



**BOWL**  
**MAGAZINE**  
**INTERVIEW:**

# STACEY GONZALES

Stacey Gonzales was introduced to bowling at Bolling Air Force Base Lanes by her father in 1976 when she was nine years old. She was not taught how to roll strikes—anybody can do that, he told her—instead, she was instructed to stand on the 10-board and hit the 3-pin and then hit the 10-pin from the 23rd board and perform numerous other combinations to learn how to convert spares and observe how the ball reacts when shooting at different spots or different pins on the lane. Already a softball and basketball player, she had a knack for throwing balls and was quite accurate—skills that definitely helped her on the lanes.

Her interest in bowling grew, and that sport soon became her main activity during her teenage years—so much so that she earned a half scholarship to Temple University in Pennsylvania, where while studying business management and computer science she excelled in both team and individual competitions with an collegiate average that reached 207. In her junior year, however, a serious shoulder injury ended her hopes of becoming a touring professional and seemingly terminated her bowling career.

Gonzales came back home and ultimately got a regular job, but she realized she still loved bowling, and the injured right-hander came up with a radical idea that would get her back on the lanes, even it was wasn't going to be at the skill level to which she had been accustomed.

Thanks to dedication and perseverance, however, she's accomplished goals in her "transformed state" that few area women bowlers have, and between rounds of the recent Virginia Bowling Queens event at U.S. Bowling, Gonzales discussed what she went through to return to the game, her memorable comeback triumph, and other topics with editor Bob Cosgrove.

## When was bowling more than something you did simply for entertainment?

Right away. I started in the juniors at Bolling, and I wanted to compete and be able to beat people. I've always had that drive, so right away I liked it.

What I like about bowling is that you have to beat the pins—you don't have to beat the other person. It's you and the pins, and it's what you do to be able to knock down those pins.

Somebody like a [WDCAWBA Hall of Famer] Dawn Fay may be shooting 230s and 240s, but you don't have to beat her; you have to knock down the 10 pins—



that's your objective. I think that's where people lose their competitiveness or think they will do bad because they try to beat the other person.

Well, it's *not* trying to beat the other person.

## Does that philosophy help you get less intimidated when bowling against top women bowlers?

I actually like bowling against *men*. The better they are and the better they do, I tend to try to do better. It brings out something in me.

In leagues, I like to *finish*. I might bowl awful during the first five, six, or seven frames, but coming down to the ninth and tenth frames, the shot is going to be there. And for some reason, I may not find it in the beginning, but I'll find it at the end, and there's a chance for us to win as a team.

That's just been me. I'm not intimidated by *nobody*. I can beat you on any given day, and hopefully it's that day when I am competing against you. You're *not* going to scare me!

## What were your bowling dreams as a youngster?

I was thinking about competing on the women's circuit. Later on, in college, I had a lot of sponsors who were willing to sponsor me. It's not that they pushed me—I wanted to. I was going to strive to do that; that was my goal. That was my lifelong dream.

I would go bowling every day—practice, bowling leagues. At first, I was just bowling Saturday in the youths, but once I got in my teenage years, I tried to join more leagues or I practiced—they didn't have a lot of youth leagues; they only had them on Saturday, pretty much.

When I came home from college, I would bowl in leagues in the summer. In college, I bowled competitively and had three leagues, so it was important to me.

I was actually a starter at Temple University my freshman year, when we went to the nationals and finished ninth, so we did pretty good. In college, you compete within your conference—we had Penn State, Buffalo, N.Y., Maryland. We never finished first, but we did pretty good with the team we had.

I only went three years because I blew out my shoulder in my junior year in 1988. I continued bowling that year and

finished, but it got to the point where it was just a little too much pain, so I quit.

I came back home and went through a lot of therapy. I saw a lot of physical therapists; I saw a Redskins trainer and a Philadelphia Eagles trainer up in Philly to try and help.

Back then, they said they could fix it, but they couldn't *guarantee*—it was a rotator cuff injury. What had happened was that they could fix the rotator cuff, but I had a lot of chips that were floating in my shoulder. They were thinking that the reason there was pain shooting down from my armpit area was that the chips were kinda cutting into my tendons. So they weren't exactly sure, I guess.

Mentally, I was more devastated with the fact that I couldn't bowl. I kept seeing people, and nobody could give me any "100 percent" hopes. I decided not to have the surgery being that they couldn't guarantee, you know, 100 percent.

So I'm going, *I'm young, there are other things I can do*. I was good in computers, so I actually got a real good job with Manila Consulting in McLean and have been there since then.

