

# BRUCE MERRIMAN

Even though Bruce Merriman was born and raised in Annandale and always has lived in the area, he had never stepped inside a bowling center until age 25. Looking for something to do in 1974, he stopped by Bowl America Manassas and met bowler John Sudduth, who immediately became his friend, taught him how to bowl, and got him into a league three weeks later.

Merriman found himself addicted to the game, and Sudduth had him practicing every weekend. Soon, Merriman was involved in pot games, where he got his "brains beat out regularly," but he simply hoped the competition would make him a better bowler. Apparently, his efforts paid off: He won the 1975 Nation's Capital Singles Classic at Fair Lanes Springfield for his first tournament victory.

He had always been involved and totally absorbed with something—auto racing, golf, horse racing—and so it was no surprise that his involvement with bowling "just snowballed" from there. In the mid-1980s, while still employed by the Fairfax Water Authority, where he began working at age 17 in data processing and later moved to customer service, Merriman noted that a friend, Jerry Francomano, had opened the Sports Plus Pro Shop in Springfield and was trying to do something different in the area but was struggling financially. Merriman at first got involved on a very limited basis, but he ultimately bought the shop.

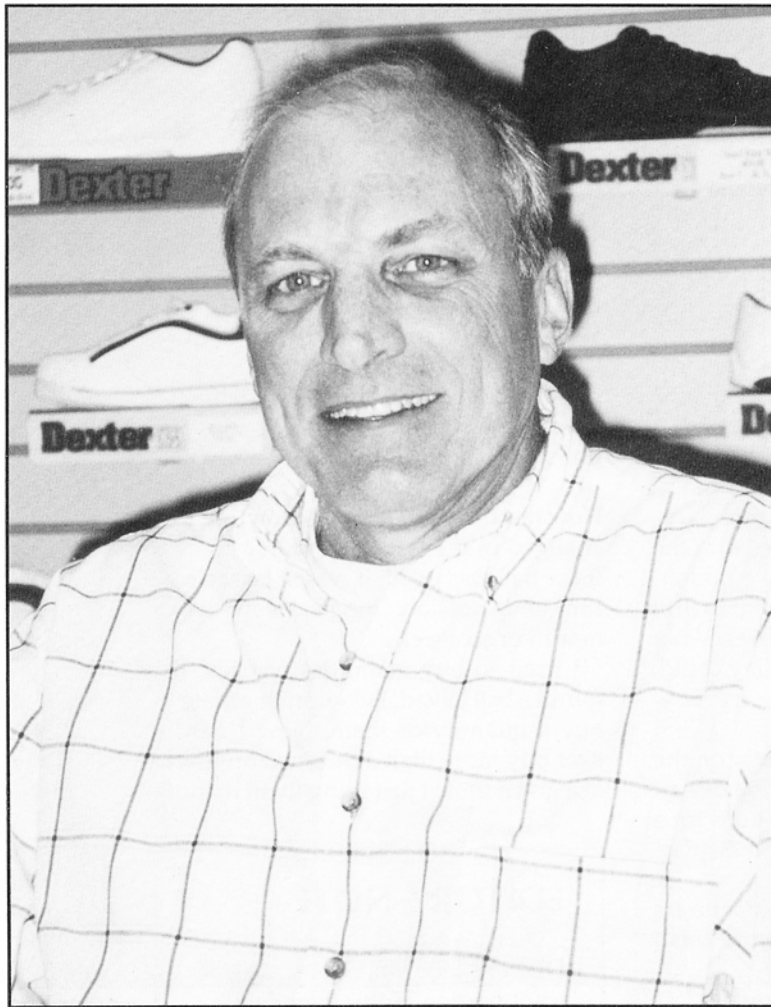
A few years later, he and his partners bought the Carmen Don Pro Shop. Today, Merriman is the sole owner of the Sports Plus/Carmen Don Pro Shop—the area's largest—on Duke Street in Alexandria.

Merriman recently sat with Editor Bob Cosgrove at Bowl America Duke and talked about his career, his pro shop, the pro shop business, the bowling business, and other topics of interest.

