

# Hazy Reflections on the Dying Art of Keeping Score

BY BOB JOHNSON

It is five minutes before 9 o'clock on a Wednesday night in November 1975. Shadow practice is about to begin in one of the top bowling leagues in Orange County, Calif. I have just finished consulting with the captains of the teams that are about to face each other on lanes 27-28, verifying their lineups for the evening.

I use a standard No. 2 pencil to fill out the recap sheet, which includes pieces of carbon paper so as to produce a record of the evening's scores in triplicate — one copy for each team captain, and the top sheet to be turned in at the front desk after the third game.


Once the recap is filled out, I put down the No. 2 pencil, and substitute a pencil with yellow-colored lead. The yellow pencil is the writing instrument of choice for listing the names of the bowlers, in proper sequence, on one of three long, thick, plastic sheets provided by the center and delivered to the settee area by the porter. This sheet will be placed in a designated spot on the scorer's table, much like the overhead projectors commonly found in schools, so that the names and scores can be beamed on big screens that hang over the approaches.

In most cases, I simply copy each name off the league's standings sheet. Sometimes, a "James" may prefer to be listed as "Jim," or I may be instructed by a captain to use a nickname — usually complimentary ("Star," for example), occasionally not ("Choke").


Should a captain or other bowler wish to change a name after it has been written on the plastic sheet, it's no problem. The yellow lead marking can be removed by rubbing the filter portion of a cigarette over it in

a circular motion. Any scorekeeper worth his salt carries one or two exposed filters with him at all times.

That said, there's never a shortage of cigarette filters because there's never a shortage of cigarettes in the building. At this point in history, per capita consumption among those 18 and over is around 4,000 cigarettes per year, and each scorer's table at this center includes two large ashtrays — one in each upper corner of the table — plus two smaller



***Before computers took over, scorekeeping was done by human beings, some of whom added a touch of artistry to the endeavor.***



ashtrays mounted, along with drink holders, on the back of the stationary chairs to accommodate the bowlers who light up... which is just about all of them.

The cancer-causing risks of inhaling second-hand smoke aside, cigarettes in the bowlers' area provided another benefit: The ashes could be rubbed on one's bowling shoes to combat sticky approaches. Plus, parents of young scorekeepers (I was 17 at the time) never had to worry about where their kids had been hanging out; one whiff of my smoke-saturated clothes, and Mom knew *exactly* where I'd been.

Those of us who have survived to tell about it recall keeping score for leagues and tournaments as a means of funding our own bowling, earning

some spending money or saving up for a big purchase, such as a car. And for some people — young and not-so-young alike — keeping score was more than a way to make a few bucks; it was a form of artistic expression.

Today's electronic scoring systems enhance the bowling experience with their animations, "exciters" and other features, and centers lacking such systems are quickly going the way of the Tyrannosaurus. So, if keeping score by hand is an art form, it's a dying one.

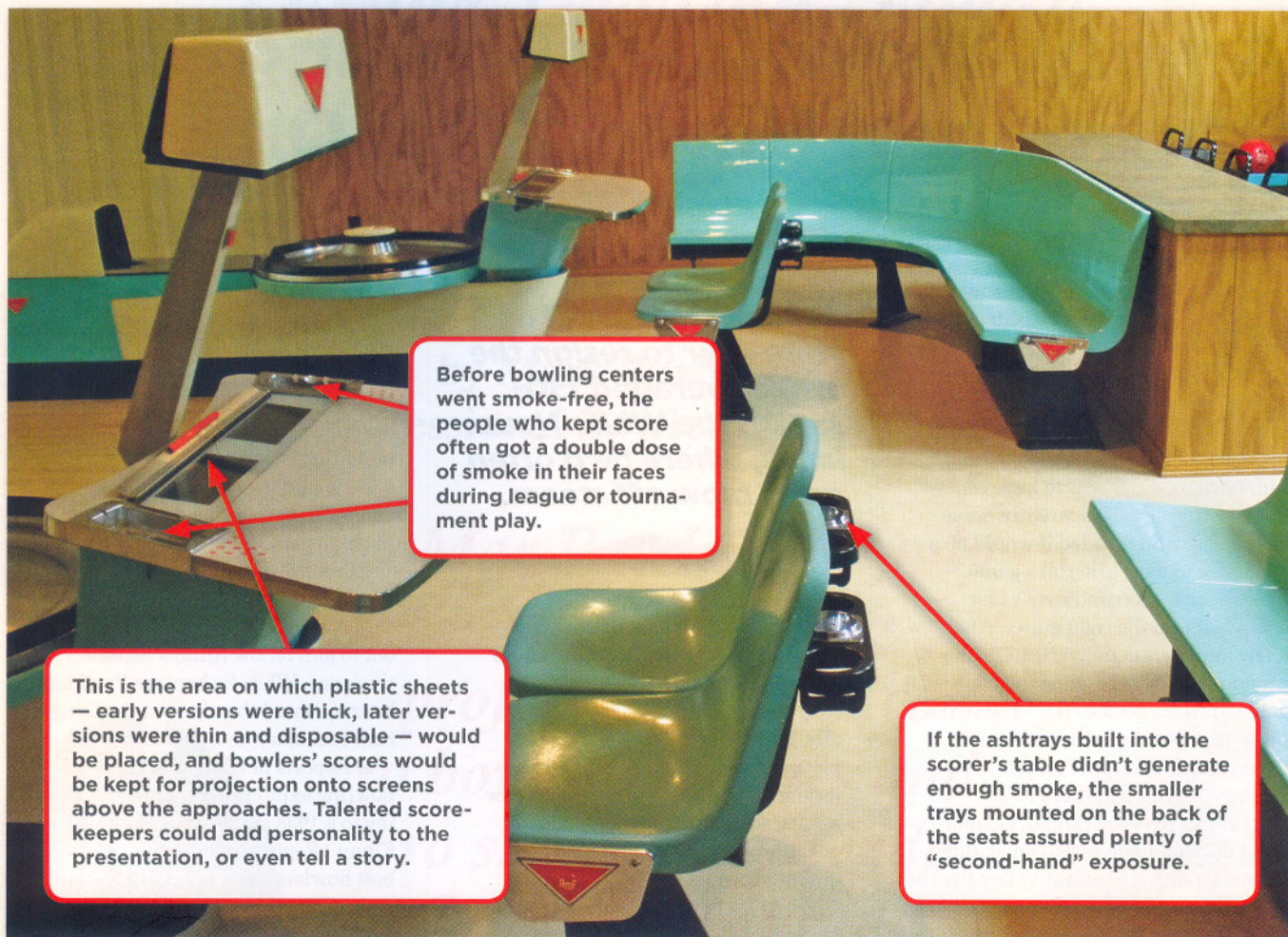
Not all human scorekeepers are artists, just as not all painters are Van Goghs. But those who take their craft seriously can use a few pencil strokes to add personality to their presentation, and even tell a story.

