

Hitting the Ground Running

By Jim Goodwin for the Bowling News Network

After a six-month search to replace former BPAA Executive Director Steve Johnson, the Bowling Proprietors' Association of America on May 11 named proprietor Frank DeSocio its eleventh executive director. He was on the job July 1, immediately following International Bowl Expo.

DeSocio and his wife, Cathy, who is the immediate BPAA past president, own a chain of bowling centers in Kansas and Oklahoma. After accepting the new job, DeSocio resigned as president of Strike Ten Entertainment, the marketing arm for bowling that he has been involved with for more than a decade. A search for his replacement at STE is ongoing.

BPAA President Tom Martino had high praise for Executive Committee Chairman David Spiegel and his seven-member committee, saying, "BPAA is very pleased to name Frank as executive director. His bowling, sales, and marketing background, as well as extensive industry contacts will be a great asset."

Indeed, it appears that BPAA was not ready to hire another leader from outside the industry and endure a year or two of the learning curve. Shortly after DeSocio was hired, the United States Bowling Congress, housed in the same building with BPAA, made a similar decision in promoting Chad Murphy to its executive director position.

DeSocio has been so busy since day one of his new job that it took a couple of months to schedule this interview for the BNN. He was very apologetic it took so long but also made it clear that he is working very hard to make BPAA as good as it can be.

When did you first know you were being considered for the job? Were you surprised when they contacted you?

I was more honored than surprised. There was a lot of talk about who would be best qualified to replace Steve, and I was told my name came up with the search committee. When they contacted me, I had to discuss it with my family, and we were able to come to an agreement and arrangement that would work for both parties.

Will you be living in Arlington, Tex., or commuting from Wichita?

Normally, I will spend four days a week in Arlington ... but they are long days. My work ethic is similar to a proprietor—lead by example, first-in and last-out to the office. Most weekends, I am home with the family.

Give us a few of your short- and long-term goals for both BPAA and for the bowling industry in general.

One of our top goals will be to restore Bowl Expo to the attendance levels it once had. It has always been profitable but less in recent years. To do that, we will promote it more -- bring in more dynamic speakers like President Bush and more of that stature. Think about it: If you are a small center operator in Iowa, it is a big deal to belong to an organization that makes that type of speakers and education available, not to mention all of the ways you can save money and make

money by attending Expo. As for bowling in general, we just want it to grow and get better, and we will do whatever it takes to help that along, especially in areas like youth bowling. We have a lot of work to do. Good things are happening, but it can always be better.

What is your reaction to the bombshell announcement from Brunswick, and specifically, how will it affect BPAA and Bowl Expo?

I don't think it will have anything close to the negative impact that some are predicting. From what I have seen, [Bowlmor AMF President] Tom Shannon is a very smart businessman, and we have already learned that all of those rumors about eliminating leagues from the centers are untrue. It is just going to take some time to see how it all plays out. But I think in the long run, it could be very good for bowling to have an energetic company behind all those centers.

What about the products business?



Frank DeSocio

Again, it depends on who buys it, but if it is the right party, it could mean growth and more profit. It is amazing what can happen when energy and fresh ideas are pumped into any company or organization.

Still, if you were representing Strike Ten, as you did for more than a decade, or the PBA, and you were trying to sell bowling to a potential sponsor, and they ask you why they should invest in bowling when its number one brand is leaving the industry, what would you tell them?

I would tell them that bowling is such a great opportunity that somebody was just willing to invest \$270 million to buy a group of centers and that many others are interested in the products side because they know what a good business it is. Don't forget, we hope ... that whoever buys Brunswick Products will pay rights fees for many years, so the Brunswick brand is going to be a part of bowling for a long, long time.

How is the search going for your replacement at Strike Ten? Why didn't they just promote [Interim President of Strike Ten Entertainment] John Harbuck?

I am not a part of that search committee, so I don't know details, but I understand that the board just wanted to explore options ... and John is one of the candidates who may get the job.

How will BPAA be involved in the ITRC [International Training & Research Center] and the IBMHF [International Bowling Museum & Hall of Fame], and what more can be done to make those two parts of the IBC [International Bowling Campus] successful?

I've been involved in the operation of the Training Center since it was built, and I am proud of all of the things we have accomplished with Team USA, and seminars and clinics, and visits from international teams, and youth bowling. We will continue those programs and add more. Regarding the museum, there are some things in the works that I cannot talk about right now, but we will continue to support the museum as much as possible.

A lot of people are saying that the USBC Convention was a pep rally that ignored any problems. Given that their membership losses directly affect BPAA-center business, do you think they need to develop a better plan for future membership?

Well, first, your framing of the question is a little negative. I didn't get that impression at all. I thought they did a good job with the convention, and my impression was that most of the delegates and everyone else who attended went home feeling better about USBC than when they arrived.

That is why I threw in the part about their decisions having a direct impact on proprietors. So you are saying that you have confidence in Chad Murphy and Jason Overstreet and their staff to turn things around and improve USBC and in turn help proprietors and bowling in general?

Yes.

Are traditional centers in big trouble? Is the future one where we see mostly Family Entertainment Centers, or is there a plan to promote hybrids, where both traditional league and recreation work together? What percentage of proprietors still believes in bowling as a sport? I'm suggesting it has dropped from over 80 percent to under 50 percent.

I don't know ... but I can tell you that I believe in the sport and what USBC is doing, and all of the proprietors I spend time with out in the field with seem to believe in the sport side of bowling. There is room in our industry for all types of centers, and whatever their methods and business practices are, we will try to help them be successful and make a profit. That is what BPAA has always done, and what we will continue to do.

You and [wife] Cathy, and Cathy's dad before you, have always promoted and supported the PBA. How can BPAA help PBA? We heard recently that there was an attempt to bring the PBA to Arlington, Tex., before they decided to make their headquarters with Luby Publishing in Chicago?

Yes, there was some discussion, but it just did not work out. You should speak to [PBA Commissioner] Tom Clark about why they made the decisions they did. Regarding our support for the PBA, it is as strong as it has ever been and we wish them much success. We will always be willing to help as long as it makes sense for both sides and for our membership. BPAA is in support of a strong Professional Bowlers Association!

What about the U.S. Opens and the Family Tournaments? We heard that BPAA has eliminated its Tournament Committee.

No, that is not true. We still have a tournament committee, but we have contracted the U.S. Opens and the All American Family Tournament to the USBC. They have some very qualified tournament people and over the years they have done a good job with tournaments. When our board looks at tournaments, they see them usually as something that cost us money instead of a profit item, so we decided to try this new arrangement with USBC to see how it works.

**Given the progress being made by World Bowling, shouldn't they also office inside the IBC?
Has there been any discussion of that?**

That is not a bad idea . . . but there has been no discussion that I am aware of. We would be willing to sit down with [World Bowling President] Kevin Dornberger to talk about it if he thinks it might work for all of us.