

# RICHARD WOLFE

Richard Wolfe first bowled at "about the age of 8 to 10" at McLean Bowling Center like a lot of youngsters—sneaking in a few shots after his parents' Thursday night league and before the lanes were turned off. Though sports-oriented, he didn't get involved in bowling again until age 13 when he joined his first Saturday-morning league at Bowl America Falls Church.

A "terrible" bowler at first, he became addicted to the game, and his 140 average soon jumped to 170 and then—primarily as a result of 100 to 125 games of practice each week at Seminary Lanes—to 200 at age 15. By this time, not only had Wolfe won several junior scratch tournaments, he already had decided that the PBA Tour was his future.

Joining the PBA in 1986, the Marshall High School graduate made the match-play finals in his first regional tournament in Greenville, S.C. Wolfe struggled, however, during his first attempts at national tour competition in the fall of 1987—not even surviving the rabbit squads—and he even considered quitting when, after talking to a trusted older friend in the area, Wolfe realized that he now was competing in a much different environment and that, despite his continued success in local events, he wasn't much of a bowler.

After a brief hiatus, he began to study videotapes of bowlers, picking out flaws in his own game and looking for positives in others'. His efforts soon paid off with his first PBA regional victory in LaGrange, Ga.

He bowled approximately 10 to 15 national events in each of the next two years, showing some improvement and capturing the attention of many on the pro circuit in 1989 when he finished sixth three times in five weeks.

By 1990, Wolfe felt his game was headed in the right direction, and he was ready to give the national tour full-time attention. Others thought he was ready, too: In *Bowlers Digest*, 1980s Bowler of the Decade Mike Aulby chose Wolfe when asked to predict the one left-hander who would win a million dollars in the 1990s.

Despite capturing another regional title and making six national television appearances, Wolfe, whom noted instructor/writer John Jowdy recently said "possesses the greatest physical game I have ever seen by any left-handed bowler, and this does not exclude Dave Davis, whom I considered had the best game from the left side that I had ever critiqued," has yet to crack the winner's circle on the national tour. His best finish took place last month in Indianapolis, where he placed second to his close friend, Jason Couch.

Two days before leaving for Indianapolis,

Wolfe sat down with BOWL Magazine editor Bob Cosgrove at Bowl America Falls Church and talked about life as a touring pro, how he's dealt with the high expectations thrust upon him, and several other topics in the first of a two-part interview.

**Is being a touring pro everything you thought it would be?**

At this point, no.

**What did you envision life would be like in 1995 five years ago?**

I would have definitely seen myself financially much more successful, not necessarily having those 10 or 20 titles but having a couple of titles under my belt. Being in a different stage of my life. I would have never thought in 1990, *Wow, I'll be 28 and up on the roof and grinding away to round up sponsors for the tour.* I would have never imagined that.

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**Talk about your job as a roofer.**

I've been working for Jack Rowles and Rowles Roofing for the last month or so. It's actually worked out pretty good. I didn't know how it was going to work at first because all I've heard about the roofing work was how brutal it was. And it's tough work.

But Jack has been really understanding, and he's at a point where he's been doing this for 30-some-odd years and he wants somebody to kinda talk to every once in a while—he's tired of doing it by himself. I could use the work while I'm at home, and the hours are pretty good for me—we're in and out most of the time by one or two in the afternoon.

**Do you ever find yourself wondering what a touring professional bowler is doing up on a roof? Is there any frustration?**

Yes, there is. I told Jack a couple of times, "I wonder what the other guys are doing about right now. You know, the guy who won last week and made about 80 grand—he's sitting at home or he's playing golf. That's what he's doing!"

The other side makes me think: *Well, this is the situation that I've created. I don't have to do this. But why not? I need some income, and*

*this offers me some pretty good hours. The pay is not too bad, and actually I enjoy it a little bit.*

That's what seems strange, but it gets me out of an environment where, as a general rule, I don't have to deal with bowlers. I can go out there and nobody knows who I am—they don't care. We're on the roof and we're working.

But yes, there's definitely some frustration that goes along with the line. I've thought that many times near the end of the day when I am pretty tired and it's 100-and-whatever degrees out for however many number of days it was, and I'm going, *This is terrible!*

It makes me appreciate bowling.

