

# A wake-up call for organized youth bowling

*Gary Beck has questions, and answers, for the industry*

By Mary Lynly for the Bowling News Network

While some leaders in the bowling world are notoriously ho-hum when someone opines about the state of the industry, Gary Beck sees youth bowling's declining membership and the "what's in it for me" mentality and has decided to step up.

His recent white paper, 20/23 Vision, tells the story of what he sees as one of bowling's biggest problems today – where organized bowling has been, where it is, and where it's going. He hopes it will rally the grassroots and inspire stronger commitment.

Beck was touted as a "visionary" by Tom Clark on the USA Today Web site

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in 2002. Visions of success have always been a part of the scenario in anything Gary Beck does. He was an effective schoolteacher, excelled in bowling, fathered three productive children, and, slowly but surely, he is making his Teen Masters Tournament an example of the ideal youth event.

Beck has worked in national and international markets creating and promoting events in the bowling world, but his sole focus is now on the Teen Masters. The event is in its 14<sup>th</sup> year of competition and gives high school bowling a national television presence this fall.

His goal for next year is that the overall winner earns funding for an entire four-year college education in front of

a national television audience. He currently has seven national telecasts in the works that will air on the VERSUS cable channel that began in late November and continuing through January 27, 2010.

Few individuals have given life to more bowling television programs than Beck. Not every event returned for re-runs, but each one set the stage for subsequent programs. Brunswick, AMF, and the PBA have tapped into his talent for creating events that have been special experiences for players and fans.

His goal has always been to showcase bowling in a positive light, and he did that in the 2006 Women's Challenge; it pumped some life into women's bowling with its television finals held in the middle of a busy shopping mall in Las Vegas.

The following year, the PBA Women's Series was launched.

He sees bowlers still being stereotyped as blue collar, overweight, beer guzzling, chain smokers, and like everyone involved in the industry, he doesn't like it; but he says that bowling's image problem cannot be erased by just denying that the game doesn't have its share of "bubbas and bubbettes." Bowling needs to find ways of showing that other segments of the population enjoy bowling too, according to Beck.

Early in his career, he had the opportunity to create and implement a business seminar in Denver, Colorado for the corporate headhunting industry called "Fair Hiring Practices." It received a national

award. While the project consumed him, he said his friends saw the fire in his eyes that came from the process of creating something from nothing, and they encouraged him to use his creative talent to do more.

Spurred by this acknowledgment, in 1991, he created his first bowling event, the Mile High Match Play Madness, and his company Killer 'B' Promotions was born.

Is he a purist? He says, "Yes and No." He created the Teen Masters with "challenging lane conditions" because he believes there should be different results from well-executed shots and errant shots, and he wanted to create a new generation of bowlers who embrace a "pure" or challenging environment over one in which everyone is bowling high scores.

In his 2010 Teen Masters National Finals, high school participants will be limited to identical bowling balls in competition. It is a bold move intended to place the emphasis on technique rather than technology. Players will bowl six games on long oil and six games on short oil, with top bowlers rolling an additional six games on mixed pairs, with one lane having long oil and the other short oil.

In a move he describes as "a significant risk," the 2010 Teen Masters Finals will add a collegiate division. Why is he willing to take such risks? He believes in bowling. He is passionate about the sport and believes there should be a direct connection between effort and reward. He sees motivation to get better being stripped away, and opportunities to compete in scratch competition becoming more and more rare.

His purist spirit drives him to continue to create bowling events and experiences with clearly defined objectives, with most focused on the sport and oth-

ers simply for their entertainment value. He believes the industry needs both to thrive.

In March 2008, he penned an article in *Bowlers Journal International* magazine titled "Bowling's Handicapped Society." In the piece, Beck asked, "Is bowling's current plight the result of trying to build a society in which everyone can win and no one can lose?" He points out that there are more not-so-skilled bowlers than skilled bowlers and asks if engaging their interest will help grow the sport.

"Maybe initially," he says, "but in using handicap to make them equal, are we doing more harm than good over the long term? In our attempts to cater to mass audience, have we lost sight of what drives participation in sports? To me, handicap and bumpers are a 'safety net.' Kids relate to a challenge."

Beck was raised in the small town of Searcy, Arkansas, home to Harding University. He graduated from Harding with a Bachelor of Science in Biology and a teaching degree. Even then, he caught the attention of the local newspaper. A reporter described him this way: "Whether teaching or bowling, Harding

All-American Gary Beck seems to operate at a high level of performance."

Beck first got into bowling to avoid the hot, humid summers in Searcy. A 10-lane, air-conditioned, bowling center seemed like the perfect solution. He dropped out of bowling for several years, but renewed his interest in college. He said he was too short for basketball, too small for football, and he hated track, so he signed up for bowling and golf as a PE elective.

He joined the college bowling team, and finished the first season ranked 10<sup>th</sup> in a 10-man roster. By spring, he had moved up into the top five and joined the team at the NAIA National Championships, where the team won.

