

Bowling group knocks down pins, builds friendships

By Kathi Overstreet
Sentinel-Voice

This weekend, The National Bowling Association members from Las Vegas, California and players from elsewhere will compete in the "Rolling on the River" Club Tournament at the Riverside Hotel Bowling Center in Laughlin, NV. Over 350 bowlers will compete for grand prizes totaling over \$5,000.

TNBA Las Vegas Senate offers both adult and junior handicapped leagues as well as team tournaments, junior tournaments, scholarship fundraisers and a King and Queen Contest.

TNBA, formerly the National Negro Bowling Association (NNBA), has a rich and proud history that stems from the fact it was established in response to racism in early years that often prohibited African-Americans from using White run bowling facilities and from joining existing official leagues for the sport.

The mission of TNBA is to promote friendship, sportsmanship and fellowship among the TNBA family, according to the local organization's Public Relations Director, Danny Mack, said.

He explained that "... locally we serve as a recruiting agency and point of entry for bowlers to receive the encouragement and coaching they need to develop their game."

Over the past half century, TNBA has grown to become one of the three major governing bodies for amateur bowling in the U.S. It boasts 30,000 adult members, 7,500 junior members, 500 sanctioned leagues, and over 110 senates throughout the U.S. (including one here in Las Vegas since 1976) and Bermuda.

The Las Vegas Senate membership includes a collage of members — blue collar and white collar workers, entrepreneurs, retirees, medical professionals, entertainers, public servants, educators, students and others.

The organization's name was changed in the 1940s. In addition, since that time, bowling has been the most popular indoor athletic "social sport" for Blacks in America, according to sport historians.

A fact not surprising since bowling has long been considered an affordable outing that is a fun way to meet new people and spend quality time with your family or that special someone. No wonder the

United States is home to over fifty million bowlers.

Even so, it has not always been so easy for Blacks to enjoy the sport.

In fact, there was a time when people of color occasionally had to take their bowling gloves with them to the bowling alley. That is, until 1939, when the first national Black bowling association was formed.

Sixty-six years ago, organizer Henry Harden and 20 fellow African-American keglers enthusiasts founded the National Negro Bowling Association in Detroit, Michigan, primarily for two reasons.

The first was to lessen the difficulties many Black bowlers experienced when attempting to go bowl or to join either of the two existing amateur bowling associations. Its second purpose was to encourage Blacks to develop their bowling skills and to actively participate in the fight for equality in bowling.

Back in the day, Blacks could be seen on any of the seven days of the week meeting at bowling establishments.

Ladies arrived in their knit sweaters and poodle skirts, accessorized with angora socks and two-toned saddle oxford shoes, cat-eye glasses and hairdos sporting straight bangs across the forehead and ponytails; or hair flipped up or in a "pageboy" or "poodle curls." Gentlemen wore shirts and ties with pullover sleeveless vests, argyle socks and Stacy Adams shoes.

Bowling alleys were equally impressive. Many offered a variety of colorful bowling balls to choose from and bowling shoe rentals, in addition to separate lounges and snack bars that prepared a variety of hot and cold foods and alcoholic beverages. Some facilities had onsite pro shops that offered the latest bowling attire for purchase and offered private coaching lessons by the pros.

Everyone came dressed to impress and ready to bowl. Yet, no matter how high their averages were, or what the bowlers wore, or how well they conducted themselves, they faced racism.

Blacks were still denied membership to the American Bowling Congress (ABC) and the Women's International Bowling Congress (WIBC). Both associations had "Caucasians only" clauses in their constitutions.

These association rules fueled tensions between Black and White bowlers and created an atmosphere ideal

for racial clashes at bowling alleys across the country. The result was the creation of the NNBA on August 20, 1939.

Rose Johnson, a great-grandmother, in her 70s living in Bedford Heights, Ohio, recalled memories of her past bowling experiences in Cleveland:

"I started bowling in the '40s for fun and exercise... I even had bowling dates — believe it or not, bowling alleys are a good place for dating. They are very public with a lot of people around... back then, chances were good that you would probably run into

other friends or family members there..."

Johnson recalled the racism in the early years, "I remember how we would be skipped over sometimes for White people waiting for open lanes, but I still favored the sport because it was an indoor game that could be played all year long."

Johnson rekindled her love for "tenpin," as it's often called, in the late '50s and '60s after divorcing, becoming a single mother and raising three daughters.

"Bowling was a good way for us to do something as a

family on a tight budget. Most Friday nights, [my girls and I] went bowling... they were also in a Saturday morning junior league, so while they bowled, I ran errands," Johnson said. She still enjoys the sport and bowls with the family every now and then.

Despite the fact that William Pierson built the first Black owned bowling alley in the country in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1940, it wasn't until 1950 that the ABC and WIBC removed the racial restrictions from their constitutions.

Nearly three decades later, in 1978, J. Elmer Reed of

Cleveland, Ohio, became the first African-American inducted into the ABC Hall of Fame.

In 1944, it was announced that The NNBA would become The National Bowling Association, Inc. (TNBA) in order to reflect its multifaceted focus.

TNBA, Las Vegas Senate, Junior Bowlers League, Director Darlene Mills, is a third generation TNBA member. "I love the game and I love children... my Dad's still a member and has been bowling for over 35 years."

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