**What is your current sponsor situation?**

Right now, I've been selling shares. They range from anywhere to \$500 to \$1,000 a piece. I've gone around and been very fortunate with friends, a few people close to the family, and a few people I've never even met before. Other people have gotten me sponsors. It's worked out pretty well. I've got anywhere from eight to 12 people.

**Does this arrangement put additional pressure on you if you go several weeks without cashing?**

It is and it isn't. I enjoy the fact that it makes me work harder than it has in the past. In the past, I had Sports Plus [Sports Plus/Carmen Don Pro Shop in Alexandria as a sponsor], and sometimes when things are taken for granted and you think some things will never end, then you realize that all things *will* end, and that was one of 'em.

On both sides, it was fortunate, and they were absolutely professional, and I owe them a great deal of gratitude for helping me out. It was a situation where I wasn't doing well, and we agreed—it was a mutual agreement—that it would be best if we split or go our separate ways.

It just got to the point where I had gotten so comfortable with the situation. And then, once I had to go out and search for other money, I realized it's not that easy.

But I feel better now the way it's worked out. It makes me feel good to know that at least there are some people who'll give me an opportunity to go bowl. I take that personally. I want to make them some money, and I want to do well for myself.

**Would you prefer not to know who your sponsors are to alleviate some of the pressure?**

No, because if I know it's not my money, it's pressure—no matter whose it is, I know it's not mine.

Then you might ask how would it be different if you sponsored yourself. I don't know since I've never sponsored myself, but I do know that it is a lot different when people who you don't know and have no background with

are taking the chance on you doing something. Most of the time, it's not an investment to turn over a big cash flow because they see the numbers and they know that, *Wow, even if he bowls well, it's not like I'm going to be able to retire off of this check.*

So a lot of them are involved because they enjoy bowling and they want to be involved with a potential—*potential*—successful bowler. That gives me an opportunity to go try for those goals.

**When John Jowdy says that you have more physical talent than either Earl Anthony or Mike Aulby, how does that make you feel?**

I don't know what that means. I don't know how he interprets that or why he says this. Once again, it's a compliment on paper where there are no comparisons. So I don't know how to take it other than to say, "Thank you."

Obviously, it's an honor that *anybody* would think this way, but John Jowdy has been around the best bowlers in the world for quite a long time. For him to make that observation or opinion, it's nice—it's a nice gesture. But that's all it is.

**How much has Jowdy helped you with your game?**

He was one of the first people who helped me with my game, which was in 1987 when I had bowled four fall stops. I bowled so horrible, and I was ready to ... that was it. He was the first person who basically told me that I was really bad. I mean, he says, "You're game is *not good!*"

You know how he can be very honest, and I was like, *Wow, no one's ever told me that before!* He really laid it on the line.

