a way they never have before. It is why I ask them in those meetings, “Why are you here? Why would your parents spend all this money to bring you to an event that is hard, that is challenging, that is not as much fun in terms of high scores? It is either because they don’t like you, or because they believe in you.” And every kid figures out real quick it is the latter. I am a firm believer that anyone, especially kids, will live up to almost any expectations you place on them. If you expect a lot, they will give it to you; if you don’t expect much, they will respond in kind. We put very high expectations on these kids about their behavior and attitude, about how they treat others around them. We really strive to plant the thought that they are capable of more than they think. You prepare them for challenge by teaching them that virtually nothing ever goes as planned in bowling or life. Anything worthwhile is hard. College is hard; marriage is hard; work is hard – and that is why all of them are worth the effort it takes to find success. I see a lot of kids come to this event and fail miserably; people don’t like that word, but they just fail. But many of them come back the next year and win. We have a history of kids going from worst to first. It is an event where you are on your own. You can’t just reach into your bag and find a new ball that moves differently – you have to manipulate it yourself. So there are not as many resources available to them except those that are internal.

**BNN: Do the parents get it before the kids?**

**GB:** An example – Brittni Hamilton’s parents . . . Steve Hamilton said to me recently, “It all started with you.” But what really happened is that Brittni found within herself the ability to meet the challenges, and she won. And then she started to see herself differently. Talk to Danielle McEwan’s mom. Before Teen Masters, no one knew Danielle. And Danielle didn’t know Danielle. But when she won, she learned what she was capable of, and she is now a very accomplished bowler. Her attitude and expectations of herself changed because of what she went through here. We have other kids who are just starting out finishing near the bottom of the list. The question for them is not, “Did you win?” It is, “Did you learn?” And the kids push each other in a positive way. Someone told me that Magic Johnson talked about what Larry Bird did for him by pushing him to get better. That is the key thing here. I want these kids to desperately want to beat each other – but I want them to learn to do it with respect. And I want the parents to encourage everyone. I’ve seen parents cheer when a kid bowling against their kid missed. That is not acceptable here. It is not the kind of behavior we foster or accept. I want heated rivalries, but they must learn to respect their competition because that is what makes them better.

**BNN: I know that many years you had bigger entry numbers for this event. This year, you have 160 boys and 80 girls. Are you OK with those numbers, or do you need more to make a profit and keep this event going forward? Maybe it is not a good comparison, but I hear the folks at USBC talk about smaller membership numbers being OK because it has become more about delivering quality. Yet their Junior Gold event is going bonkers with over 3,000 entries. What are your thoughts on the numbers?**

**GB:** I have never aspired to have the biggest tournament. We started in 1997. The last time we were in Vegas, we actually sold out at 360, and then I had four kids show up from Puerto Rico unexpectedly so we ended up with five on a pair. We recognize that there are limits. Overall, youth bowler numbers continue to fall dramatically. Our numbers are off this year from last year because I lost my mom in the fall and we canceled all of our qualifying events this year. I knew I would take a hit at the national finals because qualifiers get the word out. I care how many show up, but if I get just one person that I can have an impact on as far as how they view life and themselves and how they interpret failure, then I'm fine. But, we introduced this new environment two years ago, and our entries went up 26 percent the first year and 41 percent the second year after the balls and the lane patterns had been in the market a year.

**BNN: The environment you describe is made up of challenging oil patterns and special bowling balls for each player – correct?**

**GB:** Yes. Every player gets two Teen Masters Logo bowling balls with their entry fee. One is urethane, one is polyester; they have neutral cores, they do not flair. If you don't make it hook, it does not hook. I think the oil distance is 36 and 30 this year; flat patterns with less than eight milliliters of oil. These balls don't consume the oil like modern balls, so it is tough but playable.

**BNN: You mentioned that your mom passed away ... our deep condolences. My next question is that when unexpected things happen, will the event be able to continue even if you are not available? I know you have Kirk and Mary Von Krueger and several volunteers, but this has pretty much been a one man show. Have you given that much thought in planning for the next 10-15 years that you say you want to continue doing this?**

**GB:** When you don't follow the same path as everyone else, it is hard to gather resources. Most people have advised me to not to do what I am doing. 'They are just kids,' they say. I should make it easy; just let them strike and have fun. I have no plans to retire, but I do have a plan. We just in April received designation from the IRS as a 501 (c)(3) organization called "First Frame," and we are beginning funding operations for that.

**BNN: Like the Golf Organization First Tee?**

**GB:** Yes. I have been to First Tee headquarters three times. I met with the guy in Boise, Idaho, who wrote the First Tee curriculum. Everything is laid out. I have the balls done; I have the oil patterns done; I have a tribe of people who are passionate about the event; and now I have to build an organization that can sustain it with or without me.

**BNN: You call it a Tribe; and we often hear the term “bowling family”. What you have really created is a small community within a much larger bowling community.**

**GB:** Family is the word most used by the parents. [On] the YouTube video we did last year that is on our website, the word family keeps being repeated, as it is in previous videos over and over again. One of the reasons why we have all of the ancillary events like the Blue Man Group outing here in Vegas and all of the little side events that are priced at only \$10 – they are not to make money; they are only to get the kids and their families together off the lanes, to build unity.