## Was your original investment in Sports Plus a risk for you? Was it scary?

At the time that came along, I was pretty much decided that I wanted to get out of my career by the time I was 40 or 45. I needed something else to get involved in. I was actively looking for something to get involved in. The two just kind of fell together—right time and right place.

I was never scared by it because I was never counting on it to succeed. If it did, it was a bonus. But if it didn't, it wasn't any major loss—financially, but not otherwise.



## You eventually purchased Sports Plus outright. How did "slash Carmen Don" come about?

I brought in Chuck Dasenbrook, so it was Chuck, Jerry [Francomano], and I. Two years later, Jim Robinette [of the

Carmen Don Pro Shop] approached us to discuss the potential for a merger. We had dinner a couple of times and talked about it and decided it was really something we didn't want to do.

So they asked us if we were interested in buying Carmen Don. I wasn't, but Jerry and Chuck were. And as the 45 percent partner who wasn't actively involved in the business because I was still working at that point, I had the veto right to say, *No, we're not going to do it*. But it didn't seem fair to do it that way, so I kind of went along for the ride.

The deal closed in July of 1987.

## So you had trepidations with the Carmen Don deal?

Major fears. It was clearly heading in the direction I didn't know that I wanted to head. I was looking to get out of my other career, and I wasn't interested in starting a new one that was that big. I wanted some place to hang out and have fun!

Major fears at that point.

## What was your ownership position?

I owned 45 percent, Chuck owned 45 percent, and Jerry owned 10 percent. Chuck and I had the voting stock.

## Were you a hands-off owner?

I was there in the evenings after I got off my regular job, on weekends and stuff. I was involved, but I didn't have any specific duties. I was learning the business, learning the people, making contacts with the distributors and manufacturers—meeting these people and planning the future.

There was another big change that happened there: In about 1993, we separated the bowling business and the trophy business into two separate companies. I first bought

Chuck out and sold him the trophy business. Jerry and I stayed, so at that point, I owned 90 percent of Sports Plus/Carmen Don, and Jerry owned 10. That continued for another two years, and then I bought out Jerry's 10 percent.

So now, it's all mine, and I have no choice: I have to be there.

**What do you normally do at the shop?**

I handle almost all of the administrative parts of the pro shop, coordinate the marketing and promotion of the pro shop, and have hands-on control of everything that happens there.

**Is there a "Bruce Merriman philosophy" that you attempt to drill into your staff?**

It's been written up before, so I hate to say it again, but it's still true today: *The customer is king*. Everybody on my staff has the authority to do whatever they feel needs to be done, within reason, to solve a problem.

I'm sure there are a lot of people out there who would agree that we've gone out of our way—gone *way* overboard—to fix something that they perceive to be a problem. My staff sometimes looks at me like I'm crazy, but that's just who and what I am.

If I have an unhappy customer, I want to see what I can do to make him happy—excepting that there are people out there who are too demanding, and there's no way you can make them happy. But with the vast majority of them, you can.

**Is your staff able to make a personal evaluation of each new ball rather than accept the PR from the ball company?**

They do make an evaluation of every ball that comes out based on the technical specs provided by the companies. Unfortunately, in this day and age, with the number of balls coming out, we no longer have the luxury of being able to drill a couple up and go out and see what they do. It would be great if they could, but they don't have that luxury anymore.

We try to make sure everybody on the staff thoroughly understands the design characteristics and the expectations for a bowling ball before we put it on display.

**What could equipment manufacturers do to make things better for your business?**

The obvious first answer is bring out less balls so we have more time to evaluate them. We've got to get to know them and get them in the hands of some of our better area bowlers to see how the balls are going to perform before we have to start worrying about getting it off the shelf because it's going to be dead.

[For] a lot of balls that come out, we never get the opportunity to drill a big enough quantity of them and see them in different people's hands to determine who that ball's going to work best for before the ball is dead.

**Is it frustrating not knowing everything you want to know?**

We thoroughly understand some significant part of the balls on the market because we've kind of taken the approach that I'd rather understand what these 60 are going to do and have extensive knowledge of these 60 instead of having 100 of them in here and settling for a little bit less.