#### **What brought about your injury?**

Basically, it was just wear and tear. In college, I bowled 100 games a week, and that was too much bowling. I weighed 92 pounds, and I threw a 16-pound ball with a five-step delivery probably as hard as any guy out there! I opened up my shoulder and pulled it back. I wasn't a finesse bowler; I was more of a speed, strength, and accuracy kind of bowler.

#### **Did you have a burning desire to excel?**

Oh, yes—oh, yeah. I *dreamed* bowling. I actually punished myself pretty bad when I did a lot of stupid things.

You should *never* miss a 10-pin—that's automatic. You're going to leave it when you hit the pocket. And it should be automatic to at least hit the 1-3 pocket. You should at least be able to hit that headpin.

#### **You said you did "stupid things"?**

When I whiffed the 10-pin!

#### **You punished yourself?**

Mentally, yes. I actually had a ... pretty bad temper. I'll be the first to admit it, and actually a lot of people will say it, too!

#### **And if the ball returns could talk?**

Well, I smacked 'em a little, but I wasn't quite *that* bad. The big thing was that I used to rip my glasses off, so I went through a lot of glasses. I would actually toss them sometimes on the bench, on the bowling seat. I admit, it was one of my downfalls, and everyone says now that it took a lot from me.

The reason I feel that it took a lot from me was that for being a woman it's not very respectful to be acting like that. It's very childish. It's just not good to portray, especially to young kids.

I will try to help a lot of kids to get them to bowl; it's a great sport. But how I portrayed myself and what I did was not good. But it did help me because mentally I got so upset at myself that I would come back in that next shot and throw that strike.

You know, a lot of people don't understand that philosophy, but when I got down on myself or got mad, it made me reach in deeper and concentrate more and throw that ball better. So it did help me. Of course, I don't do that anymore.

#### **When did you first get the idea to bowl left-handed?**

In early 1989, I was talking to my Dad and said, "I really miss bowling." That was *my life* from nine years old until I was 20—it was all I dreamed about.

Actually, I tried to bowl in a summer league after I came back because I laid off a year, but I just couldn't do it. And I've put up with a lot of pain.

But this was a pain that hampered my bowling. It really did because I couldn't throw the ball like I wanted.

#### **Did this scare you?**

No, not too many things scare me. They basically told me that I could lose movement—forward and backward movement in my shoulder. And I said, *You know, if I did, then I'd have to have the surgery; if it doesn't work, I have another hand. And I have feet, I have legs—I can do things*. So it never scared me.

I'm a daredevil. I've gone off parachuting, and I want to try hang gliding. Before I could even walk, my Dad, who built houses with his father, taught me about not being scared by having me jump off a one-story roof into his arms whenever my grandmother rang the bell for dinner. So nothing scares me in terms of that.

Whether I was going to hurt myself—I



know I was already hurting, but it didn't terrify me. I knew I could overcome it one way or another. It wasn't too much the pain; it was just that I couldn't throw the ball the way I did. I didn't have the power. I couldn't get it to the pocket—to the hole. *That* frustrated me, not the pain. You can always take Advil!

Back to your original question. I asked my Dad, "What if I try bowling left-handed?" I've never done anything left-handed, but at least I can throw the ball down the lane—at least do it where I'm not going to have pain. I don't want to do it competitively now; I just want to see how it works.

So I went out, got a 12-pound ball drilled, went practicing, and then decided to join a fun league here when it was [Bowl America] Duke. I bowled with my father and my Mom, who were divorced.

It was fun, but it was tough, believe me. Getting the steps, getting to the line at the same time you're going to release the ball ... I was constantly "two-stepping"—I couldn't decide which one!

The footing was frustrating, but it wasn't as frustrating as not being able to bowl right-handed—not being able to shoot good. I got it in my mind that, *This is for fun, let's see how it works*.

And my average kept going up every year. When I first started, it was 107, then after about five years, I think it got to, like, 160-something.

I won the Virginia women's finals [for the 1990 Cambridge Mixed Doubles Pro-Am], and I went out to Reno, and that's where I saw the competitiveness again. When you bowl in a fun league and people are drinking beer, it's just not the same.

I got that feeling in my stomach. It was like, *You know what? I can do this if I practice.*

The only way I got good was when I devoted a lot of time. I said, *I haven't devoted time to it, let me try.* So I went out and bought some better balls, and I started practicing.

I finished 28th in Reno, but I was *satisfied*, I guess you would say. But just seeing the competitiveness in people ... it just made me want to do it again—you know, *seriously*.

I was bowling like three leagues. And

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that's when I decided to get a brace because the big thing I noticed is that I don't have strength in my left hand. So I got the brace because I'd "break" my wrist, and when you have a floppy wrist and you're trying to throw ... it just ain't gonna work.

