

# WEEKEND LEISURE

## Bowled a perfect game? So, join the crowd

Many fear the increasing scores will mean a gutter ball for the sport's credibility and integrity.

By DANIEL WEISS  
COLUMBIA NEWS SERVICE

All 50 lanes at Bowler City in Hackensack, N.J., were full for the Monday night league. But by the time Mike Hrbek had thrown 10 strikes in a row, everything had come to a halt. Hundreds of bowlers crowded around his lane to see whether he could keep it up.

Hrbek felt a bit wobbly in the legs, but he got two more strikes to seal a perfect score of 300. Hrbek was mobbed with high fives, and people congratulated him for weeks on his achievement.

That was in 1984, back when bowling a perfect game was still a relatively rare achievement.

When Hrbek got his fourth 300 game a few weeks ago, it was barely noticed. And when two members of a single team in one of his leagues both bowled 300 on the same night, he didn't even hear about it until the next week.

"I guess it's such a common thing now that it's like no big deal," says Hrbek, 45, who lives in Effort, Pa.

Which is the point of a bowling controversy that's brewing. Many fear the sport is losing its credibility and integrity as average bowling scores increase, and more and more people bowl perfect games.

In 1970, about 1,000 perfect games were bowled, according to statistics from the U.S. Bowling Congress, which sanctions league bowling. Last year, the number topped 56,000. And during that same period, the number of league bowlers dropped to just 2.7 million from a high of 10 million in 1980.

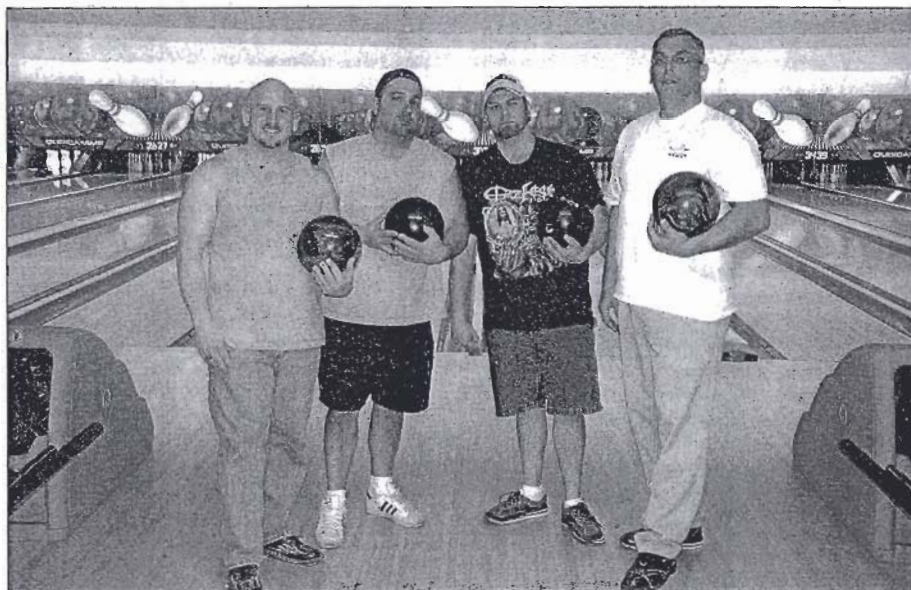
As Hrbek and the rest of his league warmed up on a recent evening, Sal LaCatena and James Dixon stood by the cashier debating the topic.

"It's getting too easy," says LaCatena, 54, who bowled his first perfect game in 1976 and has racked up 20 more since.

But Dixon, 35, says higher scores have made bowling more fun. He bowled two 300s in November and has six over all.

### Improvements count

After a perfect game, bowling offi-



DANIEL WEISS/CNS

Officials are promoting more challenging environments for bowlers such as Mike Hrbek (right), who has 4 perfect games, and his teammates. But will that program catch on?

cial used to rope off the lane like a crime scene to inspect it and scrutinize the ball to make sure everything complied with league regulations. Since the early 1990s, officials no longer bother.

Bowlers point to better bowling balls and improvements in the way lanes are maintained for the rise in scores.

Until the late 1970s, bowling balls were made of rubber or plastic. Since then, new materials such as resin embedded with ground glass have created balls that grip the lane surface better.

At the same time, bowling centers apply oil to the lanes in patterns that allow for a greater margin of error.

"It used to be if you had a 200 average, you were known as a good bowler," says Len Nicholson, who worked for several decades maintaining lanes for the Professional Bowlers Association tour. "Now, you can bowl 230 and still stink because the equipment today has made gorillas out of monkeys."

As a result, bowlers' records have ballooned as if on steroids. At least 50 league bowlers have more than 50 career perfect games each. One bowler says he has more than 100. And in the past decade, 10 have bowled a 900 series — three perfect games in a row — a feat once thought to be impossible.

"What does that truly say about our game?" asks Neil Stremmel, technical director at the USBC. "I mean, nobody's ever going to shoot 18 in golf" — a hole

in one on every hole.

