

Head Mechanic: BRIAN FOWLER

(First in a series on people who work in the bowling field)

For the past seven years, Brian Fowler of Alexandria has worked as a mechanic at Bowl America centers, first as an assistant at Shirley and currently as the head mechanic at Falls Church.

Fowler, 27, a 1992 graduate of Thomas Edison High School, first bowled duckpins in the mid-1980s at nearby Penn Daw Lanes before he became hooked on the big-ball game. During his teen-age years, he became a certified welder while working with his father's heavy equipment company. It's a skill that comes in handy today.

He doesn't consider himself a serious bowler, yet he has a sanctioned 300 game to his credit and last season carried averages of 211 and 203.

Recently, Fowler spoke with editor Bob Cosgrove while taking a break from overseeing the conditioning of the lanes at Bowl America Falls Church—yet another responsibility of his position.

How did you become interested in pinsetters?

I've always fiddled with cars, boats, trucks, anything. I've always been around it. I started bowling at Bowl America Shirley and got hooked on it. I

ended up going there every evening to practice. Graham Aylor, the head mechanic at the time, would talk with me, and he later asked me if I wanted a job, and there I was.

Is there something about the pinsetter that you don't know or can't fix?

I'm pretty much mechanically inclined, and I'm very determined. So if there's something that gives me a problem, I'll stay at it until I get it. Not to say that I know everything, but I haven't come across anything yet where I've had to call somebody else in.

So you understand the basics of what the whole machine does such that if there is a problem, you know that *this needs to do that*, etc.?

Any guy who's the mechanic of his center has to have that ability, in my opinion. Some might do it better than others, but that's how they got where they are. That's why we're here during tournaments and stuff like that because we can diagnose a problem right away.

I've had stuff that I've had to go home and sleep on. Then I come back refreshed, and I might figure it out in

five minutes or five hours, but I'll get it done.

What's the one service call you're not fond of hearing?

I guess when I hear there's a ball in the channel and that the bowler had hit the sweep a few times. There's a possibility for a break in the rake arm, which is kind of a good project, but it takes a considerable amount of time.

Do you consider a night with few calls "good" or "boring" or both?

It's a *good* night. That's where I get my feeling of accomplishment, where I feel like I'm doing what I need to do.

When I'm here during a tournament or something and I only get a couple of deadwood calls, that's what it's all about, you know? You can sit back there and write up a parts order, sweep, clean up, do the general oiling on the machine. That's when you realize you look around and say, *Man, I'm the one who makes these things run that good*. It's a good feeling.

So you're like a referee or an umpire in a big game?

Yes. I'm the guy nobody recognizes until there's a problem. When things are going good, you don't know my name; when there's a problem all of a sudden, you know it.

If someone were to visit you in the pits on a "quiet" afternoon, what would he likely see you doing?

I try to set an example for my other guys. We have a maintenance schedule for our four mechanics, so we set aside 12 lanes for each mechanic. I'll do my cleaning, and oil this and that, just to try to set that example.

During the day, I usually do my bigger projects. If there's something I can rebuild on the workbench to go ahead and put on the shelf for when I'm gonna need it, I'll rebuild stuff.

You'll see me walking and checking if there's something visible on a ma-



chine that I need to look at the next day or maybe later that evening. I generally like to keep my pit area clean.

What's the biggest problem you regularly face?

Pinsetter-wise, I haven't really come across anything that's thrown me for a long time. When it comes to scoring machine troubles with the electronics, I've had problems that seem to go away for a few days after you change something, and then all of a sudden they reappear. Some of those can really nag at you!

What's the first indication you as a mechanic see at a center you visit that the pinsetters are not being properly maintained?

To me, noise is one of the biggest indicators. If you hear it, there's something wrong. I'd like to think that my machines run pretty quietly. They should be seen and not heard. If you hear a machine constantly clattering, you know the maintenance isn't the best.

Without looking at a machine or walking through the back, noise is what lets you know that something's wrong.

What part of the pinsetter needs the most maintenance?

One of the most important things is very simple: Each machine has 10 deck chutes in it where the pins are delivered. I like to go through and clean mine; I run silicone spray on them to help the pins go through. It generally lets the pins slide through a lot better and prevents them from getting hung up and causing blackouts and 180s.

It's also important to keep the machines oiled because there's nothing like seeing metal shavings on the floor. That's *not* a good sign!

What one service call do you find bowlers having the most trouble describing to the control desk?

I would say "out of range" because sometimes they somehow manage to look past the fact that the machine is halted and that the sweep is down, and yet they still bowl. The machine only hits the top of the pin, and it cuts the gearbox out and tells it to stop running. Somehow they manage to look



right past the sweep that's down and the deck that's on top of the pins, and they bowl anyway!

This problem gets called all sorts of things. I don't work the desk, but bowlers often say, "My machine is broken."

Have you ever had any major injuries?

No. I get dinged up every now and then, but that comes with the territory.

Is it difficult to bowl here or at a center where you're known as a mechanic?

I've bowled in other centers, and if they have trouble and they're aware that I work for [Bowl America] or that I work on pinsetters, they'll ask me to run back [to the pits], and I usually do it. I don't mind.

I guess when I'm bowling in my own center, I just want to be another bowler, but I know that can't happen. It's such general practice now to complain about a lane condition pattern or the way the lanes are or this and that. Now people just generally talk, and they don't know if I'm standing there—they just don't care. It's part of the game now.

Would you be able to tolerate a traditional office job?

No. I like the feeling of *accomplishment!*

Don't take me the wrong way. If there's a bowling lane and I'm having trouble with it and I resolve the problem and there's satisfaction, I see the difference.

Compare this to if there's a pile of papers on the left side of my desk and they move to the right side of the desk, and that's done, and then that other pile starts adding up. It's the same grind every day.

At least here, you come to work and have different problems. It's a feeling of accomplishment—*not* to insult anybody who works in an office!

What would you like bowlers to understand about your job?

Personally, I'm proud of what I do. I want people to walk out of here saying, *Man, this center does run well compared to other centers we've been to* or that it just runs well in general—and give me credit for that. I'm not looking to be some kind of hero and considered some legend in the bowling industry, but I care.

I get a lot of complaints about stuff, and everything goes to heart. I listen, and I check every time somebody says something. If I feel there's a problem, I'll look into it.

Bowling is definitely a sport where people like to complain or moan about *something*. I don't go to *their* jobs and complain about what *they're* doing! This is my livelihood, you know? And when you're ragging on it, it affects me.

I wish people would respect it a little more as a real job. They think it's somebody in a bowling center, and that, *ah, you know, that's something you do in high school, and you move on to a real career.*

Well, for some of us, it is a career, and I'm proud of it.