

Bowling Colossus

He had taken the alley next to us, a big man—six-six at least and probably tipping the scales at three-forty—dressed all in black. He looked out of place at a bowling alley, perhaps more appropriate at a World Wrestling Federation venue, the Grim Reaper on steroids. He sat, put on what had to be size fifteen bowling shoes, black, of course, and withdrew his ball from its bag. It had unusual markings, yellow on a black surface and the holes in it looked big enough to accept two of my fingers at the same time. When he hefted it, it looked like a grapefruit in his huge ham of a hand.

Though we had been bowling a game of our own, all of our movement stopped as we became spectators to the tableau unfolding before us. He inserted three fingertips and his thumb into the ball, which had to be sixteen pounds, not an ounce less, lifted it to his chest and took two giant steps toward the line. I expected his delivery to be thunderous, the releasing of his ball creating tectonic rumblings that would shake the building to its foundations. Yet, he released the ball as quietly as a whisper. That's not to say no power existed behind the release. The ball shot down the alley, hugging the lip of the gutter on the right as if propelled from a cannon, his curious, hand-flip-of-a-release causing the strange markings on it to form a corkscrew illusion. *Now*, the seismic effect of all that power came into play. The ball, sweeping from right to left in a vicious hook, scattered the pins like leaves in the wind in a thunderous cataclysm that got the attention of everyone on either side of his alley. Even if he had missed the pins altogether, the wind and violence of his delivery would have knocked them over.

He repeated his prodigious feat of sheer power four more times—five strikes in a row—and we held our breath, our game forgotten. In frame six, one pin, the ten, wobbled, but, like a frightened rabbit holding its ground when cornered by a predator, remained standing. We nearly gasped from the sheer audacity of that pin's defiance.

The huge man glowered as he lifted his ball, took a stance on the extreme right side of the alley, made two giant steps and released the ball without the curious hand-flip. This time, the ball made a distinct thump and seemed to move, without the corkscrew effect, even faster than before. The clap of its hitting the pin echoed throughout the alleys and the pin caromed off the back wall, ricocheting forward, only to be re-hit by the same ball. Incredibly, the top of the pin broke off! The satisfied look on the big man's face told us he felt he had meted out a proper punishment for the recalcitrant pin. It would never defy anyone again. He finished the game with six consecutive strikes for a 279 score!

The big man bowled a second game and, this time, he bowled 300—twelve consecutive strikes! In game three, he rolled eight consecutive strikes. We settled in to witness another 300 game, but, to our amazement, in frame nine, the five pin wobbled like a drunk and stayed upright. Again, he scowled and, using his previous altered delivery, shot down the pin with such force, we would later agree that the alley's owner would have to look at possible repairs to the back wall of the building. God help any unfortunate employee within range of such onslaughts. With frame nine closed, he seemed to settle a bit and he rolled three more strikes, for another 279 game!

Leaving his ball where it sat in the rack, he stalked off and returned a few minutes later with three beers, curiously, light beers. He polished off the first in one long pull and got halfway through the second. He then sat and looked over at us. This galvanized us to return to our game. Feeling more than a little self-conscious, our ball-deliveries suffered, seriously eroding any hopes we had of decent scores. Then, a curious thing happened.

The colossus got up and walked over to our party, towering over where we sat like a skyscraper among cottages. “Excuse me,” he said, in a surprisingly high-pitched voice, which made me think of the bass in a quartet usually being the little guy and the tenor the big guy. He took another long pull on his beer, draining it. “The thought occurs to me that I’m intimidating you nice bowlers.”

“Uh,” I pitched in with my usual flair, “those games of yours were the most amazing thing we’ve ever seen.”

He chuckled. “I was trying for three consecutive 300 games.”

“Um, we’ve never seen someone break the top of a pin off.”

“Oh, that,” he said, finishing his second brew. “I’ve done it a few times before.”

Feeling bolder, I probed a little. “You seem to take it personally when a pin stays put.”

“Oh, I assure you, I *do*. It’s not the pin, per se, but the perverse laws of physics that allow such things. I refer to it as ‘thermodamnics.’”

“H-how many 300 games have you bowled?” one of the ladies in our group managed to get out.

“I’ve lost count.”

“Oh.”

“It was our pleasure to witness yours today,” I said with all sincerity.

“Thank you. Would you nice folks mind if I gave you some pointers?”

“Uh, that would be great, thanks,” I said, wondering what form of special punishment his mentorship would include.

“Give me a minute to order some beverages for you. What’s your pleasure?”

We put together a list and he took it to the snack bar, returning within five minutes with a tray of drinks. After the initial swallows all around, he then proceeded to work with each of us. In a display of patience incongruous to his earlier scowling at the pins, he helped each of us detect and cure the things that hindered our achieving decent scores. After his impromptu workshop, he sat back, nursing his third beer with a benevolent look on his heavy-featured face. We all started a new game while our mentor watched and we turned in scores forty pins higher than our usual.

