

Dick Evans

Syndicated Columnist

Bill Supper, a Man Who Knows Bowling Inside Out, Dishes Up Some Interesting Comments About State of Bowling Industry World Wide

Bill Supper is an American success story that should make every American bowler happy and proud.

His U.S. Military hitch took him to Japan from 1966-68 before he returned to the New York/New Jersey area and joined the Professional Bowlers Association.

"But I quickly learned not to give up my day job to become a full-time professional bowler," he jokes.

Friendship with bowling writer/PBA historian Chuck Pezzano led Bill to a job with the PBA, which in turn led to a job with Ebonite. From there Bill Supper took giant career steps by moving on to challenging jobs with Storm and now Columbia 300.

At Ebonite, headquartered in tranquil Kentucky, he rose to VP of Sales. At Storm, located in bustling Utah, he served as president. At Columbia 300, located in cowboy happy Texas, he started out as president of AMF and then moved up to executive vice president sales and marketing of Columbia 300.

It's a long way for a city slicker to travel. But when you have family " especially three grandchildren" only a few hours away in nearby Austin living in San Antonio and working for Columbia 300, AMF 300 and Track is where you want to be.

Speaking personally, I have always liked Bill Supper as a human being. In my mind he's gifted because he can laugh at himself.

Better yet, he's not afraid to roll up his sleeves and do some of the tough work at tournaments. I always admired the way he jumped in and helped with the weighing in of thousands of 16-pound bowling balls at the High Roller Tournaments at the Showboat Hotel/Casino in Las Vegas.

And I liked the way he handled the fabled Earl Anthony when he told Ebonite that he was retiring from the tour and no longer was going to pick up a bowling ball for any reason. Supper didn't go public with the information; he just quietly released Earl from a lucrative contract.

I think if you will take the time to read Bill Supper's views below on a variety of subjects -- crude oil, foreign markets, PBA, USBC, high school/collegiate bowling and proprietors " you will learn much about the problems facing the entire bowling industry, with a few possible solutions thrown in for good measure.

Not sure my questions were that great, but his astute answers sure were.

QUESTION: "With this great bowling background, what kind of prediction can you make for the bowling ball business in the next 10 years?"

ANSWER: "I wish I had that crystal ball to see into the future. I am more optimistic than some of my colleagues when it comes to the future. I like what I am seeing in a few areas, high school bowling and collegiate bowling. Kris Zahn is doing a wonderful job getting bowling into the hands of our future. I have had a few meetings with Kris and told her we at Columbia 300 will help her quest to get these kids into our game in an organized manner.

"As far as collegiate bowling is concerned, look around; we have great coaches like Gordon Vadakin, Mark Jensen, Jim Lewis and Bill Straub to name a few. I also feel if the USBC gives Bob Maki and Cary Pon the support to grow the coaches program, which ALSO will help our sport grow.

"Columbia Industries has just created a new position called Executive Vice President of Technology and Education. Del Warren is the person in that position. His primary focus is training and teaching coaches how to coach and pro shop, operators how to be better business people. If we continue on the path of status quo, we will be doomed. We must educate the youth and the public on how to improve their games so they can have fun bowling."

QUESTION: "How is America's bowling ball business in Asia, South America, Europe and North America?"

ANSWER: "Unfortunately I can answer that question very easily" stagnant at the best, declining by 8-10% at the worst in both the US and Europe.

"I just returned from a sales trip to Europe, and they are experiencing the same problems we have been going through for the past five years or so" bowling centers are closing.

"Asia is having a rougher time of it with the economic conditions in Japan, and Korea people are not spending money bowling. I have seen statistics stating that the Pacific Rim could be down almost 40% in the past 3 years.

"South America is very small into the bowling market and never had the growth of the other markets enjoyed years ago, so they have a smaller distance to fall."

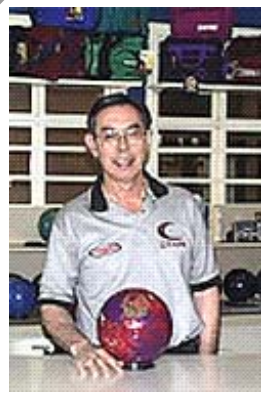
QUESTION: "Do American companies have any big rivals in the production of bowling balls in other countries?"

ANSWER: "Japan, produces some high performance bowling balls, but mainly for the Asian markets."

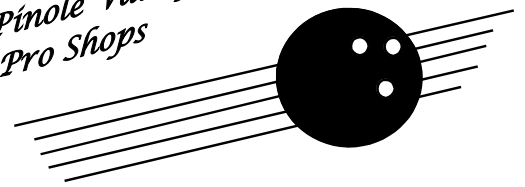
QUESTION: "What type of balls are they making and are they hurting American companies?"

ANSWER: "China and Korea have been active in the polyester and entry level urethane. The US production area hurt most by the Korean and Chinese production

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is in the manufacturing of house balls.

We just cannot produce a quality product and sell it as cheaply as a product produced offshore."

QUESTION: "What kind of impact on American bowling ball companies is the high price of crude oil having on the bowling industry these days?"

ANSWER: "Bowling balls are petroleum based, so we are all being affected by the escalating costs. With the loss of bowlers and the reduced number of balls being manufactured, all manufacturers are experiencing less burden absorption.

"Then you take the weekly increases in raw materials and place that into the equation, and it means less to the bottom line. We all have to watch our expenses and waste carefully to show our owners a profit. We cannot raise prices enough to balance out the other costs."

QUESTION: "Why is the price of crude oil such a key component when it comes to making bowling balls?"

ANSWER: "Resin is the main component, in the manufacturing process of a bowling ball. It does not make a difference if it is polyester, urethane or reactive resin."

QUESTION: "What can ball companies do to offset a decline in sales and an increase in production costs?"

ANSWER: "We need to be extremely careful when it comes to new product introductions. We at Columbia have promised our customers we will curtail our introductions and market products for a longer life cycle. We need to be smarter with our releases and release fewer products.

"We also need to make best use of our advertising dollars to maximize exposure while minimizing cash outlay."

QUESTION: "What is your reaction to the United States Bowling Congress' attempt to curtail scoring by proposing new restrictions on how a new bowling ball must be made to get USBC approval?"

ANSWER: "If bowling balls are the culprit for high scores, why is this year's ABC (USBC) national tournament in Baton Rouge experiencing lower than normal scores? The bowling balls have not changed.

"The USBC should have better direction than to worry about bowling balls. I would like to see the USBC's plan on getting league bowlers back into the game.

"I have the greatest respect for Roger Dalkin and his crew; but I think if their priorities are bowling balls, pins and lane oil, then they will have a difficult time reaching the objective of more sanctioned bowlers.

"I have served, for the past two years, as President of the Billiard and Bowling Institute of America (BBIA). The entire organization, both manufacturers and distributors, is extremely concerned at the erosion of our customer base.

"We at Columbia 300 are willing to commit our resources to assist in the retention and creation of the sanctioned bowler base.

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