Right-handed, I had the strength—I never wore a brace. Whatever position I had, I could keep it. So I got a brace, and then I started seeing that, *You know what? This might work.* I was getting some hook, getting some power—a little—at the end.

One thing that I do know: Left-handers are gonna kick my butt about this, but it's a *much* easier shot out there. I can bowl these tournaments, and I can only basically move two-three boards if I find the shot and have the pocket—you know, just keep in it. Right-handed, I've bowled so many tournaments where I've had to move 20 to 25 boards.

So it's a true fact: Being that I've bowled on both sides, lefties do have it easy. The only bad thing is, lefties do get shut out. I *will* give 'em that!

In 1999, I started to bowl more seri-

ously—I was averaging in the 170s and 180s. I joined more competitive leagues like Friday [the Lost Weekend] at [Bowl America] Shirley. I used to bowl the [Bowl America] Open Tour with Willie Jelks, who asked me. I bowled a travel league and went to tournaments in Williamsburg and Lebanon [Pa.]. I joined the Virginia Bowling Queens in 2002 when I started to average 190.

It was me being around the atmosphere of competitiveness that brought that fight, the feeling back—that wanting to beat people. Now I'm devoting the time. I wanted to, but I couldn't then.

Mark Glover, Dawn Fay, Tiff [Bell] and Terri Franklin, Carla Sessions—they all pushed me, and they helped me, not pointers and stuff, but just being with them and wanting to win and wanting to bowl well.

**Was there an excitement as you saw yourself getting better and becoming competitive with these people?**

I feel now that I can probably ... that I can be a better bowler than I was right-handed. The reason being is that I'm not more of a power bowler, but I think I'm more of a finesse bowler. You don't have to throw the ball hard, especially with the equipment that's out there now. You can throw a 14-pound ball and get just as much carry and as much drive as throwing a 16-pound ball. So I don't feel like I'm going to hurt myself.

Being that I bowled right-handed, I know how to adjust and read lanes and do different types of shots. Because my mind knows how to do that, I will try playing a deeper shot, or now, finally in the last couple of years, I've gotten better with the "down-and-in."

Being that I didn't have a lot of speed, I always had to fluff the ball out. Now I'm developing more strength and more power, so I can play the down-and-in shot. If I have to move, I will move *fast*, and I think that's just because I was a right-handed bowler.

The men are strong enough to overcome, but a lot of women lefties basically play one shot; you don't see 'em swing-

ing [the ball]—they just don't. And it's not that they can't, it's just that they've never done it, so they don't know or they don't trust their game.

I now feel that I do trust my game. I think I'm there—I improved nine pins last year from the year before. I bowl the WASA [Women's All-Star Bowling Association tournament], I've bowled the [Virginia Bowling] Queens since 2002—it helps bowling different lane conditions, going to different places.

I will adjust, I will try different lines. It's the point of just being accurate, hitting and knowing where you have to line up, and doing the same thing all the time.

*It's not a difficult sport.* To me, the difficulty is on teaching yourself to discipline yourself—to do the same thing over and over.

In throwing a softball, you just have to throw it to the guy who has a range of area to catch it. But if you can hit that 12th board and end up with your timing there at the same time, you're going to get the same reaction. And I think I've gotten to that point where I can do that mostly on a consistent basis.

**Even so, are there ever any "what could have been" regrets on your part?**

I think about it a lot. I could have been up there in the "Top 10" bowlers. I feel that I could have gone out on the pro circuit and won—I mean, I'm not going to win probably *consistently*, but I would have won. I feel that.

I might sound a little conceited, but I devoted the time, I practiced a lot, and, like I say, anyone can do it if they set their mind—I'm no more special than anybody else. I just practiced; I just worked at it. I kept my mental aspect on it and reached for goals. I've always set goals. I probably set really high goals, but I feel I'll reach 'em sometime. I'm not gonna quit.

But I can reach a lot of goals now. The pro circuit, maybe not, but there are a lot of things I think I can accomplish, and hopefully I'll get a chance to do so.

**What are those goals?**

300. ... 800. ... Be the No. 1-ranked bowler in the area. I'm pretty sure I'm going to be in the Top 10 for this past year. ... Winning a WASA.

I got lucky and got a [Virginia Bowling] Queens [title] at Fort Belvoir because ev-



everybody says it's a lefty house. But, you know, *whatever*—you still gotta execute the shot.

If my back holds up, I'm going to bowl in the USBC Queens [in Reno, Nev., in June 2006].

### What did your Virginia Bowling Queens win mean to you?

A lot. It was quite an experience that I'll probably never forget. It was very exciting, very scary. While I was bowling, Tiffany [Bell] was right there within reach. Being the bowler she is, she's quite a bowler.