**Have complaints slowed the pace of the "ball a month" tactics of the manufacturers?**

Unfortunately, it seems to be speeding up. I don't remember the exact number, but one of the major distributors that I deal with puts out a report once a quarter telling me how many new balls were released and categorizing them. It was like 1.8 balls a week last year from the five major manufacturers. Let's bring in 1.8 balls a week and evaluate those balls!

A couple of the manufacturers have started bringing out *lines* of balls. They don't send you *a* ball and a week later send you another one: They bring out six or eight all at one time. It's a major studying process to go through to evaluate a whole new line of bowling balls all at one time.

**How has the shelf life for a bowling ball changed in the last 10-15 years?**

If the ball was good, it was at least a season and possibly longer. Now it's a month or six weeks.

I used to buy quantities of balls. If I found a ball I liked, I wouldn't hesitate to buy a quantity of them. Now I hardly ever buy more than a dozen of anything at a given time; I just bring them in more

frequently. So the ordering process has gotten certainly more time-consuming at the pro shops.

**How has the International Bowling Pro Shops & Instructors Association's formation affected your business, and are you a strong supporter of the organization?**

I'm a believer in IBPSIA, but I wouldn't say I'm a strong supporter. Initially, we were very active in it. I think they've got the right idea.

In my opinion, the funding is not there to do some of the things that they've been talking 10 years about doing. And in the bowling business, I don't think there ever will be. The majority of the funding has got to come from the pro shops, and the pro shops are typically low-profit businesses that can't afford to spend \$2,000 a year for dues to support this elaborate budget.

**What things has IBPSIA talked about that haven't been done?**

I think the whole educational process—the pro shop training program they have—could certainly be expanded and be more accessible to the membership. There are a lot of shops that can't afford to fly their staff to Las Vegas to attend the seminars and learn from the *experts*.

I think they could also benefit from putting in more effort in determining who the experts are.

**Are some members masquerading as experts?**

The bowling community is a small community, and it's pretty easy to build a reputation in the bowling community. And the people with the reputations are the ones running the programs and the shows. And they're not necessarily the ... they're not qualified for the job they're doing.

There's more to running a pro shop than knowing how to drill a bowling ball—customer service, the business end of it. There are a lot of pro shops out there that could benefit greatly from having more training and knowledge and understanding of running the business end of the pro shop instead of the technical ability to drill a bowling ball.

I see a lot of pro shops struggling; I see a lot of pro shops going out of business—and they shouldn't. Bowling is declining, but there's still a significant market there.

If these people had a better under-

**EDITOR'S NOTE**

Due to space limitations, a significant portion of this interview does not appear on these pages. The entire interview appears on [www.ncaba.org](http://www.ncaba.org) and currently can be viewed by simply clicking the "BOWL Magazine Online" logo.

standing of what running a business is all about, they would be surviving. They may not be growing, but they certainly would be surviving.

But even for the ones that do make the commitment to send their staff to one of these week-long or several-day training sessions, the vast majority of what they're taught while they're there is how to lay out and drill a bowling ball. There's so much more than there is.

The manufacturers have gotten involved in some of it over the past few years. Ebonite has a very excellent program—"Striking Effects"—where they come in and look at your shop. They design a layout for your shop. They provide you the merchandising fixtures and whatever you need to lay out your shop and have it look like a professional program that helps you sell your merchandise—instead of a dirty hole in the wall.

It's a good program, but it's very expensive.

#### **How important is it for your shop to cultivate relationships with bowling centers?**

It's an ongoing program, an ongoing project. In this area, we're dealing primarily with corporate bowling centers, a lot of turnover. Every time there's a management change in one of the bowling centers, we're back to ground zero, and we have to start over. But it needs to be done, and we do it.

My staff and I try and get out and meet the people in these bowling centers as soon as possible and let them know we're there to work with them and help them in any way we can. It's a mutually beneficial relationship. We do ball repairs for them, we work out deals with them to drill their balls for them in their ball leagues. We organize tournaments for their centers, we organize leagues for their centers, we help with league recruitment for some of their centers for the managers that are interested in working with us and want our help.

