



A *Future* FOR THE *Sport*

A FUTURE FOR THE SPORT - 2020 RECAP, 2021 PREVIEW

By Chad Murphy, USBC Executive Director



Wow, what an incredibly challenging year.

Most will understandably look at 2020 in a dark light, and who can blame them. The COVID-19 virus devastated bowling across the nation and around the world for months. Additionally, it locked down several states altogether for most of the year. Our hearts go out to the proprietors and association leaders who have been shut down. Also, our thoughts are with those centers that had to close for good. We will miss these partners and thank them for their service to bowling. We also mourn the tragic human toll, as our bowling community has seen many great people pass away during the pandemic.

This year did give bowling an opportunity to learn more about ourselves, our infrastructure and the foundation that makes the industry so strong. While many industries have been shuttered almost completely, bowling still certified close to 700,000 USBC members this fall. Some will point at the number in a negative light and talk about losses. That is certainly a reasonable position to take. However, considering the pandemic and devastation across the sports industry, we see it as a sign of resiliency and bowling's strength, as well as an indication bowling has an opportunity to bounce back quicker than most.

All the great things that made bowling unique before the pandemic will be here as we rebuild. This reality should comfort and drive our members and stakeholders. The social nature of the sport, which brings friends and families together creating a special community inside our bowling centers, will continue. The competitive side will resume in greater numbers as well across the nation for those who choose it. The bottom line is that bowling's value offering remains strong as ever.

Sure, things will be different. Some changes implemented during the pandemic will stay, but bowling will come out the other side in position to productively move forward. We can all hang our hats on this reality.

Please do not take my optimism for our sport long-term to mean that everything is great in the short-term. There is much distress that will require hard work for all of us who love the sport and seek to rebuild. Still, the participation numbers give us a strong foundation. We must be smart, take care of our centers, our members and move into this new opportunity post-pandemic with great optimism.

I leave 2020 proud of our industry. The proprietors have been working tirelessly to make our members feel safe and confident about bowling amid constantly changing local health regulations. Our partners at BPAA have shown tremendous leadership in providing education, resources and support to centers across the nation. USBC local associations have looked at ways to run in a responsible manner. It required doing things a little differently, with additional effort, care and thoughtfulness.

Here at the national level, we acted quickly to make governance adjustments allowing bowling's ecosystem the ability to be nimble as local health standards evolved. We created flexibility in some competition rules so local operators would have the freedom to work with local authorities. We also published event protocols that local event holders could use as a guide and show regulators that bowling can run in a reasonable manner. In some parts of the country, it worked, and bowling resumed, while other regions proved to be more challenging. Overall, we all worked together to assist and provide support wherever possible.

Bowling's consumer goods business has suffered at all levels during 2020. We hope our members are mindful that bowling's great product manufacturers, pro shops and distributors need support in 2021 more than ever. Please think about buying that new ball or pair of shoes sooner, rather than later, if your situation affords you to do so.

In talking to the stakeholders in bowling's retail distribution channel, everyone is doing their best to get us through to the other side and be there for their customers. My conversations with these fine business operators make me proud to be a bowler and to be a part of this great industry.

As we move past 2020 and look to 2021 with optimism and opportunity, I just cannot help but feel good about the future of our industry. It is full of wonderful people that have been making it go for years. These hands will help serve those who are currently bowling, but also to rebuild what has been lost.

There is a tremendous amount for our association to be proud of in this crazy year. We continue to evolve and did not break each other apart along the way. Just the opposite, we unified. Thanks to all our partners, volunteers, members and centers for working through it TOGETHER.

2021 and beyond

In the new year, our efforts will return us to focus on our core priorities: Youth Program Development, along with Membership Value, Technology, Competitive Bowling/Championship Tournaments and Marketing.

It certainly will be another very challenging year financially, but one that sets us up to rebuild and work toward 2022 with a sense of optimism, where we also can see light at the end of the tunnel and work toward it.

Membership

An additional organizational priority this year will be on the membership side. In reviewing our member database, we can see the group of bowlers that found themselves unable to bowl or uncomfortable joining a league in 2020 due to the pandemic. Starting immediately, we will begin communicating with these bowlers through direct mail, email and digitally to remind them of the experience they had prior to the pandemic. We want them to know that bowling is ready when they are.