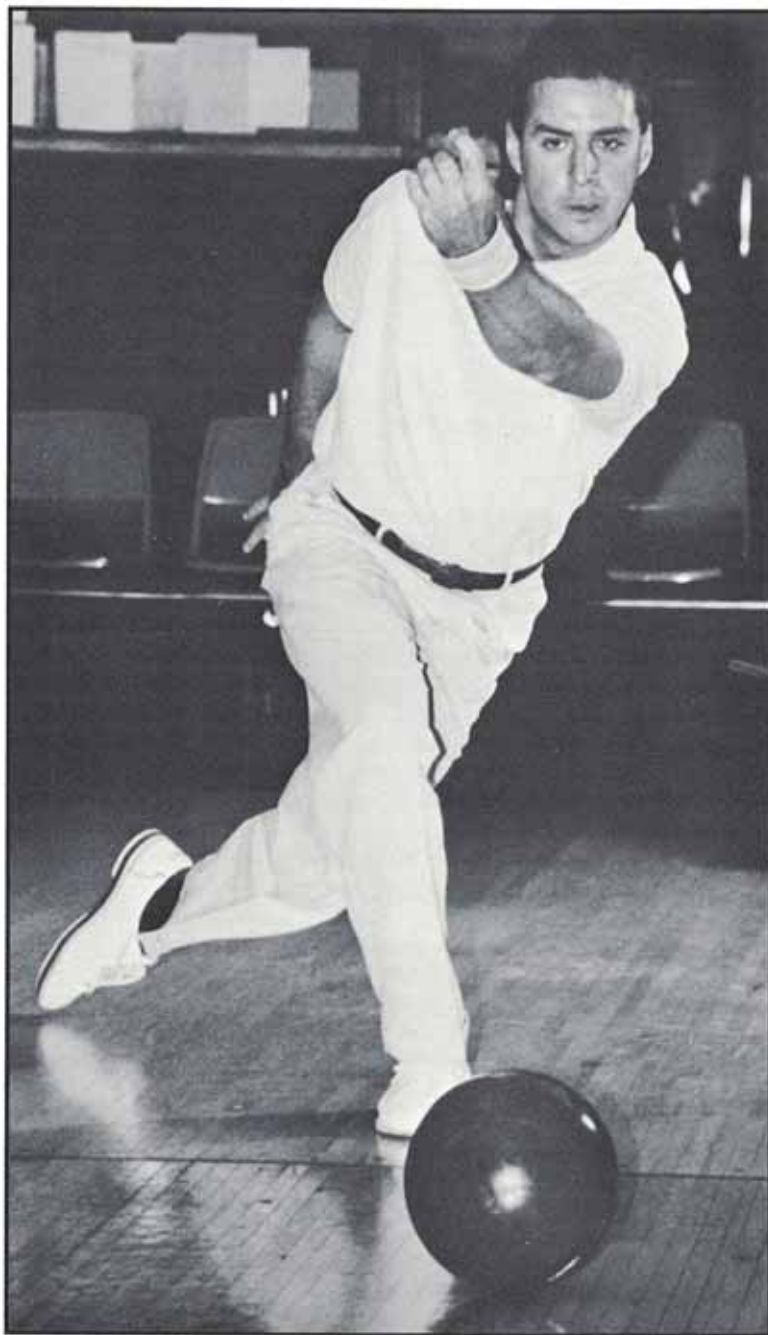
Periodically, he's helped me over the past three or four years.

**When Jowdy told you that your game was not good, did he add something like, "But I see that it can be good."?**

No. There was nothing [positive] that he could find because everything that I guess he likes about my game now, he hated—the controlled swing, no rhythm in the feet, so many variables he didn't like. So he saw nothing positive at all when he had talked to me the first time about it.

**Who was responsible for the change?**

There's no one particular person I worked with; there were so many people involved with it. A lot of it was just myself searching for different opinions and different views and not only their views, but why. And why this would work and wouldn't work. And then I



videotaped myself and videotaped just other bowlers in general. So there were so many people involved in the viewing of the tapes—their opinion and whether I agreed or disagreed. We'd go back and forth. But it's slowly gotten a little better over time.

**Do you get tired hearing about the potential of Richard Wolfe?**

It's not necessarily the article that Jowdy wrote [in *BOWL Magazine*, October 1995], but there have been articles previously that, if

I'm not mistaken, mentioned my potential and a couple of other items. I have to take that for what it's worth—it says I have potential, and that's basically the end of it. I'd rather they write something like that about me than writing that I have no ability, no talent, and that I should go home.

However, I almost enjoy the fact that there are people who think that way. They think that I'll never do it. I almost enjoy that more than I do the praises because I've heard a lot of the praises. I have no problem with people telling me their opinion—good and/or bad. I respect them more for giving me an opinion rather than to say something behind my back.

So I would have to say that I look at those articles as sort of an compliment, and *thank you*, but I understand now that it's not going to make me bowl better or be more successful. It's up to me.

**Is Richard Wolfe an enigma?**

Yes, I am, I guess, because the article was pretty much the truth. I've wondered myself what's wrong, but a lot of times, you can wonder about yourself for so long and you create a problem by searching and searching. You're working on this physical game and trying to make it so stellar and *this* and do *that* and *this*.

And a lot of times it's just the fact that there's a way to win and there's a way to lose, and it's up to you to find out how to win. A lot of times it's easier to lose; it's much easier to lose. And that sounds stupid.