Amazingly, there are some out there that don't want it! It's *I'm the expert here,*

*you're just a pro shop....* You can't do much about that mentality. You can offer the help and try to develop a relationship. Sometimes it works, and sometimes it doesn't.

#### **What is your relationship with your fellow pro shop operators?**

Not as good as I would like it to be—and I don't know why. Except that we're the biggest in the area—we're one of the biggest in the country—and there's a certain degree of responsibility that comes with that.

I have invited the other pro shop owners to lunch. My treat: *Let's just sit around the table and chat for a couple of hours.* You know how it goes.

The NCABA invited the pro shop owners to its office last year, and three of us showed up. I don't know why. I don't

**changed as a customer through the years?**

I think there's a bigger distinction now than there used to be in the hardcore bowler than the league bowler. The typical league bowler these days is more content to buy his one ball each season or whatever. They're achieving as much as they really want to achieve out of their game. They want to enjoy the league experience; they're not necessarily looking for a competitive experience.

When reactives came out, everybody saw dramatic change. There were a lot of people who jumped on the bandwagon and made the effort to get the scores up, get better, and I think a lot of that has died off. It's back to the few competitive leagues; everything else is much more social.

#### **Any particular reason why that desire for improvement died off?**

It's tough to point the finger. I think to some extent the pro shops start taking the customers for granted, the bowling centers start taking the customers for granted, and the manufacturers clearly start taking the customers for granted.

Customers are coming in and buying a ball they read about in *Bowlers Journal*. At the bowling center, a buddy is saying, "What did you buy that piece of trash for? That ball died three months ago." Well, it didn't, but it just got reviewed in *Bowlers Journal* this month! That company's released *two* balls since then.

So you had a customer feeling as if he's made a wise investment, buying exactly what they wanted or needed to help move their game on to the next level, and the first thing they hear when they walk into the bowling center is something negative.

#### **Has the price of high-tech balls affected the buying habits of the competitive bowler?**

There are a lot of balls coming out—a lot of new technology coming out. The hardcore competitive bowlers are buy-



know how you can get through that, but I think it would benefit everybody if we had a better relationship.

#### **How has the typical league bowler**



ing what they need. I don't see them backing off the size of their arsenal.

But no, they're not buying every high-tech ball that comes out because as soon as Brunswick comes out with a ball with a new surface, every other ball company out there is going to come out with a comparable product that's going to do a similar thing. Sometimes even in their own line, you've got two balls that are basically the same ball.

So they're buying as many as they were buying before, but they're not getting everything that comes out because there's so much more coming out. They're buying everything *different* that comes out.

And there's other markets to buy them in now. The league bowler wants the convenience of being able to drop into a pro shop and pick up a ball and have it drilled and go on his way.

A hardcore bowler who's going to buy 20 or 30 balls a year doesn't mind waiting a couple of weeks for the ball to get here. He goes off to the tournament, and there's a ball rep or whoever there who'll be happy to take an order for a bowling ball for him and ship it to him in a week to 10 days. Or he can go on the Internet and buy it, or he can get on the telephone and buy it. He then takes it to his local pro shop and gets it drilled.

*Do they save any money?* Sometimes they do, sometimes they don't.

#### **How did you get involved in sponsoring pro bowlers?**

I guess it all came from Rich [Wolfe]. Rich came along with Carmen Don [Pro Shop] when we bought Carmen Don. I'd known Rich a long time and had offered him sponsorships before then. He was selling shares in himself the first few years he was out. We sponsored him for a couple of years. He introduced us to other people.

We looked around for other people ourselves. We kept hearing about Danny Wiseman in Baltimore, this quality local bowler who had the talent, had the ability, and nobody was giving him a chance. We had dinner with him one night and talked to him a little bit and decided to give him a chance. He bowled for us a couple of years.

I met Eric Forkel through Rich. Various people have approached us over the years and sent us resumés. It's not something we set out to do; it just evolved.

**Was there a goal in becoming a sponsor?**  
Not really. We certainly looked at it as an

opportunity to have a name that could help us market and promote our shop. But professional bowling being what it is, these men don't have time to help you market and promote your shop; they're too busy marketing and promoting themselves just to get by.