“You all did wonderfully well,” the big man encouraged. “Just keep in mind what I taught you. Bowling is a game of physics and consistency, a lot like golf. Taking into account the condition of the alleys and the ball material, a consistent mechanical approach to delivery is the key to high scores. And watch your emotions. They can get in the way.”

“Pardon me for bringing it up, but you told us it’s personal with you,” I pointed out, emboldened by his garrulousness. “Isn’t that emotional?”

He smiled, an expression out of place on his craggy countenance. “True, but I’ve worked with it for years and have it under control.”

“I understand the mechanics of delivery idea, but you have a unique release that makes the pattern on the ball look like a corkscrew. Isn’t that a little complicated?”

Another smile. “It’s a little affectation of mine. I like the way it looks, but it also tells me when my delivery is consistent. If the corkscrew falters, so does my game. You probably didn’t notice, but those two times I spared, it was a tad off. Then again, sometimes physics works with me and I make the strike anyway.”

“Do you get splits?” another of our brave ladies, queried.

He gave her a wry grin. “A couple of times.”

“Did you convert the spares?”

“No, I ended the games. I don’t work at making them. It’s not my thing.” He got up so suddenly, we all jumped. “Well, I want to bowl another game, if you’ll excuse me.”

He went over to his ball, spent a minute polishing it, drained his third beer and began. As before, our bowling stopped so we could watch in awe. Perhaps the beer had relaxed him, but he seemed a bit less energized, though still powerful, and bowled another 300 game! Having been tipped off to his delivery tactics, I noticed his corkscrew looked perfect each time.

He bowled a second, another 300 game! Without pause, he started a third and rolled eleven strikes. On the last roll, he carelessly delivered the ball and left one pin, the seven, for a 299 score. He looked over at us and smiled, as if to say, “I could have rolled a 300, but I did that on purpose.” Not one doubt in my mind challenged that look’s unspoken statement.

“Well, I’m done for the day,” he said as he packed up his ball and changed shoes. “It was really nice meeting all you folks. Keep working on your basics and you’ll be champions in your league, for sure.”

Just then, a petite, blonde woman, dressed all in pink and looking like the personification of Tinker Bell, entered his alley. I doubted she topped four-eight. She had a cute, pretty face, shoulder-length hair and a killer figure, the very definition of blonde beauty. The big man swept her up with one arm and she threw her arms around his tree-trunk neck to kiss him full on the lips. He put her down, picked up his bowling bag, took her small hand in his and they left the alley. The tiny woman smiled and waved back at us, looking like a little girl gripping her daddy’s hand.

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We sat in stunned silence. We had just witnessed one of those once-in-a-lifetime events that left us all wondering if it had been real or an apparition. A waitress came over with another tray of drinks.

“We didn’t order these,” I said.

“No, Elam did.”

“Elam?”

“Yes, the big guy you bowled next to.”

“Oh. What can you tell us about Elam? Does he come here all the time?”

“No, not really. Just occasionally. This is the first time in six months.”

“Is he a professional bowler, or something?”

“No, our alley pro says he’s not on any roster of professional bowlers that he knows of.”

“Are they friends?”

“Well, they’ve bowled a couple of open games before and it’s quite a show. I can remember a night when Elon bowled three perfect games and our pro bowled two, with a 279 third. That was a night to remember. Before they finished, our parking lot was full and the place packed with spectators. Not one other game was bowled, but we went through our entire stock of beer and had to truck in an emergency delivery. It was a profitable night.”

“What’s with the tiny, garden-fairy blonde woman?”

“Oh, her. She usually shows up at the end of his time here.”

“Is she his wife ... girlfriend?” I wanted to add “lover” but didn’t have the temerity.

“No idea. They kiss and leave hand-in-hand. I think it’s weird, her being so tiny and him so big. It looks wrong.”

I didn’t want to let it go. “Does anyone else know anymore about them?”

“There are rumors that she’s the one thing that keeps him from going off and doing something dark and awful. Hell, you’ve seen him bowl. He looks like a madman on a death mission. If I were a bowling pin, you couldn’t get me to stand with nine others anywhere. He’s scary as hell.”

“Actually, he was really nice to us, a real gentleman.”

“Yeah, maybe the rumors are true.”

With that, the waitress walked off and we bowled another open game, turning in respectable scores, enough so that the bowlers in the next alley noticed. We had swelled heads as we packed up and left the alleys.

All of us in the group that day noticed a marked improvement in our averages. We even gained some notoriety over the fact we made so many two-hundred-plus scores. To my way of thinking, we owed it all to the colossus in black, who awed us on one hand, but patiently taught us on the other.

Oh, and we never saw him, or his Tinker Bell companion, again.