

LARRY O'NEILL

a candid conversation with the association's individual average and series record holder

In his teenage years, Larry O'Neill "hung around" the local bowling center—not to bowl but to play the pin-ball machines for money. He did well at this and was soon challenged to bowl duckpins—a game which he quickly found was not for him. Seeking revenge, he invited his opponent to some tenpins. Needless to say, he not only got his money back but also got quite an appetite for the big-ball game.

He quickly got his average into the 180s and, seeing that the area's best weren't doing much better at the time, decided to give the game serious consideration.

Since then, O'Neill has made quite a name for himself in this area. When he is not on the pro circuit and is able to qualify, he always is around the top of the local rankings (being number one in 1975-76 and 1976-77). In the 76-77 season not only did he roll three—yes, three—games of 299, but he also set the association average record with a 225 for 83 games in the Falls Church Scratch League. Earlier this year in the Virginia

Masters at Shirley Park, he established a new association series record when he rolled a 791 on games of 223, 289 and 279.

A remaining bowling goal of his is to shoot an 800 series. The feeling here is that it would be quite unwise to bet against his attaining it.

BOWL: In terms of sets, what is a "good," "average," and "poor" night for you?

O'NEILL: A good night is probably 630 or better; an average night is about 600 or maybe 612. On bad nights I usually shoot around 560, so I'm sort of a grind-out bowler. When it comes to rankings, that's how I beat out a lot of people—because my bad nights aren't as bad as their's as a rule. But their good nights are better than mine!

BOWL: Does a 700 series still have any special significance for you?

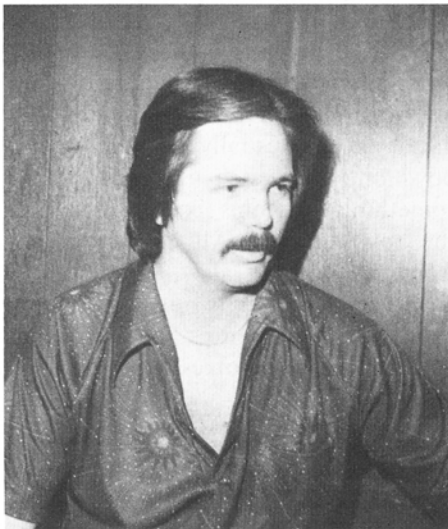
O'NEILL: Somewhat. It's always nice to shoot "seven"; you really feel good for a few days. It helps your confidence quite a bit.

BOWL: How were you able to average 225 in that one league?

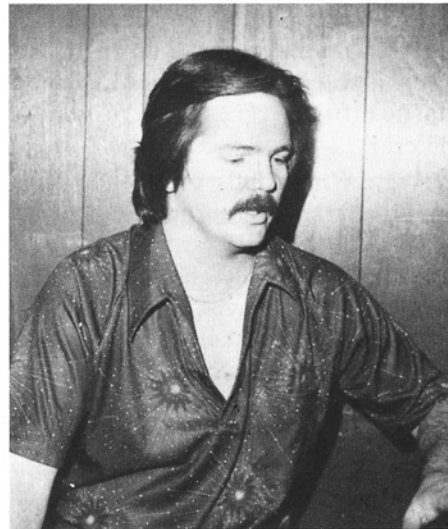
O'NEILL: There were a couple of things, really. I was really grooved. The lanes were the same every week. They weren't blocked, except for maybe three nights that I would consider them blocked. I stood at the same place all year long until the end of the season when they got a little bit different—and I probably got a little tight, too, because I was averaging 230 at one time and there were six or seven weeks to go. I'd say to myself, "230!" When you come in thinking that you have to shoot 690 to hold your average, it starts working on you mentally a little bit! And I was thinking a lot about it!

BOWL: When you start a game with a long string of strikes, what are you thinking about between shots?

