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Candelpin bowling strikes Jutras' fancy

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By BILL WELLS

AGAWAM - Charlie Jutras remembers when candlepin bowling was one of the most popular sports in Greater Springfield.

He remembers when there were 28 candlepin bowling alleys in the region, and when bowling stories and results appeared in the Springfield Union and Springfield Daily News every day.

Jutras remembers when people waited to bowl, with lines going out the door on winter nights. He also remembers when area high schools had bowling teams, just like the other varsity sports.

Those days are long gone, with people's time absorbed into televisions, computers, malls, traveling and hundreds of other recreational opportunities.

Jutras, who has seen candlepin bowling take a freefall from its peak, still loves the sport, and the 74-year-old from Feeding Hills has maintained the drive which made him one of the best competitors in New England for six decades.

That drive, though, traveled along an interesting road. Since he started bowling at age 13, he felt what other bowlers were doing was inconsequential. He competed against himself, and whatever happened, happened. He never went to a tournament expecting to win. He just wanted to get in the pay line.

"I knew if I do good, and I concentrate on what I'm doing, everything would fall into place," Jutras said.

Things usually fell into place. Jutras ended up in those pay lines an awful lot over the years, as much or more than any other candlepin bowler ever in New England, and eventually earned him a spot in the World Candlepin Bowling Association Hall of Fame.

Jutras, who grew up on Portland Street in the Brightwood Section of Springfield, took a job in 1948 across the street from his house as a pin boy at Brightwood Lanes. He bowled in his spare time, and quickly found a knack for the sport. With his slender body, flexibility and dedication, he instantly found success.

When he was 14, he joined Brightwood's team in the Western New England League. The following two years, when he was 15 and 16, he recorded the highest average for the entire league, which consisted of many of the top candlepin bowlers in Western Massachusetts, from Springfield to Greenfield to North Adams.

After graduating in 1952 from Trade High School, where he was the team's star bowler, he joined the Navy. He served in the Korean War on the Battleship Mississippi. After his three years of service, from 1952-55, he came back to Springfield and got right back to doing what he did best.

He joined Mid-Town Lanes on Orange Street and became the first player in the Western New England Candlepin Bowling League to average a 130 for a season.

Jutras was also traveling, entering tournaments all over New England on a weekly basis. He regularly finished in the money. He was often on candlepin television shows, on Channel 5 out of Boston and Channel 27 out of Worcester.

At the height of the sport's popularity in New England, Jutras was famous.

"There used to be 28 bowling centers in the Springfield area: Brightwood, Indian Orchard, State Bowl, Apremont, Recreation, 20th Century," Jutras said. "I could go on and on.

"Back in the old Springfield Union, they would have articles every day about bowling. Every day. They covered the leagues, professional bowling, or if someone had a great score. Then, the Sunday morning paper, back in the '50s and early '60s, they'd have big blow-out articles and a lot of coverage. They used to keep score of all the Western Mass. leagues. Then, the leagues would bowl on Sunday night, and on Monday morning, the paper would have all those scores in."

And at or near the top of the scores was always Jutras, who bowled nearly every day or night of the week.

"I always had the drive," Jutras said. "Once you get good, you have the drive. I couldn't wait for the next tournament. I couldn't get down there fast enough."

But it was the type of drive that helped Jutras bowl at such a high level for so long. He said if he was at a tournament, and another bowler was running away with first place, it didn't faze him, while other bowlers cracked. He just wanted to make some money.

"A lot of guys would give up, and say 'I can't win this.' They'd quit," he said. "Mentally, they'd stop.

"I just wanted to get in the pay line."

Also, interestingly, unlike many other athletes at the top of their sport, Jutras never expected to win. He felt if he could just do his best, not quit on a string, and stick it out even though someone else was doing well, he'd be OK.

"I never went to a tournament thinking I was going to win," he said. "I went hoping I would win. There was a lot of talent back then: a lot of good bowlers. To go and say you were going to win, that wasn't going to happen."

Jutras usually made anywhere from a few hundred to \$1,000 for winning, but he said the pay was also pretty good for coming in the top five, and sometimes the top 10. He twice made \$2,500, once for winning a tournament and the other time for placing second.

"Any time you could put \$300, \$400, \$500 in your pocket, to me, that was a delight," he said.

As for the TV shows, which helped place Jutras into legendary status, the cameras didn't fit his style. He wasn't flashy, and he didn't want the extra attention. He was an even-keeled gentleman.

"I was never really happy about being on TV," Jutras said. "Everything was magnified. If you miss a single ... I liked being on, going for the money and hoping that I'd win. But your nerves are upgraded. I was always worried about doing something. There were always old people in the front row, and if you'd miss a single, they'd go, 'Ohhhhhhhh.' I hated that. I hated that sound."

He also hated seeing the sport fall from grace. One by one, the local alleys closed due to a lack of business.

"Before television, people had nothing to do," he said. "People would go bowling. That's why you had so many alleys. I remember over at Riverside Alleys, you had to wait in line. Every Saturday and Sunday, you got a number and waited in line. There were leagues every night; doubles leagues every night. But that's the way it was. Life around candlepin bowling was outstanding. Bowling alley people, they never got rich, but they made a living.

"Then TV came in, and TV brought people into the house."

And out of the bowling alleys. Jutras, though, said there was nothing he could do, other than keep bowling. Year after year, he maintained his drive.

"I always stayed with it," he said. "That's why I'm still capable."

He's also a capable bass fisherman. Jutras always liked to fish, and in the late-1960s, he started to take the sport seriously. He's competed in bass tournaments throughout the northeast, including finishing second one year for a season-long competition.

"I go to New York a lot. I've won a few," he said.

Jutras even competed at this year's Bassmaster Weekend Series Championship at Clarks Hill Lake in Georgia.

"I like the competitive part," he said. "It costs a lot of money, though."

Jutras said he approaches fishing the same as bowling.

"That mental thing is right there," he said. "You want to go out there and do good. They're basically the same."

But no one was the same as Jutras: not at candlepin bowling, and not for such a long period of time.

"Up to two years ago, I was winning tournaments," he said.

Jutras has some arthritis in his left knee, which is his sliding knee. So the fluidity in his mechanics isn't the same as it was for so many years. But he still has his drive. He bowls once a week, and also in a few tournaments a month.

"I don't have the arm speed any more," he said. "And I have a lot of bad outings now. I never had bad outings before. But if I get my knee fixed, I'll get back up there. If I can get my knee fixed, I think I'll be able to make a buck or two."

And get himself back in the pay line.

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