

The Second Sportsmanship Games - Burton 1996

Within six weeks of the first Sportsmanship Games, I parted company with First Leisure and Derby Super Bowl and joined Northern Leisure as the Deputy Manager at Burton Bowl. Almost immediately, I began planning the next "Games", determined not to repeat the mistakes learned from my first attempt. Instead, I encountered new ones!

Burton-on-Trent is synonymous with many things - beer has got to be the number one industry, with Bass, Allied and Marstons breweries all there. Adding to the towns' aroma also are Robirch Sausages and Branston Pickle and I found myself in a pickle, when I couldn't find one hotel with a function room large enough to accommodate my prospective visitors. I had to go back down the A38, just into Derby's city limits and come up with two hotels to do the job.

The Post House and the new Travel Inn were both of good standard and within half a mile of one another. This time there should be no complaints - wrong - I learned another invaluable lesson - to either notify the restaurant staff of the early influx of breakfast diners at the weekend, en masse or to make sure they offered buffet service (a tactic I adopted for future "Games"). Unfortunately, some bowlers had to miss breakfast because of the slow service, but were compensated at the centre.

I was determined to be more organised this time and preparations were far better. I mailed out entry forms to the first participants and, with word of mouth and Keith Hale's write-up in Go Tenpin, there was no need for further advertisement. Before I knew it, I had filled the tournament with the maximum 24 x 6 person teams.

During mid-preparation, Northern Leisure sold the centre to an independent owner. Professionalism prevents me from naming him but I will say that he gave me a great deal of grief prior to and during the tournament. I took all his comments and tried to force them from one ear and out through the other, determined to make this an enjoyable tournament for the competitors. I believe I succeeded but by the end of the tournament I was resolute in looking for another employer within the bowling industry.

Everything was going well but I was concerned about the state of the lanes. The condition was not good, the heads were shot but a resurface was just around the corner. Well, I don't know what these guys did but following the resurface, the shot was even worse! Did this affect the tournament? Well, there were a few grumbles to start with from the "better" bowlers but they got on with. Everybody just seemed resigned to the fact that scores would be low and carried on enjoying themselves.

Well, all except one. A decent average bowler (whom I will refrain from naming) was, to say the least, very upset with his scores. So much so that he ripped up his scoresheet and threw it in the bin. This is NOT sportsmanship. I had a long discussion with his team captain and, for the sake of the team, allowed his scores to count in the team all events. However, his name would be noted and he would never be permitted to play the tournament again!

The evening disco was held at the Post House where the majority of competitors were housed. I poached the DJ, Dave, from his regular spot at Derby Super Bowl and, despite some reservations from a few people, he was excellent. His party tunes and bravado on the microphone soon had the dance floor packed. As the guests filed in, one thing became apparent in that the room was a tad on the small side - another lesson learned! Despite that, everybody still had a good time, playing musical chairs with those who were up dancing.

As time went on, tiredness set in for some and so they made their way up the stairs to the exit and gave a wave. The crowd responded with a chorus of "cheerio, cheerio, cheerio" and this continued as each group or individual bade goodnight. This "sportsmanship" lark was REALLY catching on, far more than I had anticipated. As the party crept further on, Dave's repartee got more into current dance mode, with more of a younger set remaining. As the clock reached 2.00 a.m. it was time to finish but everybody wanted more, more, more! Dave extended his set by a further thirty minutes to the delight of the remaining "clubbers".

There was a fine array of hangovers the next morning, not made any better by the consistently "tough" condition. However, the actual machines were fine and everyone battled on, bang on schedule. During the final event, the fives, votes were collected from everyone for the "Good Sport of the Games".

The award was new for this year. All bowlers and their guests were given the opportunity to vote for the person whom they thought personified "sportsmanship and fun, both on and off the lanes". As I prepared the medal presentation table, other members of the Committee frantically sorted and counted the votes.

With all the bowling over, everyone tucked into their buffet as I made the final preparation for the presentations. Forgive me if I am wrong (as I am writing this 5 1/2 years retrospectively) but I believe it was my fellow Deputy Manager, Will Lang who presented the medals. The final award was for the "Good Sport of the Games" and as I read out her name, Bev (sorry can't remember the surname), seemed very hesitant in collecting the award. Bev appeared at the control desk, from where I was making the announcements, along with Will who, taking the microphone from me, stated that was a hoax (which Bev had been in on). The award was to go to ME! When I thought up the category, it was open to anyone associated with the tournament (not necessarily a bowler). I had never intended for myself to be considered in the running. There was a huge round of applause and I felt obliged, humbled and very thrilled to accept it.

Fighting back the tears of emotion, I declared the tournament closed and wished everyone a safe journey home. And as if that wasn't enough, as everyone trooped past control on the way to the exit, they all stopped to shake my hand or give me a hug and say "thanks". I had never experienced anything like it. I was just running a tournament, doing my job but the appreciation was overwhelming. Yes, the Sportsmanship Games was truly a winner but where would the next one be...