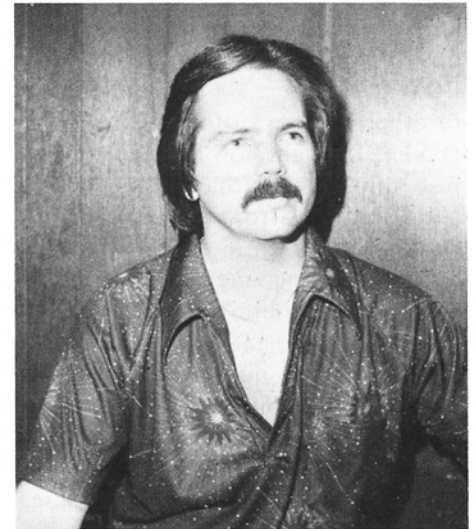
O'NEILL: Actually I think about everything *but* bowling. I'm really not doing it on purpose, but I get extremely relaxed when I get on a string. Most people get tense and tight, but the more strikes I get, the more relaxed I get, which is kind of strange.



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BOWL: What type of information did you learn while on tour?

O'NEILL: I think the greatest thing I got from the tour was confidence—just out there bowling with all of them. I didn't do that well, but I got my share of the money and it just gave me a lot of confidence. When I came back here was the year that I averaged 225, and I was just bowling with super confidence.

BOWL: Did you have any goals while on tour?

O'NEILL: I really expected to do okay. I didn't expect to go out there and knock 'em dead, but I'd thought I'd learn a lot. You never really know 'till you're out there how tough it is. It's pretty tough out there—those guys are good bowlers!

BOWL: Are you a frustrated bowler in the sense that you are a local pro but not a national touring pro?

O'NEILL: It bothers me slightly. As I said before, the lane conditions here really hold back people from knowing how good they are.

BOWL: But if the pros have "good" lane conditions, wouldn't it be that a top local bowler might be able to do well on the tour?

O'NEILL: Yes, but basically the tour has a lot of oil on the lanes and you have to roll the ball a little more and turn the ball a little more. If you do that in this area in most houses the ball hooks off the lane. You can't really learn the game you need for the tour in this area.

Basically, people in this area learn how to muscle the ball because the lanes hook so bad and it's not conducive to bowling on the tour.

BOWL: How do you compare yourself to other bowlers in this area?

O'NEILL: Right now I consider myself just a little better than most of them, and I think it's from the experience on the tour and mental desire. I have extremely strong mental desire. It's something that (Jim) Robinette used to have years ago, and I think he's lost a little bit of that now. He's sort of lost interest a little bit. But it's really hard to bowl good year after year, especially bowling on some of the lane conditions that we have to bowl on in this area. It's more of a grind-out. You learn to really be tough mentally and no matter what happens just keep on trying to do your best. Right now I think I just have

more desire to bowl well than anybody else in this area. There's a lot of people who throw the ball better than I do, I know.

BOWL: What is the strongest aspect of your game?

O'NEILL: It would have to be mental concentration. If anything, I think my physical game is a little weak—I think I could throw a much stronger ball. Where I can defeat most people in this area is my mental concentration and my desire.

BOWL: What do you feel is the main factor that keeps many bowlers in the 180-185 range year after year with little improvement?

O'NEILL: Usually a big deal of it is mental desire. A lot of people say, "I've been 180 all of these years and have desire," but I really doubt if they do because it's only a matter of one strike a game. And also I think the lanes in this area hold back a lot of people. The lane conditions in this area are generally pretty poor.



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BOWL: What is your toughest spare leave?

O'NEILL: Well, it's funny—the toughest one I have is the 6-10. It's really strange, but I can manage to chop that, I'd say, at least one-third of the time—no matter how I shoot it. I'll just pick up the ball, run up there and throw it and it will slide back and chop it! The 6-10 for some reason just drives me crazy!

BOWL: What kinds of bowling balls should the avid tournament bowler have in his arsenal?

O'NEILL: Basically, he should have two soft balls—maybe soft plastic like a Yellow Dot and soft rubber like an LT-48, and one hard ball—either plastic or rubber, depending on which feels more comfortable. You can pretty much adjust to any condition with those three balls.

BOWL: You have said in the past that great lane conditions in this area would not automatically create the averages like those in the West. Explain.