He competed in Nationals during all four years of college, and in his senior year, won singles, doubles, team, and all-events, which led to being invited to the U.S. Team Trials. He earned a position on Team USA in 1975 and had the honor of representing the United States in the FIQ World Championships that year in England. The experience forever tattooed bowling on his heart.

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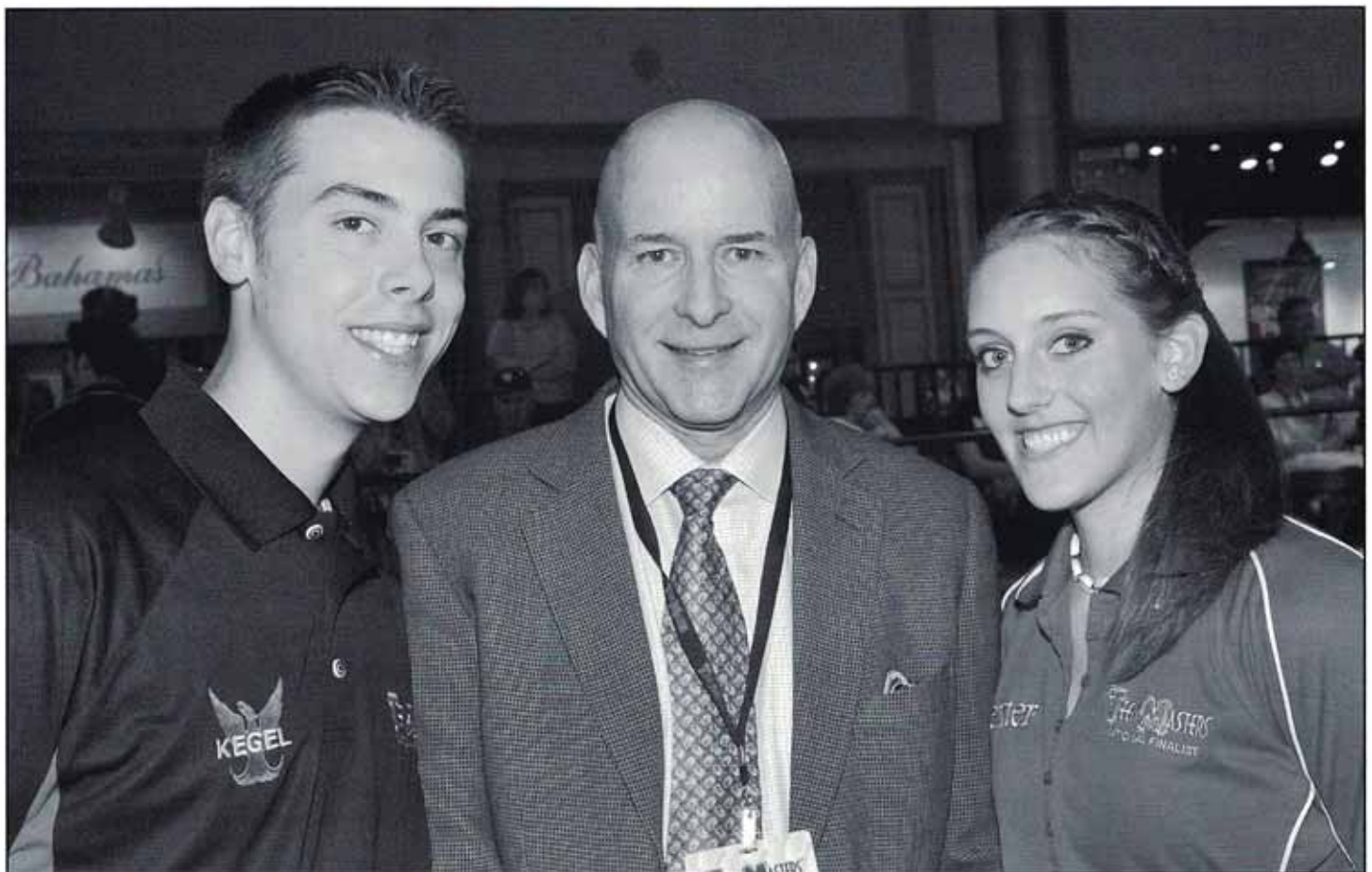
to be someone who can get things done and make things happen. He admits that there are always pitfalls, but climbing the mountain is his personal challenge. He is fond of the saying, "If you lose, don't lose the lesson."

The bowling industry has few people with the creative talent of Gary Beck. By tapping into his talent, it can send a message that it understands the importance of developing youth bowling and nurturing the grassroots, setting the stage for developing the passion and the drive to propel the sport to unprecedented heights.

Beck has paid his dues. He has felt the "thrill of victory and agony of defeat." His 20/23 *Vision* report should be a wake-up call for all concerned. Has he finally arrived at the right place and the right time and taken the giant step of putting a fire under the bowling world to make youth bowling a top priority? He's hoping 2010 will reveal that he has.

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*Mary Lynly, a past president of the California Bowling Writers and the California WBA, currently serves as the life member representative on the Bowling Writers Association of America board of directors.*



Gary Beck (center) with 2009 Teen Masters winners Brandon Fietek of Minnesota and Danielle McEwan of New York.