#### **Are you sponsoring anyone now?**

At the moment, no one.

#### **And if the right opportunity came along?**

If the right opportunity came along, it's something I would certainly consider. The assumption is that somewhere in the future [shop manager] Jimmy Lewis is going to want to go out and try the tour for some period of time. We certainly intend to be involved with that. To what level, I don't know. But it could happen.

*There's not a lot of business people in bowling I still encounter on a regular basis. You're talking to people in responsible positions with ball companies and distributors and pro shop owners who don't have a clue.*

And if somebody else were to come out of the woodwork that wanted a shot, I'd certainly consider it, but I'm not out actively looking for anybody. There's too much instability out there on the tour right now, and it doesn't make a whole lot of sense for anybody to be out there.

#### **Did you suffer the same panic that many of your colleagues did upon realizing that people could buy bowling equipment cheaper over the Internet than the pro shops could sell it?**

No. I like to believe I reacted the same way I did when the pro shops went through their other panics.

I remember that at the first IBPSIA convention I went to, the major topic of discussion throughout the whole week was all of these Have-A-Ball leagues that Fair Lanes at that time was going to do and how were we going to stop this.

The sad reality of this is we're not going to stop this. I look at it as another situation I have to adapt to. *Am I going to sell less bowling balls?* Yes. *Am I going to have more drill-onlys?* Most definitely. I already do, and I'm sure it's going to continue to grow.

There's a distinction between the bowler who's willing to wait a week or 10 days to get his bowling ball from Las Vegas or wherever and the bowler who wants to come over before his league tonight and drill up a new ball. There needs to be pro shops to serve that customer, and you need to be providing them something that lets them know you're worth the extra 20 bucks.

We've always had [drill-only pricing] because you always had to deal with Aunt Harriet buying someone a ball for his or her birthday and then having to get it drilled somewhere. So the volume just dramatically increased when the Have-A-Ball leagues started, and it's increasing now with Internet sales.

I don't see it as a problem; I see it as a change.

#### **What's been the best moment you've had in the business?**

To answer that, I've got to look at the different parts of the business. Danny Wiseman winning his first tournament was a major event. I really felt good about having been involved in him getting the opportunity to do what he was capable of doing.

I love our tournaments, particularly our youth/adult tournaments. Last week, we had Rawlin Jefferson and his mom out there bowling in the tournament, and they were having *fun* together. We created a situation where the kid didn't go off to a Saturday morning youth league and mom did her shopping. Mom didn't go off and bowl with her friends and leave the kid home with his big sister or whatever. Mom and this kid went out there and bowled together and had fun for three hours.

I really enjoy that part of the business. I go home feeling good.

#### **What's something that has surprised you the most about the pro shop business?**

The biggest surprise is the people in the business. I've been involved in a lot of different businesses in my life; there's not a lot of business people in bowling I still encounter on a regular basis. You're talking to people in responsible positions with ball companies and distributors and pro shop owners who don't have a clue.

Bowling is not Microsoft, but it's not a nickel and dime business out here, either. It's a real business world with real dollars.

And the people running bowling constantly amaze me. You've got a couple of

groups, I see these people out here busting their butt on a volunteer basis only to be trashed by the very people that they're working so hard for.

You bowlers and business people: You go to a job everyday, you go to your office, whatever it is you do, and you know what it takes to make things happen. Take a few minutes once in a while and think about what it takes to make this tournament happen or this league happen and show some appreciation for these people who are out here volunteering their time.

That guy who showed up and gave you your 700 pin the other night *didn't have to be there*; he could have been home watching TV.

And the corporate people around here: I don't know how many times over the years I've heard a bowling center manager, when I asked him, "How's your summer filling up?" or "How's your fall filling up?" say, "I'm going to be a little over my budget for the year, so I've kind of cut things back."

When I ask why he's cutting back, he says, "If I'm up 100 bowlers this summer, next summer they'll want me to be up 150."

What kind of policies do we have in place in the bowling industry that *discourage* the managers out there who have the ability to create bowlers and create interest?