Most computerized scoring systems are limited to the four standard scoring symbols: X for a strike, / for a spare, O for a split and — for an open frame. A human scorekeeper, however, has additional symbols at his disposal, including a W to indicate that a washout had been left, and a C to note that a spare had been chopped.

For the bowler who left the washout or chopped the spare, the projected W or C could take some of the sting out of their miscue. They're much more soothing than a harsh —. For onlookers, those symbols are an indication that the bowler may have suffered some bad luck in compiling his below-par score.

A scorekeeper also can use his pencil to show empathy. If a bowler opens three times in a row, for example, a scorekeeper might draw a thick vertical line to the right of the most recent frame box — symbolic of a "wall" to halt the opens. If the vertical line doesn't work and yet another open is registered, two horizontal lines — above and below the frame box — may be added to the





Before bowling centers went smoke-free, the people who kept score often got a double dose of smoke in their faces during league or tournament play.

This is the area on which plastic sheets — early versions were thick, later versions were thin and disposable — would be placed, and bowlers' scores would be kept for projection onto screens above the approaches. Talented scorekeepers could add personality to the presentation, or even tell a story.

If the ashtrays built into the scorer's table didn't generate enough smoke, the smaller trays mounted on the back of the seats assured plenty of "second-hand" exposure.

"wall," creating the appearance of a closed-bracket. Some scorekeepers might draw a large dot in the lower right corner of a frame box, symbolic of a period and "the end" of the opens.

Back in the day, you could always tell the experienced scorekeepers from the newcomers. We old pros (even at 17, I had seven years of scorekeeping experience) would always immediately add the 20 in a spare-strike or strike-spare sequence; inexperienced ones often would not. And a pro would never, ever fill in the 30 when a turkey was registered, instead keeping the score section of all frame boxes empty until the string was snapped. Writing in the 30 right after the third strike was rolled is a common rookie mistake, and

considered by some bowlers to be a jinx.

Every center that utilized human scorekeepers rather than machines had its share of both pros and rookies, and the services of the pros were coveted by the league bowlers. And if ever there was a pro's pro among scorekeepers, it was a gentleman named Martin, who kept score for the Thursday night 777 Scratch league at Champion Lanes in Garden Grove, Calif.

When those thick plastic scoresheets were replaced by thin, disposable sheets that came on a roll, bowling centers traded clarity for convenience. Made to accommodate regular No. 2 pencils, they were difficult to read when projected, even if a scorekeeper had some old yellow pencils to use.

Martin's solution was to bring his own Sharpie pens. That solved the visibility problem, but Martin took matters a step further.

For the actual scores — the numerals within the frame boxes — he would use a black Sharpie. But for the strike Xs, he employed two other colors. A green X would mean that, in Martin's opinion, the strike was perfect. A blue X would mean that the strike shot could have been better; perhaps the ball hit light in the pocket, or maybe the 10-pin was slow to fall.

The bowlers didn't always agree with Martin's color coding, of course. But if anyone shot a 300 game with all green Xs, that was a sheet worth keeping, sculpted by a scorekeeping craftsman.