Still, Stremmel emphasizes that perfect games are statistically rare, occurring on average once every 5,000 league games.

Five years ago, in an attempt to offer a more challenging environment for league bowlers, the Bowling Congress began the Sport Bowling program. The program mandates oil patterns similar to those used by the Professional Bowlers Association.

Interest has been gaining ground, but slowly. This year just 13,000 bowlers participated in the program.

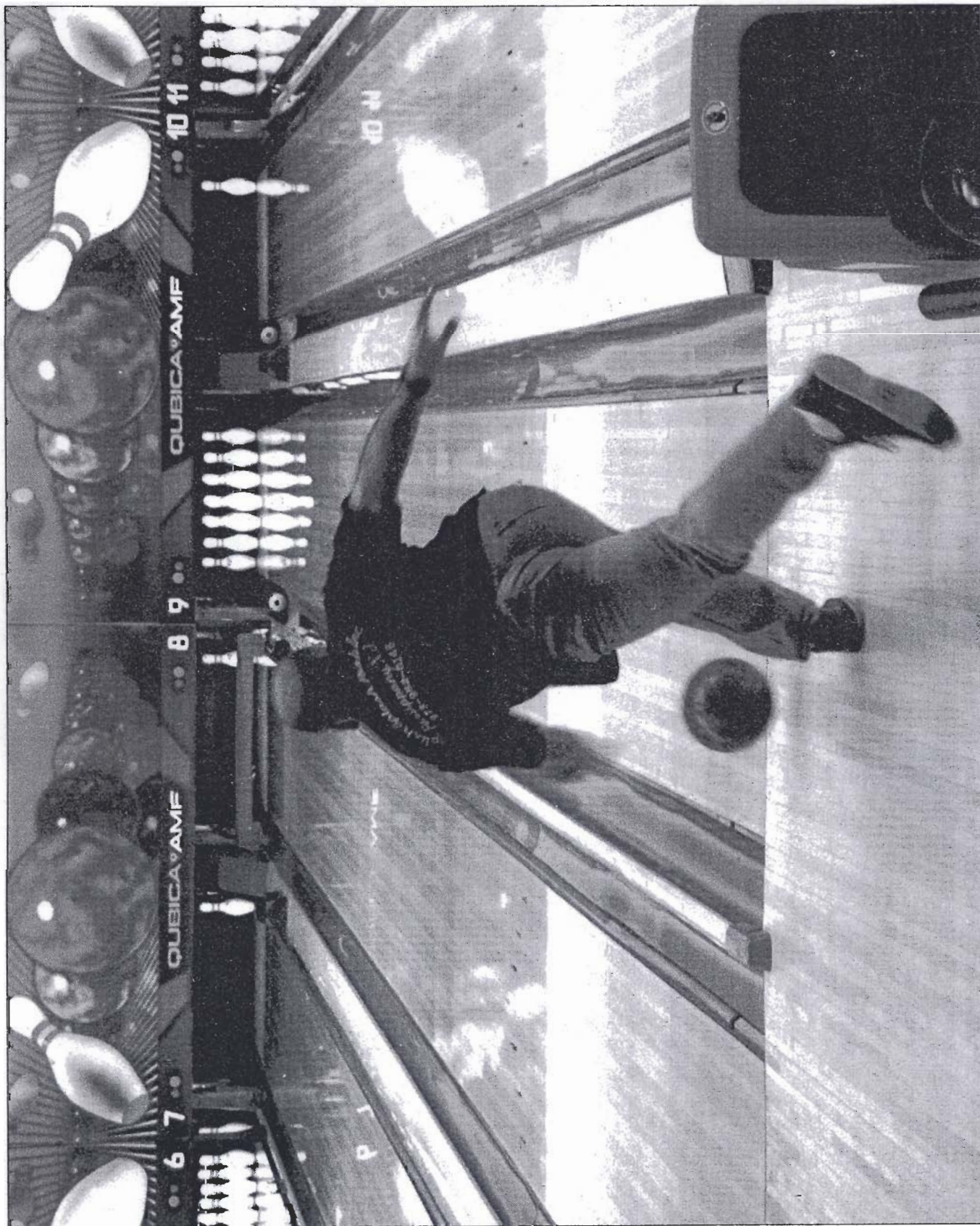
"The bowlers have resisted tougher conditions," says Jim Dressel, editor of *Bowlers Journal International*. "They want to be able to pound on their chests and say, 'I can average 220. I can average 230.' They don't want to go backward."

In 2007, the Bowling Congress will offer a new version of Sport Bowling in which league players can bowl using lane conditions identical to those of the professionals. Steve Wunderlich, a former professional bowler who directs the Sport Bowling program, hopes the approach will appeal to more players.

"I think it would be cool to experience what the pros bowl on," says Dave Pfeiffer, 41, who has shot seven perfect games. It would be "much more a testament to skill, being able to figure out a shot," he says.



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Better equipment might be one reason bowlers such as Dave Pfeiffer pile up perfect games. The New Jersey teacher has 7 to his credit.