



## Don Johnson: Gone but definitely not forgotten

Don Johnson not long ago was named as one the 20th Century's Top 20 bowlers. Following his sudden death on May 3, writers from all over the country printed glorious stories concerning his 26 PBA titles. Who knows how many more he could have accumulated had he not sustained a serious wrist injury in his prime that shattered his career.

No one can ever forget the prize-winning picture of Don laying face down after his incredible Firestone Tournament of Championship game of 299 on April 4, 1970—a photo memorialized in the Bowling Hall of Fame and Museum in St. Louis.

Many stories have been written regarding his warm personality and his reluctance to attend the PBA bowling school later in his career. His refusal to attend the PBA school was indicative of his strong will, his ideals, and his principles.



Don Johnson's opposition to the school was not unreasonable, irrational, or illogical. After all, he engaged in PBA tournaments for over 20 years and did so in the most professional manner possible. This was attested by his selection as 1977 Steve Nagy Award recipient, an honor bestowed on PBA players recognized for the highest level of sportsmanship.

Don was the ultimate professional—calm, courteous, and ever-complimentary towards his opponents. He never uttered profanities, never raised his voice above a whisper on splits or bad breaks, never kicked a ball return, and never conducted himself in any manner detrimental to the sport.

Here was his reaction to the new rule: "After over 20 years of participation and 26 titles, why should I have to go to school to learn how to act like a pro?" This seems like a reasonable stance to me. However, this PBA rule transformed Johnson from a har-

monious, peerless performer into a dissident nonconformist.

Don Johnson was truly a man of principle. He was not rebellious. He was not an agitator, rabble-rouser, or troublemaker. Nonetheless, he was staunch and unyielding in his stand towards the PBA rule.

Was Johnson alone in his convictions? Absolutely not. Earl Anthony, generally regarded as the greatest bowler ever, was similarly opposed to the policy and, like Johnson, finally succumbed to the inane rule.

Don Johnson was more than a friend to me. He was like a son. Like myself, he was a lifelong Columbia staff member. We had a special bond between us. He called me "Godfather," an endearing term that had no connotation to the mob. Addressing me as Godfather was an expression of respect and love that spanned years of unity and compatibility.

Don was an excellent bowling instructor. He was a fixture at Arizona Charlie's Bowling Center. Don may have been the first instructor to use high-tech equipment, complete with slow motion and stop action tapings. He recorded every PBA stop and was able to describe every bowler's strengths and flaws.

In addition, he was able to determine the amount of revolutions every bowler applied to the ball. He studied arm swings and hand actions and imparted this knowledge to all his students. He attracted bowlers from all over the world and produced three outstanding instructional tapes. His was a labor of love.

Following the closing of Arizona Charlie's, Don abandoned his instructional courses and, despite his weakened wrist and with encouragement from his wife Carolyn, he took a shot at the PBA Senior Tour.

Like many of his contemporaries, Johnson encountered difficulty in attempting to master reactive urethane equipment. This was principally due to his weakened wrist that inhibited his ability to generate sufficient speed for controlling the explosive action of the modern missiles.

This unfortunate streak of bad luck continued when his wife lost a hard-fought battle with cancer—a personal blow that probably discouraged any further affiliation with the game of bowling. Following the death of his beloved wife, Don practically dissociated himself from society and became what he described to me as a "couch potato." Television, his children, and his grandchildren were all he lived for. He refused to attend tournaments, except on occasions when he yearned to renew acquaintances with old buddies like Roy Buckley, Sam Flanagan, George Pappas, Dave Davis, Dave Soutar, and a few others.

Indeed, Johnson recently received reams of publicity from bowling writers throughout the country. However, the one area they have never reported was his incredible record in clutch situations.

I recall an incident at a tournament in Merritt Island, Florida. During this era, PBA Public Relations Director Kevin Shippy selected two PBA stars to conduct a question-and-answer session to fill a gap in the schedule while scores and starting lanes were determined for the 24-man finals prior to the position round. Dave Davis and Johnny Petraglia, two of the brightest stars at that time, were asked the proverbial question, *Who was the greatest bowler you ever played against?* Davis ran off a few names ... Earl Anthony, Don Carter, Dick Weber, Mark Roth, and, pausing suddenly, he said, "The greatest bowler I have ever seen in clutch situations, by far, is Don Johnson." Petraglia was in total agreement.

Johnson thrived on pressure situations. As a matter of fact, he actually pulled for opponents in the 10th frame, particularly when it would force him to strike out for the victory. Don had ice water in his veins. He was the most focused bowler I ever saw. Once he took his stance on the approach, nothing in the world could distract him. He was oblivious to any sounds or movements; he executed flawlessly and seldom failed to take advantage of any possibilities that would end in victory.

If I know Don Johnson, as I believe I do, he can be found up in Heaven Lanes, preaching, teaching, and weaving the same magic he did during his magnificent bowling career.

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*ABC and PBA Hall of Famer John Jowdy is a past president of the Bowling Writers Association of America. Additional tributes to Don Johnson appear on ncaba.org.*