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Small Pins Offer Bowlers a Big Challenge

By JACK CAVANAUGH

SCORES of children screamed and squealed as bowling balls crashed into pins on a recent Sunday afternoon at Barnum Recreation Lanes in Stratford. Children outnumber grown-ups by a 3-to-1 margin on weekend afternoons at the bowling center on Barnum Avenue, and that would seem to bode well for the future of the game it features, duckpins.

But the general manager of the Barnum Lanes, Clarence Lavers, conceded that youngsters who come for family outings or birthday parties will not necessarily come back as they grow up.

"Once a lot of the kids get old enough to handle the bigger ball, they switch over to tenpins," Mr. Laver said, referring to the form of the game that most people know simply as bowling. "They watch professionals bowling tenpins on television, and they say, 'Hey, I can make \$40,000 a year doing that when I grow up.'" 'A Much Better Game'

For three decades now, the far more popular game of tenpins has been the bane of duckpin bowling, which uses much smaller balls and pins.

Duckpins have "dropped in popularity, particularly in Fairfield County," said Mr. Lavers. "And that's a shame, because it's a much better game -- far more challenging than tenpins. I'd like to think that duckpins is going to make a big comeback, but that will only happen if we get more television exposure. And I don't see that happening."

In Connecticut 21 bowling establishments still offer duckpins. But most of the alleys are upstate. The game has vanished in lower Fairfield County, where duckpins thrived from the 1930's through the 50's. Eight tenpin alleys remain in Greenwich and Bridgeport, but even that number is down considerably from the 70's and early 80's.

"We haven't had duckpins around here for about 30 years," said the secretary of the Lower Fairfield County Bowlers Association, Nick Romaniello. "But maybe a duckpin house could succeed." The number of duckpin bowlers in the state appears to be growing, and the number of establishments is holding steady. Some of them, like the Barnum Lanes and Sena's Center in Waterbury, have been in operation for more than a half century.

"I started out as a pin boy when my father opened the alleys in 1938," said Norman Sena, the owner of Sena's Center, which has 20 duckpin lanes. "Business is down a little this year, because of the recession. But overall duckpins is holding its own in the Waterbury area."

The game is strongest in the Hartford area and the northeastern part of the state, with lanes in Hartford, Manchester, Windsor Locks, Newington, Bristol, Mansfield, Rockville, Winsted and Waterford. Other communities with duckpins are Cheshire, Danbury, Hamden and West Haven.

Most duckpin bowlers say they are drawn to the game because they find it far more challenging than big pins.

"There's no comparison," said Mr. Lavers, who has been the nation's top-ranked bowler four times since 1982 and was named the best bowler on the duckpin professional circuit three times. "A top duckpin bowler could give a leading big-pin bowler a good go in tenpins, but a big-pin guy couldn't compete with a good duckpin bowler." Hurt by Property Values

Why did duckpins lose ground in Connecticut, particularly Fairfield County?

"First of all, tenpin operators began putting up these beautiful bowling establishments that were family oriented," said Mr. Lavers. "At the same time, a lot of the duckpin alleys had been allowed to deteriorate. Then property values began to soar, especially in Fairfield County, and many duckpin owners sold out to developers. Network television of the pro tour also gave the game tremendous exposure. And people liked the higher scores. Meanwhile, duckpin operators did nothing to market or promote our game."

A duckpin ball is only about 5 inches in diameter, and its maximum weight is 3 pounds, 12 ounces, compared with a tenpin ball, which is approximately 9 inches in diameter and weighs up to 16 pounds. "It's almost impossible for a little kid to bowl a tenpin ball with three or four fingers in the holes of the ball," said Mr. Lavers, noting that duckpin balls have no holes.

Besides the size of the equipment, the major difference between the two games is that a duckpin bowler rolls 3 balls in each of the 10 frames, compared with the 2 balls in tenpins.

"Bigpins is a game of strikes, while duckpins is a game of spares," Mr. Lavers said.