A lot of times when you've lost for so long, it's hard to turn it around into winning. That's what I'm up against at this point.

**You've heard the question, *When is Richard Wolfe going to win?* Would it be a more appropriate question—although not as kind a question—to ask, *When is Richard Wolfe going to be a more consistent casher?* or *When is Richard Wolfe going to be a more consistent match-play finalist?***

Yes. That's my impression when I hear, *When are you going to win?* If I was at a point where I was making shows on a regular basis and making a lot of finals and cashing regularly, I would say, "When *am* I gonna win?"

However, I have to look at this at a totally different point of view. I want to make every

show. However, I've got to go out with the attitude that I have to take myself at my own pace. Go out there to attack to win, but understand that you're not going to win every tournament.

The key is to be on a more successful level every week. And then, when an opportunity arises, take full advantage of the opportunity to win the tournament.

Just looking at winning the tournament from Game 1, I don't think that's how the successful bowlers win. I think they approach the old cliché of "one shot at a time" and/or "one game" or take the situation and deal with this and everything else will take care of itself.

Winning will happen—over bowling well and cashing and making finals and making shows. If you give yourself enough opportunities, and you get that close, you're eventually going to crack through there and win.

If I went out there just to go, *I'm going to win this tournament*, and if I went out and bowled poorly the first game, I think I'm done. I might as well pack up.

**I know you've heard how many people have said, "If he could only win once."—meaning that great success likely would follow. Is that phrase a torturing tease for you whenever the idea of leaving the tour pops up?**

It would be interesting to see what does happen after I won that first title—how I could be affected by it. But even after I win that first title, if I don't win again in the next few weeks, people are going to think that I'm a flash in the pan.

Some people think that if I win the first one, I'm going to win the next 10 tournaments. I laugh: That's not the way it works. I hope it does.

The key to my success is not winning one tournament.

**Did Danny Wiseman's early success have you wondering, *Why not me?***

Danny and I roomed together in the beginning of 1990—the first time we both were full-time touring players. Danny had worked hard and bowled well locally, and he was very fortunate to pick up Sports Plus as a sponsor. I was very happy for Danny—he deserved it. We were roommates and very good friends.

There have been other people who have won after him that I've obviously questioned—*Why them and not me?*—but I realized that was not very productive thinking, either. It was kind of an easy way out.

**Titles and money aside, what is the difference between you and Mike Aulby and Parker Bohn III?**

Well, both of them are very ... well, you said ignore the titles and money, but I think that ... well, the first .... As you can tell by the way I'm answering, I honestly don't know. The first simple answer to that is that I don't know. The

other side of it is that there are quite a few things that are different between us.

They came out and—my bowling knowledge, unlike the Colley boys [1993 NCABA scratch all events champion, Tim, and PBA southern regional casher and one-time *BOWL Magazine* contributor, Jim] isn't that good—Aulby was [1979] PBA Rookie of the Year, and I believe he won [the PBA National Championship] that first year. Parker also won early in his career. That helps a lot.

The confidence factor that you get by going out there and not only thinking you can do it, but doing it, is a whole other subject. As you go on, and if it doesn't work and you're not winning and not being as successful as you thought or others thought, there's a lot of pressure that you apply to yourself.

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As in bowling and a lot of other sports and games, it really does come down to a few crucial shots in any situation. If you're not ready to perform in those situations, and when you make good shots and you don't get there, and when you make a poor shot and don't get there, the bottom line is that you still haven't gotten there. Over a period of time, that begins to weigh on you. A lot has to do with the mental attitude that you have. You have to keep trying to overcome all those negatives.

**Was there added pressure when Aulby was quoted in a national magazine that the one left-hander who would win a million dollars in the 1990s would be you?**

At the time, it's a compliment, and it makes you feel good. As I sit back and wonder what I could have done differently or how I handled this situation, I remember the Jowdys and the Aulbys, just in general references—*You're going to do it. You're going to do it.* I really thought that I would, but I wasn't pursuing it the way I should have pursued it.