O'NEILL: Even if all of a sudden we had "West coast" lanes here where they're pretty easy, the bowlers just aren't used to stringing strikes in this area. It would take them, I would think, a full year of bowling on good conditions where they can get seven or eight in-a-row. Now they get three or four and they get kind of nervous because it doesn't happen that often. Out West it happens all the time, so they don't get bothered until they get maybe nine or ten in-a-row.

You have to become accustomed to shooting good scores, which was something that I wasn't accustomed to when I went out on the tour.

BOWL: Do you have any future goals you wish to accomplish?

O'NEILL: Well, Chuck Gannon and I have the pro shop (The Pocket Pro Shop, inside Seminary Lanes in Alexandria) and I want to make that a big success. Business is really picking up, and I think it's because we keep up to date on the kinds of balls that are working now, the new techniques in lane conditioning—any new devices that come up—like the popular finger inserts.

We have a system of measuring people: we look at their hands, the bend of their fingers . . . I think we do a better job than all of the other pro shops. A lot of the other ones go by the book that was used thirty years ago, and I think a lot of changes have been made and that there are a lot of new things to look for.

BOWL: How important is bowling in your life?

O'NEILL: Bowling is most of my life, especially now that I'm in the pro shop business. I'm in the bowling alley all day long, and usually I either go and bowl or I go watch my girl bowl or something—it seems like I'm always in the bowling alley. All my friends are from the bowling alley, just about. I have very few friends outside of bowling. All my experiences are in bowling. My whole life revolves around bowling.

BOWL: Is there anything that you wish to discuss at this time?

O'NEILL: Well, on a derogatory note, I would like to address the Hall of Fame in this area. In most bowling areas, the Hall of Fame is both for bowlers and for service. And I think in

most areas it is at least fifty-fifty as far as who's in the Hall of Fame. In this area I think it's like ninety-five percent service people. They ought to recognize more of the bowlers in this area. It perturbs me that there are so few bowlers in there. Robinette, for one, deserved to be in there long before he was. I guess you can call this one of my pet peeves.

BOWL: Finally, if there were a "Larry O'Neill's Bowling Center," how would your house differ from many of those found in this area?

O'NEILL: I would be more concerned about the higher average bowlers: lane conditions, the cleanliness of the house, what they want in leagues . . . I know what kind of lane conditions I'd have.

BOWL: Can you be specific in this regard?

O'NEILL: What would generally be done is that the oil would be put even, gutter-to-gutter, which is the ABC rule. You can stay within the ABC rule and put up a very playable shot.

After going 15 to 20 feet the first time with the "even" oil, then go back and put on another coat of oil with more in the center where most of the play is, then gradually taper the oil down to the outside of the lane and carry this oil down to about 30 to 35 feet.



This has to be done every day at the same time.

That's the shot that most of the people in the high-scoring areas have, although a lot of them do get an actual "block" where the outside boards are bone dry and the ball bounces off them and comes back into the oil and stops where there's a heavy concentration of oil in the middle.

Humidity is a problem in this area. I think I'd have dehumidifiers in my house.

Also, the lanes would be clean—completely clean and stripped of oil about once a week, which I think not many houses are doing in this area.


I think in half of the houses in this area the porter does the lanes. They tell him how to push the "on" button on the machine and to set it on the gutters. If there's no oil in it, he doesn't know—he *doesn't even care!* When he drags them, he goes down one lane and up the other—which is improper. That's why you find so many houses with pairs of lanes that are different.

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I think—while we're on the subject of lane conditions—the problem with this area is that it has been a seller's market for years. All they had to do was open the doors and people would flock in and they'd be full, so they didn't have to do anything—and they didn't. They could hire a *monkey* if it could collect the money, and the people would come in and bowl anyway.

Now, I think the economic situation—the way it is—they're going to have to start doing things to get the

bowlers to come in. I notice this year, especially, a lot of houses are hurting for leagues and it's the first time I've noticed a big decline like this. They're going to have to do something for the bowlers—good lane conditions being one part of it.

For years they've had it their way, and now the bowler is going to start having it his way. So I think we're going to find lane conditions getting a lot better in this area and I feel we've already seen that this year a little bit.