In order to survive, Barnum Lanes and other old bowling establishments in the state have had to refurbish their interiors and expunge their unsavory image as dimly-lighted, smoke-filled places.

Prices for duckpins range from \$1.75 to \$2.50 a game. Some lanes are rented by the hour, usually for \$10 to \$12. Prices are generally lower for the elderly and children younger than 12. Rates are often cheaper during the daytime on weekdays.

"Leagues are the backbone of the bowling business, but nowadays we're also getting a lot more seniors on weekdays," said Jim Gesuelle, who with his wife, Nancy, has owned Farmington Avenue Duckpin in Hartford, near the West Hartford border, since 1989. The 16-lane establishment, which Mr. Gesuelle said was 52 years old, was previously known as the Mark Twain Lanes.

"The place was really rundown," he said, "and after we bought it, we shut it down for three months to completely refurbish the place." Played in 12 States

In the heyday of duckpin bowling in the state, many large companies had their own bowling alleys. Duckpin lanes were also often found in the basements of fraternal and sports clubs, generally with billiard tables nearby. Such alleys, though, are now as much a part of the past as pin boys, who were replaced by automatic pinsetters in the 1950's.

Still, Connecticut remains a stronghold, relatively speaking, of duckpin bowling. Only 12 states still have duckpin lanes, and four of them -- Pennsylvania, Florida, Indiana and Wisconsin -- have only one duckpin establishment each.

Duckpins remain most popular in Maryland, its birthplace. By most accounts the game was invented in Baltimore in 1903 by John McGraw and Wilbert Robinson, who were then playing baseball for the Orioles and owned the Diamond Alleys there.

Five duckpin bowlers from Connecticut are currently ranked in the top 20 by the National Duckpin Bowling Congress. Besides Mr. Laver, who is ranked second, they are Mike Trepanier of North Haven, Brian Kulas of Windsor Locks, George Kaeser of Newington and Bruce Sylvester of Hamden, whose wife, Judy, is also an outstanding bowler.

Mr. Laver and the Sylvesters play twice weekly in a highly competitive league at Barnum Lanes. Others in the league include Frank Iaizzi of Stamford, who once held the world record for an eight-game set, and Tom Lynch of West Haven, who was ranked fourth in the nation in 1982. Mr. Trepanier, Mr. Kulas and Mr. Kaeser bowl regularly in another strong league at T-Bowl Lanes In Newington, the largest duckpin complex in New England, with 48 lanes.

All of them compete on the eight-event professional duckpin tour, which runs from March through November. "Nobody gets rich on the pro tour," said Mr. Lavers. "At the most, the leading bowler on the tour will make about \$10,000 a year." Top bowlers on the tenpin tour earn as much as \$400,000 a year.

More than 150 bowlers participate in the children's leagues at T-Bowl Lanes. One of the best is 12-year-old Amy Bisson, whose mother, Kim, is the establishment's general manager for operations and wife of one of the owners. Amy, whose average score is 128, holds four world records in her age group.

At the T-Bowl Lanes on Dec. 3, 1984, Ben McDonald of New Britain set a single-game world record when he bowled 267, a mark that has since been broken. Nick Tronsky of Kensington, who is regarded by many bowling experts as the greatest duckpin bowler of all time, bowled at T-Bowl for many years.

But the game has changed since Mr. Tronsky was first voted Duckpin Bowler of the Year in 1931, an honor he also achieved 30 years later. Wooden pins have given way to much livelier plastic ones, gutters are shallower, and sideboards are now made of rubber rather than fiber. These changes have combined to produce higher scores.

"In 1969 I averaged 134, which was the second-best average in the country," Mr. Lavers said. "Today I average 151, which is still the second best in the country. But I'm not any better than I was in '69."

Photos: Duckpin bowlers, top, at Barnum Recreation Lanes in Stratford. Above, the machinery that resets the pins. Lovers of the game can choose from 21 establishments in the state; Judy Sylvester bowling at Barnum Lanes. (Photographs by David LaBianca for The New York Times)