*Yeah, yeah—you're right, you're right. Like it's just going to happen. You just sit there, and it's ... just ... going ... to ... happen.*

That's so idiotic thinking, but that's the way I was looking at it: *They're right.*

But five years later, I realize it's not that way.

So those [predictions] are nice. It makes me feel good to know that they respect my game enough to say these things. But also understand that it's not going to help me bowl better. It's not going to put up the titles and the

money that I'm looking for—that's not the way it's going to work.

**Is money what drives you out on tour?**

I would have to say that the money drives me now for the simple fact that I'm becoming in debt because of my bowling habit. In all honesty, if it were all about money, I would have quit at this point three or four years ago. So, no.

At times, it becomes the overwhelming factor when you're looking at what it costs to bowl. You have to round up sponsors, and then you look at what you can possibly make by creating the last check. By getting that last check, what can you offer these people in return? And that's a hard sell. So in that respect, yes, it is about the money.

People have asked, "What's it going to be like after that first [win]?" I don't know. But that money is the least thing in my mind. The trophy is not in my mind. At this point, money has nothing to do with me personally. This is a personal pursuit of a goal I have set that I have put a lot of years into and a lot of other people have helped me.

If somebody wanted to bowl me for a buck, and it was somebody who I thought really thought could beat me, and he wanted to show people he could beat me, I would try to beat him whether it was for a dollar or \$50,000 because it's personal, meaning it's on the lanes, not a dislike—that has nothing to do with it.

**You talked about the pursuit of a goal. Is that goal winning or being a success on the tour?**

Winning one time will not make my goal. My goal is set much higher than that. Obviously, the first win will be the most memorable—it would be great—and I'd be very disappointed if it didn't happen.

My goal is much more than that. I want to be in that PBA Hall of Fame, and I want to have 10-plus titles. If I didn't think I could do that, I wouldn't go bowl.

**What's been your best moment on tour?**

Hasn't happened yet. There's been no real joyous occasion—no, nothing at all.

**What about the worst moment—a downer?**

I guess the last real downer was missing the show in Indianapolis two years ago. I had never been lower than fifth the whole tournament. I bowled Parker Bohn the last game, and he bowled very well—he shot in the mid-240s, I believe. I shot 190, and I actually thought I had made it, but Joe Salvemini had shot 280. He was in tenth, and he went around me to make the show.

That was a crusher because I hadn't made a show in quite a while. I had bowled well and then the last game, I didn't make the right

decisions; I grinded away, and it just didn't work out. That was very disappointing.

And then I ended up making the show the following week, but I was in the lead by 300 pins at one point. I had only bowled on one end of the bowling center, like 1 through 40, and I had bowled all my games on 1 through 20 that morning and took a 300-pin lead. And [the press] was asking me what I thought. Actually, I had bowled one game on the higher end of the house, and I shot 140.

When I came back that night, *all* my games were on the high end of the house, and I just panicked right from the start. If we would have had another game to go, I wouldn't have made that show, either.

But that was disappointing in itself because I was in the lead, this was the Brunswick World Open, a very prestigious tournament, I was real excited, and I just took the gas there. It was horrible. And then I end up losing the first match to [Dave] Husted, who was the eventual winner.

**[NCABA Hall of Famer] Larry O'Neill once said that when he bowled at a Fair Lanes Open in Baltimore, he was stunned when he happened to look up and noticed he was leading the tournament. Did you have the same experience?**

The bowling was the easiest part of it, as far as leading. It was afterwards when I had to deal with people wanting to talk with me about what I was going to do and how was I doing, where I was from, and just in general, asking me a lot of questions. It was nice, but it was different.

So not only did I have to bowl and do all the other things I have to take care of, I was having to run back and forth to the press room, so they reminded me of it. Here I'm not thinking about it, but they're reminding me so much that now I'm thinking, *Wow, I am leading. I'm leading by 340!*

Then the next thing you know, at the end of the tournament, [the press] didn't want to speak to me—as usual.

So no, I don't think it's hard to lead, it's just a different experience. I had made a few shows before that, but I had never led. I was always sneaking around, but I took that early lead, I was out in front, and, you know: "We haven't heard much about you." [The press] didn't know who I was, where I was from—they knew nothing.