**BNN: Seeing what you spend for this event, it is obvious you are not getting rich, but do you at least make a profit?**

**GB:** I am sustaining right now, but with all of this coming together, I need to monetize the event by getting some sponsors outside the industry – nonendemic sponsors.

**BNN: Which companies have been your primary industry sponsors?**

**GB:** Dexter shoes has been the longest; Bud Clapsaddle understands what we are doing. Kegel – John Davis was a personal friend who was a very strong advocate. In fact, the environment was inspired by him and something we hashed over several times in his living room. We talked philosophically about if it should be one ball or two balls. John made his living selling lane oil and machines, but he was genuinely concerned about how much oil had to be put on a lane.

**BNN: I well remember his One Ball One World project. He recruited me to get the bowling writers to come to Sebring for the demo several years ago. He was a great host and very passionate about that project although it never got off the ground.**

**GB:** He couldn't get past the politics of it. It took me several years to persuade Ebonite that making the Teen Masters would not cannibalize their sales. It is not mainstream, but the bottom line is that the kids like it. They like that it is all about them.

**BNN: Have you tracked the performance of Teen Masters bowlers in Junior Gold?**

**GB:** Wesley Lowe left here and won Junior Gold last year. A young man, Eric Zimmerman, actually won the 15 and under division of Junior Gold throwing his Teen Masters PBA Skill 3.0 ball in the match play round. We have not done an analysis of our kids and their scores in Junior Gold, but we did do a survey, and 91 percent told us that bowling in Teen Masters improves their bowling in other events, which includes Junior Gold.

**BNN: Do you know what percentage of TM bowlers roll in Junior Gold?**

**GB:** We are doing that this year. I'm guessing it is at least two-thirds. We can also point to at least five Teen Masters Champions that have gone on to become PBA champions. On the girl's side, players like Brittni Hamilton and Danielle McEwan have done really well ... but it isn't like we train them. We just attract an audience, or a tribe, or a competitor who has the kind of mentality that they want to be tested, and Junior Gold is another test.

**BNN: Off the top of your head, who are some of the TM champions or top bowlers who made names for themselves in the pro and top amateur ranks?**

**GB:** Sean Rash bowled the Teen Masters two years. Ryan Cininelli is a TM champion ... Jason Sterner, Michael Fagan, John Sczerbinski, Jake Peters ... Bill O'Neill bowled but never won. But again, it is not that they came to TM and their skill set suddenly improved, but it did help them get ready for the mental grind that they face in other major events.

**BNN: How important is it for kids to learn the mental skills that this and other events like the Turbo Collegiate Expo teach?**

**GB:** I tell people from outside the industry that we make this event really hard for a reason. We have from the very beginning. And we use it to try to teach kids how to overcome failure in their life. Everybody is going to experience failure at some point. Does that mean you are a loser? No. I have always said that the opposite of winning is not losing – it is quitting. How do you handle failure? How do you embrace tenacity and perseverance? This gets back to what we are going to be doing with First Frame. Like First Tee, we will have 10 Core Values that drive everything. Coming to this event, you will put yourself through a meat grinder both mental and physical. It is 42 games to get to the end of this. And you have two bowling balls and two lane patterns, and it is tough. You can't simply change balls to make it go straight or hook.

**BNN: If our roles were reversed, what question would you ask Gary Beck?**

**GB:** ... I consider myself an agent of change, so I don't say this to attack ... but I am very concerned. You mentioned Junior Gold and how big the numbers have become. How is it really doing? What do the press releases say? *Record entries and record memberships*. This is what bothers me. There seems to be complacency. I sat down with several people this past week during Bowl Expo, and basically all of them said we have no worries because youth bowling is doing so well. I am concerned by that. The majority of bowling centers do not have youth programs. If complacency occurs, rather than try to push hard to try to get kids engaged in the sport, not just in the recreation, but in the sport, we will relax, and we can't relax. In my view, youth bowling is not doing that well. A lot of the change in Junior Gold numbers has to

do with the elimination of any requirements to be a member. You used to have to achieve an average to be eligible. Now, everybody is eligible.

**BNN: In fairness, you have lowered your Teen Masters requirements as well. I noticed that you now have 11-year-old kids bowling alongside high-average players who are headed for college.**

**GB:** Yes, I do. Cameron Doyle bowled as a 10-year-old. Before anyone else, I started a 14 and under division. But what I am concerned about is all of the publicity about how youth bowling is growing, and yet, over the past 10 years, we have lost 50 percent of our youth members. And over the past five years, the decline has continued at the same pace. What happened was that the cup was half-full, and they got another cup half the size and poured it into the first one and put out a press release saying, *the cup is now full*. So, the numbers have simply been repositioned. I think Junior Gold is great. I used to send quite a few kids to Junior Gold. I think any environment that tests the kids is beneficial. I just don't want the proprietors to relax thinking that we have youth handled.