I expected to win sometime, but maybe not quite so soon. It was shocking then, but now I look back at it, and ... I know I can do it. But still, it was very overwhelming, very exciting.

I actually struck out from the eighth frame on in the last game and shot 237, I think. Bobby Jones was behind me and said, "You've gotta get it together here." He didn't tell me that they were *right there*, you know? But I knew what he was saying.

For me to finish that way, when I struck out, I felt relieved, and I said, *You know what? If Tiff does get out there and beat me, I did the best I could. There's nothing anybody can take away from me, even if I do finish second because I put a goal out there, and she had to reach it. It wasn't like I tried to spare it—I went after it.*

I don't know if I can even describe it; it was quite a thrilling moment.

### Was your victory a shock to others?

I think so. For people who know me or bowl with me, probably not. I think they were all very excited, which ... surprised me. You always have that competitiveness where everybody wants to beat.... I've always congratulated people and felt my heart toward them, but there's a lot of cutthroats around here, too!

There's a few who are incredibly kind—and mean it. I have a lot of support from Dawna Taylor, Shelley Bowers, Dawn Fay—she was very, very supportive, which made me feel good. Bobby Jones—he was back there pacing. I don't know who was more nervous, him or me. I feel bad that my Dad wasn't there; he was out of town. He was always there my whole life when I was bowling.

Those people weren't [shocked], but outside of the realm that knows me, they were like, *I can't believe you won a Queens!*

## The Stacey Gonzales file

✓ Born November 15, 1967.

✓ Started bowling at age 9 at Bolling Air Force Base Lanes.

✓ Rolled first 600 set by a female junior bowler at Bolling Air Force Base Lanes.

✓ 1986 graduate of Groveton High School (now West Potomac) in Alexandria.

✓ Attended Temple University in Philadelphia with a half scholarship in bowling. Left school in junior year after injuring shoulder.

✓ Began bowling left-handed in 1989.

✓ Earlier titles include 1987 Women's New York Bowling Proprietors' Association Tournament in Buffalo and 1990 Bowl America Queen of the Year Grand Finals.

✓ Won several Bowl America Open Tour events in the 1990s.

✓ Won 2004 Virginia Bowling Queens Tournament at Fort Belvoir.

✓ Won 2005 WDCAWBA scratch and handicap doubles (with Christine Martin). Scored 1,980 all events total (651-669-660).

✓ Scored 2,030 scratch all events total (225 average) in 2005 NCABA Championship Tournament. Placed fifth in scratch singles with 747 and fourth in handicap singles.

✓ Won 2005 NCABA/WDCAWBA 600-700 Scratch Doubles Tournament (with Mark Glover) at Alexandria.



I did the best I could; it just happened to work out my way.

### You didn't hear anybody *really* say that, did you?

There were a few people I know who said, "I can't believe you did it." They weren't saying it in a *mean* way....

### But in a way as if it were an amazing comeback for you and all you've overcome?

Right, right. But I'm sure there were a few people there who were shocked.

### Do you believe you are perceived differently now by some people because of your Queens victory?

Probably a few. A few are probably surprised and maybe think I can be in contention.

But the people I do bowl with and the people I named before, no. They know how I am. We're friends. We hang out. We bowl so many tournaments together, and they know how I push, how I strive to do better, so they don't feel any different.

I tell Dawn [Fay] now all the time, "You better watch out; this lefty's gonna be able to kick your butt. You know I've got it easier over there." She's like, "Bring it on! Bring it on!"

Tiff and Terri, they're sweethearts who have always supported me. They'll say, "I guess we gotta reckon with you now, don't we?"

Since then, and being that I had such a good year last year, there are guys now that would like to bowl with me—have asked me to bowl tournaments and things. So I have a perception now that people do feel that, *Yeah, she can bowl.*

So there is a little difference—probably a lot of difference—but not with the people I've always bowled with.

### How would you compare your inner drive today with what you had in your earlier days?

It's there. It's very strong, but I just keep it inside more. I'm more *ladylike*. I guess that comes with age—maybe!

I want to achieve a lot and do better, but being that I'm older and have responsibilities, I try to devote a lot of time to it, but I can't make it my number one. When you don't have responsibilities, you can devote something to one thing. Now I have a lot of pets—three ferrets, three cats, a dog, and a whole bunch of fish. They're my kids.

But I have that drive, I have that push, and when I get out on the lanes, I'm gonna do the best I can. It doesn't always work out the way you expect it, but I always give it my all. I'm not a quitter, never have been. Like I said, I do expect to have more achievements in time. I'm not just going to walk away; I'm gonna keep doing it.

So I do have a lot of drive, but being the age I am, having the responsibilities, there is a little difference. But to where I am in life, there is probably not any more drive anybody would have to want to do better, to want to achieve. ●