So that's what becomes more difficult: It's a different experience, and you're not used to a lot of the things that were going on.

**Was that a slap in the face when after one round everybody in the media wants a part of you, and then after the next round you're**

**alone and available in a corner and nobody's paying any attention?**

I guess the first time it happens, you think it's going to happen all the time, as far as their wanting to talk to you. But no, I realize that's the way it is.

If Mike Aulby and I are sitting together and we're tied for the lead, they're probably going to want to talk to him. He's got mid-20 titles,



and I have none, and that's just the way it is. That's part of being out there, and hopefully one day, I'll be sitting next to some younger guy who has a lot of potential and I'll go, "Have a seat and relax, I'll be back."

**What are you most proud of about your game?**

I feel I have the ability to bowl on quite a few different conditions and bowl well on them. Unfortunately, in today's environment

you need to be either very, very good on those varied conditions or you need to be dominant on one condition.

As a matter of fact, the last time I bowled an under [below a 200 average] tournament was the beginning of 1994, so I feel I'm much steadier than I was. I'm able to keep my composure and figure out the lane much faster.

But in all that changing and doing the different variables of the shot, repetitiveness on a particular condition isn't there like it was. And then you lose your dominance, and when you lose that, you lost what got you on tour. And that has a lot to do with the lack of winning.

**What do you need to work on the most?**

Unfortunately, I've been fiddling with my physical game for such a long time. I keep picking up so many things that I view as important, which probably aren't nearly as important as the mental state that I've gotten myself into over the past—I'd say since the [television] show in the fall of 1993.

At this point in time, I'm trying to unscramble my brains, basically, and become much more positive. That's why I've been talking with [tour consultant] Billy Hall. I've realized that a lot of times the reason he and I seem to agree on a great deal is because I've noticed I've tried to be open-minded and listen to people's suggestions or their ideas.

We had a long talk the other day, and I'm sure this happens to many people that a lot of times you're looking around and you're searching for something that's wrong—and there really isn't anything wrong. But you're spending so much time searching for it, and *you've* got the answers, *you* know what's right or wrong, and it's up to *you* to apply it.

That's basically the end of that story.

**What is your thought process when you need that first strike in the tenth frame?**

I've always fought with my emotions. I used to get so keyed up that I was ready to throw the ball through the back of the unit. And that's basically what has happened in the past. It seems that I've been light every single time I need a hit, so I'm not yanking it, but I'm just missing it from getting a little excited.

I can remember on my first show in 1990 bowling against [Scott] Devers. I remember him throwing the first one, and then he threw a crossover on the second hit, and I remember telling myself, *It doesn't matter. I'm going to win this match. I know I'm going to win this match, and this is the way I want to win it.*

And then, when I didn't get it [leaving the 3-5 pins], I was, like, shocked: *What a minute, this is not the way it's supposed to be!*

I guess there are a bunch of different ways to approach situations like that. I have to learn how to teach myself to handle every shot basically like it is the same. Some people can get pumped up for a particular shot; I get so pumped up that it causes me trouble. I have got to learn to control that emotion from Game 1 all the way through.

The only thing that I feel good about, even though unfortunately there's been a couple of times I haven't struck, is that I'm not afraid to throw that shot. I still want to win my first tournament, and I want to strike out to win that tournament. That's still my dream, and that's how I think about that happening. Of course, I want to win any way I can, and I'm gonna take a win any way I can straggle through.

**How have the resin balls affected your game?**

Unfortunately, they have done my game no good. They're not helping me. If anything, they've taken away my advantage.

**Which was?**

The ability to create back-end and/or to get the ball to come back when I did miss left.

I don't think the bowling balls are the biggest problem; there's also the lane conditions themselves. The bowling balls can be eliminated by the push of a button.

In the past, the area centers had a heavier concentration of oil in the middle, but it was more blended going to the gutter. So therefore, you could get a great amount of rotation on the ball, but if you missed to the outside of your target, if you rolled it heavily, you would possibly create some friction to carry a lighter hit. And then if you actually got it in slightly, it would actually hold pocket because of the oil holding it back.