**BNN: Isn't it really more about having good youth programs in bowling centers than it is about tournaments like Teen Masters and Junior Gold?**

**GB:** Yes. As long as those youth programs teach kids how to bowl.

**BNN: Let's talk about the venues. You have taken your TM National Finals to Las Vegas several times, even inside the famous Fashion Show Mall one year, to Universal Studios in Florida, and even to New York's Grand Central Terminal a couple of times. Now you are in the world's newest and most technically advanced arena here at the South Point Plaza, and you have had television for the final match. Why is it so important to stage your finals in these incredible but probably very expensive places? How tough is it to make that happen?**

**GB:** First of all, Mike Monyak and South Point have been very supportive of what we do. We held our first event in 2007 at the Orleans, the year after we went to Universal Studios. The next year, he moved here and asked us to come with him, so we had our 2008 and 2009 finals in the South Point 64-lane center, and now we are back to this amazing new arena this year. Everything I do is designed to show everyone, especially the kids who bowl, that this event is special. The lights and graphics on the walls and above the lanes, the shirts that the bowlers wear.... When they came to the finals in 1998, we had 48 lanes all with PBA gold pins. It is all a presentation to make them feel special, to start changing their mindset that nothing is normal, and thus, behavior is not going to be normal. The expression is "Go to the mountaintop" – it means you are taking yourself out of your normal environment and suddenly you start thinking differently. When they come to a place where everything is different, where they are all in uniform shirts with their name and class on the back – it is all part of allowing them the freedom to start thinking about themselves differently. It is really all about our respect for them. And yes, I am chasing

corporate sponsors from outside the industry, and when they come to this event, I want them to know it is an environment that they absolutely positively would be proud to be associated with.

**BNN: To pause for a minute ... do the kids get those shirts with their \$250 entry fee?**

**GB:** Yes, they get two of them, plus a ticket to see the Blue Man Group, plus personalized credentials, plus all of their bowling, not to mention the two PBA Skill balls they bowl with. It is turnkey. Getting back to the presentation, it is all about perception. Just because they are kids does not mean that we don't give them the same respect; we are back to that word that we would give a PBA player at a PBA event. That is the highest standard. They are here to put their skills to the test, and we want them to do it in an environment that speaks volumes about how much respect we have for them. It shows how we want them to treat our staff and each other. The Grand Central and Fashion Show Mall and Universal Studios finals were to put bowling up on a pedestal in front of the general public that may think of us as Archie Bunker, Ralph Kramden, or Fred Flintstone. We love Archie, Ralph, and Fred, but they are not the only bowlers out there. I just do things to the best of my ability, and I am fairly creative, so I come up with lunatic ideas and I'm crazy enough to try to make them real.

**BNN: Is the plan to continue coming to South Point now that they have this new arena?**

**GB:** I would love to. It is great, but Vegas is not the bargain that it was only a few years ago. I paid almost \$600 for my airline ticket, and if you have a family of four or five that really adds up, and you can't drive here from the east coast. Spending that much money is problematic, but the main problem is that this South Point Plaza Arena is going to be a very, very busy place for many years. Originally, we were scheduled for 2015 and 2016 here, but now the USBC is expecting their 2016 Women's Championships to be here through the end of July; and we have to do this event in July. A lot of high schools don't end until late June, and some high schools and colleges are now starting the first week of August, so we have no other options. Right now, it looks like we will be back in Florida next year.

**BNN: Is there a plan to alternate between the east and west every other year?**

**GB:** I'm trying to find a venue in the northeast; and if we can find one here in Vegas, we would set up a rotation between Florida, Vegas, and the northeast in a three-year cycle, and that gives me about five more events in each place before I am done. It's funny, I had one parent who was against coming here who is now so impressed that he is recommending on Facebook that we make this our permanent home because this is a very, very nice facility. But we really need to hit both sides of the country to be fair to everyone.

**BNN: Final thoughts?**

**GB:** I have all of the pieces of the puzzle together now, and we have made a lot of progress in recent years. The balls work. The lane patterns work. We have the 501 (c) (3). We have a good partnership with the PBA. We have national television. I have built a Ferrari, but it is in the garage, and now we need some fuel. Fuel is sponsorship money or some foundation. There are a number of people in the industry that have resources....

**BNN: You have always been a pretty good salesman. Have you considered turning over the operation of the TM event over to someone else so you can concentrate on sales?**

**GB:** I have, but how would I compensate them? I have to find money first. I need fuel. You were asking about the entry fee and what they get for it, and what we charge for side events and such. Yes, the event has to be profitable, but....

**BNN: Do you have other sources of income?**

**GB:** I operate a PBA50 event that makes a little, but the Teen Masters is my passion. It is a struggle, but I have poured my heart and soul into it, and now I believe I have built what can be monetized. We are doing a couple of new things, for instance in Wichita; we will be having a Teen Masters Qualifier next year that will be hosted and run by the Wichita State University Shockers bowling program, and they will be the financial beneficiary of it. I have a strategy, and as you well know, I am tenacious and patient. Losing my mom this past year made me look at my own mortality face-to-face, and I now realize that I no longer have the luxury of time.

**BNN: We understand. You are 62, which is the new 40 we are told, but none of us last forever. After 19 years, it is time to make it happen.**

**GB:** Absolutely.

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