This effort will take place across the country. The numbers may be small in a few states, and larger in others, but the effort is needed across the entire association.

We will be asking our local associations to participate in this effort as well. Dropped bowler lists have never been more important. We need our local associations to comb their lists and communicate to those who did not return this season. Our Association Development team will be reaching out to work with you directly with guidance and best practices in this effort. If you have additional ideas, please be sure to share, as everything will be on the table in this initiative.



By now, I am sure you are all aware of the \$3.5 million USBC has committed in relief funding through our associations. About \$1.5 million already is in the hands of local associations across nation. The money is there for you at the local level to use in any way you choose, but we do hope you will invest some of it on initiatives to bring back those bowlers that have been lost in 2020. The recruitment effort will be ongoing in the center as it always has been, and we trust our proprietors will be great partners.

This is a unique opportunity for local associations to work with centers to talk directly to those most effected by the pandemic and simply ask them to come back and give bowling another try. Some will be comfortable returning this summer or next fall. How quickly this group feels comfortable returning will be a very personal decision. Our job as an association is to reach out and tell them we will make it easy for them to return when ready, and they are welcome. Retaining these bowlers is our best opportunity to return to normalcy for our centers, our association and, of course, the bowlers themselves.

Tournaments

We move to the new year with cautious optimism for our tournaments. In anticipation of Nevada state guidelines, we have adjusted to run one team per pair for both the USBC Open and Women's Championships.

Running the tournaments primarily in the summer should mean modest expectations for tournament entries. While the structure has been built to allow us to run at larger capacities, we do not expect consumer demand to fully return for the 2021 events. We have projected 6,500 teams at the Open Championships and 3,000 teams at the Women's Championships in our 2021 budget plans.

Achieving these numbers would be spectacular, however, we know even smaller numbers are likely. Given the uncertainty of vaccine distribution and the virus itself, all we know for sure is that plans may change.

Our goal is to successfully run these flagship events in 2021, then work to rebuild in 2022 to a sustainable level after the vaccine has been delivered to everyone and most folks feel safe in moving around the country again.



Again, "cautiously optimistic" is the message for our tournaments. As for our nationally conducted short-duration events, we have plans for all our tournaments that are currently scheduled. Of course, things are fluid, and all the short-duration events could again be moved to the fall if necessary. Especially, the senior events.

Youth Program Development

A similar recruitment effort will take place for youth membership as well as simply "getting back to business" when it comes to tournaments. From the Pepsi Championships at the grassroots level, to USBC Collegiate at the height of the youth-development ladder, our plans are to get back to what we do best and move things forward.



Photo from 2019 USA Bowling National Championships

During the pandemic, two new youth-related technology systems went online - the Junior Gold Qualifying Event Portal and the new CollegeBowling.com. These important systems are in place after a few years of development. Initial reports have been strong in terms of usability and functionality. A big win for bowling as we move to modernize our systems from paper to digital.

Marketing - BowlTV and Digital Media

The BowlTV pay service was another business structure decimated by the pandemic. Obviously, with all the tournaments shut down, it also shut down this offering. We made the decision in the best interest of the consumer to just start over. We rolled all the subscriptions over to 2021 for those who wanted to stay, and also offered a refund to anyone who requested it. And so, the rebuilding begins with the PWBA taking center stage in late January. Look for a new mobile app that will be launched in the first quarter of 2021.

With a lot of folks at home, our YouTube and digital presence has been stronger than ever with new show offerings. Inside the OC and The PWBA Podcast, in addition to the Sport of Bowling Show, were introduced, and these popular shows will continue in 2021 as well as our latest show, Bowling Explained. All of these products fall under marketing and communications, but more importantly, there are new ways to educate bowlers and fans about the sport. I learn something new from each of these shows and encourage you to check them out.



I get asked all the time, "What can I do to help support the PWBA?" The simple answer is to purchase a BowITV subscription. The dollars from this pay service will be used to bolster the tour as well as youth programming here at the campus. Please check out the robust content on BowITV and consider joining the effort.

Overall, our communications team "reached" more than 3.2 million people in 2020 with these new shows - an incredible feat for Year 1.