Now it's basically the opposite. If you miss the target to the outside, for certain speeds and rolls, the ball goes high. And then if you move your eyes inward and miss your target in—now when I'm saying miss targets, I'm talking about by a board each way, possibly—the ball goes light.

I'm constantly fighting the fact that the dry is so dry and the oil line is so heavy that the dropoff is enormous. I'm always fighting that wet/dry or that type of high/light, change of balls, or moving around. That's been my nemesis. It's been not good, and I keep working on it. It's a speed and a roll. I can drill as many bowling balls as I want; the fact of the matter is that I'm not matching up to the condition properly.

Whenever you have a wet and a dry, that is a high-scoring condition—for somebody. No matter how wet or how dry it is, somebody's going to be bowling well.

**Are there bowlers in this area who compete on your level?**

Yes. If they don't compete on my level, it's because they don't compete on the conditions I bowl on. They have the ability to do so.

***I don't think anybody has a real right to criticize me for attempting to pursue my own goals.***

**Who are these individuals?**

The only reason I'm not going to answer that is because it would be unfair to put the pressure on them. I'm willing to take the rag, and I've told a few people that I really respect their game, and I think they would do well. It would be unfair for me to put that type of pressure on them, whether they're going to be ragged on because I said it or just the fact that if I say it, they think they have to go out and prove something, which just adds pressure on to them that is unnecessary.

I know I'm leading you on, but some of them are surprises who most people wouldn't think of, but I think they have tremendous ability, and some of them don't even know it.

**As a touring pro, do you feel you should win every local tournament?**

Absolutely. That's the way I feel. However, that obviously hasn't been working. I bowled a few tournaments recently, and I'd been staying away from some of the local stuff because I was so burnt out from bowling poorly on the tour.

I feel like I should be at a major advantage because I do get to practice a lot and I have the availability of equipment and a few other variables that they don't have access to or as easily. I do believe there are a lot of times where practice and/or the equipment don't even come into play on some of the conditions that are bowled on because of the short formats. Basically, they are four, five, or six games straight, and you cut to match play.

The bowlers in the area have become much

more knowledgeable, and they are better bowlers as a group, so you're not going to come in and just lap the field. They can play, and if they get a certain ball reaction and a certain look, they'll average 240. So that's talent, that's good bowling, no matter what the environment is.

**Is there extra pressure on you in local tournaments because of the expectations of a touring pro?**

There was at first, but I think that over a period of time because I haven't done well, I think I'm not looked at that way as much as I am that, "He's a touring player. He can't bowl out there, and he really stinks back here!"

For every John Jowdy, there are maybe two or three other people who won't say it, or I haven't heard them say it, but they have those feelings, too. I will not argue with these persons, and I won't tell them they're wrong because I have to accept the fact that I haven't been successful on tour, and I may not have done what I wanted to do locally, but I *am* trying.

I've never come back home and said I'm the best bowler out there or in this area. I've never made comments like that. However, they're not going to say that to me without getting a response out of me. If they think they can beat me, I can be found, and I will bowl them, and it will be purely a bowling match—it's nothing personal.

I think I've proven somewhat that I *can* bowl, and I've bowled against the best bowlers in the world and made a few telecasts. So I don't think anybody has a real right to criticize me for attempting to pursue my own goals.

I have told other people in this area that I hope that everybody who wants to go bowl on tour or to go to a higher level of bowling gets their chance. Some, because I think they can do it. Others, so they can realize what it's really like.

**Have you had a truly embarrassing moment on tour?**

The only thing that came close to being embarrassing, and only a couple people realized it, was after I lost my TV match in Indianapolis at the 1991 U.S. Open. All week, I had used the restroom on the low end next to the paddock. After I lost, I walked into the bathroom on the high end and unfortunately, I didn't look up to the "Men" and "Women" signs—they had switched them from the low end of the house. I was in the women's room washing my hands before I realized there were no urinals—but only after some lady informed me that I was in the wrong restroom!

**NEXT ISSUE:** Richard Wolfe talks about the PBA, his fellow pros, his positions on amateurs and women competing in PBA events, Nelson Burton Jr., and much, much more!