Imagine that: "*Because I don't want to set too big a target to meet next year.*"

**What are your thoughts about the futures of the men's and women's pro tours?**

I'm not pessimistic about either of them. I'm not expecting an Eric Forkel or a Walter Ray Williams Jr. to become as known as Tiger Woods or even a Jack Nicklaus.

I'm optimistic that bowling is going to find its place. There are a lot of sports out there that were not heard of, were non-existent, 10 or 15 years ago. Cable has changed that. I think the Internet is going to change it again; the Internet is going to help change bowling.

I don't know what these new guys in the PBA are going to do, but they've all been successful, and I'm sure they've got some good ideas. The potential is there. There are some major web sites out there looking for content, willing to spend big bucks for content. Here's content. How you do it, to what extreme you do it, I don't know.

Will they ever be as big as golf? Not a chance—not in my lifetime. Will they be

as big as beach volleyball that has some major money tournaments and a major following throughout the world? They certainly have the potential.

**What is the biggest challenge facing the pro shop today?**

The biggest challenge is probably maintaining a competent staff in the future. Not only in this market, I see it all over the country.

Bowling is declining, and it's declining dramatically at the junior level. The next Rich Wolfes and Jimmy Lewises and whoever the pro shops will be looking for their talent pool for the future—I don't see 'em out there. I see some bright kids out there, but they've got aspirations beyond working in a pro shop. There are so many more opportunities now for any kid that wants to get ahead than there were 15 or 20 years ago.

*There's concern about the future as far as pro shops surviving. There'll always be a need for some, but how many?*

**What do you envision the pro shop to be like 10 years from now?**

I see a whole lot of less merchandise on my shelves. We're clearly going to move into the direction of where people are going to bring the product to me to finish the job.

**Because of E-commerce?**

Yes, particularly with the direction I see the PBA Tour going. I don't see the customer out there calling me to ask me what ball [the pros] were using. I see it flashed on the bottom of the screen, and if you're interested in buying one, click on this icon, give us your credit card number, and we'll ship one to you.

**Is this good in that you may sell fewer balls and bags but instead can focus most of your attention on specializing in the latest technological aspects on your end (drilling, etc.)? Or are you really concerned about the future?**

There's concern about the future as far as pro shops surviving. There'll always be a need for some, but how many? And I definitely think it's a negative.

I think about Wal-Mart increasing their sales volume at the expense of the little Mom & Pop shop on the corner that can't

make it anymore. I think long-term, that's bad for society.

And that's kind of where I see the pro shops—the little Mom & Pop shop on the corner that really personalized service. *You know us, you have a relationship with us. I see you in the bowling center, and you can come up and talk to me....*

**Any closing thoughts?**

I would definitely like to personally be more involved with people—directly or indirectly—that are interested in promoting or enhancing bowling out there in some manner. I don't think—and this goes back to there not being a lot of business people in bowling—I don't think people look at the pro shop's role in the business market of the bowling business the way I would like them to.

**They see it as "us verses them"?**

Most definitely. A couple of years ago, as you probably know, we wanted to see what we could do to raise some scholarship funds for youth bowling. And we did a pretty good job of it.

I had to end up running the tournaments myself to give the money away because the people out there who had programs in place—had tournaments in place or whatever—didn't want us sponsoring their tournament.

*How can that possibly be a negative?* You've got a successful tournament. We're interested in helping you enhance that tournament, and we're asking for nothing in return. I just want to write you a check and walk away. But we got resistance. And I don't know how or why we can change that.

The pro shops need to have a role in bowling; they're not just bowling equipment stores. There are bowling equipment stores out there—*pro shops aren't them!*

[Colleagues] Gary Parsons [in Camp Springs], Dale Underwood in Waldorf, the staff at Sports Plus—we need to be involved. Our job is not to sell bowling balls; it's just a piece of what we're doing.

And how we get the rest of the world to look at it that way, I don't know.

**Your job is more than just selling and drilling balls....**

Yes. Let's all go sit down at the association office sometime and have a discussion about what we can do to help promote bowling. It's a *great* idea; let's do it!