Technology

Understandably, there was a slowdown in our efforts to expand use of the new tournament registration system to state and local associations across the country. Nevertheless, many states have been proactive in seeing this time as an opportunity to offer online registration and credit card payments to their tournament bowlers. States including Kansas, Georgia, Pennsylvania, Arizona, Idaho and others are using the system with great success. The platform is receiving great reviews. Our stated goal was, and is, to onboard every association interested in using the system. If an association is interested, our staff will help you and your bowlers make a big step forward using online registration.

The work continues!

New in the plans for 2021 will be beta testing of a new League Management System. We are working toward offering this system to select groups as soon as fall of 2022. Look for more information on this exciting technology project later in the year.



Equipment Specifications

In 2020, USBC announced postponing implementation of a new tiered center certification model until January 2023. We will continue to work throughout the country in 2021 to test the process and tools for those centers interested in participating. More details will come later in the year on the tests, tools and tiers themselves.

We also are working on research into string pinsetters. Everything about this technology is thoroughly being researched. The results may or may not provide conclusive data to support a position on the certification of string pinsetters. We are deep enough into the research to see there are significant differences from certified standard free-fall machines. The task is to narrow in on how much different and what causes the variances. Next would come analysis to see if manufacturing adjustments can be made to narrow the gap. String pinsetters remain uncertified for USBC competition as we finish up the research through this calendar year.

SMART

The SMART Board has been talking with USBC representatives over the last couple years about ways to provide even more value to youth bowlers in the future. In 2020, a working group of SMART stakeholders met through Zoom to discuss the program. The SMART Board has done an incredible job over the last 10 years in safeguarding the fund and growing it through a responsible investment plan. At the same time, SMART is in need of some significant policy changes in the future to better support students using funds.

In 2021, you will see the start of that effort as the SMART program moves back under the guidance of the USBC Board. A new committee will be formed to support SMART, with sub-committees of

qualified volunteers. One sub-committee will be on the finance side to continue ensuring SMART's safeguarding of funds and prudent investment planning. The other sub-committee will be looking at scholarship use policy, specifically ways to put more scholarship money toward education.



Photo from 2019 Intercollegiate Team Championships sectional qualifier

USBC staff has been operating the SMART program under the guidance of the SMART Board since 2010, so the service to providers and recipients will stay the same. The changes that are needed moving forward are complex, but everyone agrees with shifting SMART's focus to get more scholarship dollars used by youth bowlers. We thank the SMART Board for their leadership over the last 10-plus years and look forward to working on adjustments to SMART to ensure more youth members can further their education through bowling.

Summary

Our National Governing Body is moving forward and improving in many positive ways, and all of us can take pride in the accomplishments. The last year has provided us a unique opportunity to learn, think and care about each other. These lessons will allow us to be better and do better in the future.

I want to thank USBC Past President Karl Kielich for efficiently passing the torch to new President Melissa McDaniel in the middle of the year and the pandemic. Karl's leadership was a bright star in a very trying time and we wish him well. His commitment to pushing the new board forward while having to cancel so much of what we do required courage and grace. He skillfully facilitated the transfer of leadership in our governance structure, keeping our "essential" functions running smoothly during a year that made us evaluate that word like never before. I applaud Karl and the 2019/2020 USBC Board of Directors for their strategic thinking and dedicated service.

Also, thanks to President McDaniel and the current USBC Board of Directors for their leadership, support and quality strategic direction. Having strong volunteer leadership has never been more important. In that light, a huge thanks to the thousands of association volunteers who dedicate countless hours in support of bowling. Finally, thank you to our entire staff here at the International Bowling Campus for their efforts and passion.

I will close with a friendly reminder as to the mission and promise of USBC. It is certainly an honor and a privilege to serve as your executive director.

USBC is the National Governing Body for the sport.

Our mission is to provide benefits and services, resources and standards for the sport.

Our promise is to celebrate the past, be mindful of the present and ensure bowling's future through thoughtful research, planning and delivery. We will protect and nurture the sport with a mutual admiration and respect for all who enjoy bowling.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Chad Murphy', written in a cursive style.

Chad Murphy
USBC Executive Director