

THE PRODIGY

Page one

A prodigy can be described as someone having been endowed with an exceptional talent, usually at an early age. They are assisted by others who recognize that talent and work with them to bring that talent to fruition.

There are the others not born with an exceptional talent, but who work to improve that skill, usually by lots of practice. On occasion there are folks who are willing to work with and inspire that person to improve the performance of that talent. Those who have been inspired are called proteges.

Prodigies are pretty rare and often there is a big fuss made over them, yet a protege can achieve nearly the same results, by the efforts of those willing to give of themselves in bringing out the talent of someone who is willing to work for it.

Today's kids are very fortunate. They have magnificent facilities to train in and to take part in their chosen sport. They have very talented instructors to help them become dominant in whatever sport they choose.

Today the "bowling brats" ride to a multi-lane bowling establishment in air-conditioned comfort. They arrive with the necessary and best equipment to partake of their sport. Those who are willing to improve, work with a certified coach to get the best of the best that the instructor has to offer. They are now proteges and some work diligently to improve their skill levels. Those who become more diligent in their work ethic frequently wind up on television as members of the PBA. Although, they may not have had the talent to begin with, it is safe to say that they have graduated from protege to prodigy.

As a product of an earlier time, the same types of training facilities and instructors were not available to me. However, without realizing it, I became a protege by default. Would I progress to prodigy, probably not, but it would be nice to try. Later I will explain what I mean by the default method.

The hard rubber ball was the contemporary weapon of the time. It worked well on shellac or lacquer wooden lanes. There were no inserts in the ball, they hadn't been invented yet. At my time of starting, the finger tip grip was becoming the drilling of vogue.

The gentleman who fitted my very first ball asked me if I wanted a finger tip grip. Then he had to explain what that meant. I knew less than nothing about the equipment. It provided more revolutions with less work. I didn't know that! It hooked wonderfully and there was no more fun than to watch a ball go coast to coast.

After a time and a sore thumb, I determine that that thumb hole defies description. It needs about five pieces of adhesive tape for a decent fit (no pre-cut strips). Shucks, we even used tape in the finger holes. Oh, I nearly forgot, many of us carried a tube of Carpenters and some cotton to repair torn thumbs. The thumb hole was always too big, too round and in my case, the span was too long. There was something else that was somewhat new, three-eighths reverse, something else that I didn't know about. An excess here, more than your fingers could hold, would cause you had to knuckle the thumb hole to keep the ball from just falling off your hand at delivery. I am now becoming a protege by default, because of the actions and explanations of my ball fitter.

THE PRODIGY

Page two

This was the one ball era, black. You carried your shoes in a one ball bag. You didn't need anything else. The memories of the good old days return: towels and chalk at the back of the ball return, clouds of cigar smoke and the only message about bowling came by courtesy of the "Ten Pin Tattler."

The old ball returns were despicable because if you were tall, on occasion, you managed to kick a ball off the rack while shooting the ten pin. Heh, Heh! That always woke 'em up on the adjacent lane.

That hard rubber ball was terrific, well, there was no other choice. It could be left in the car in the midst of the coldest winter and it never cracked, but beware the first time you put your fingers in the cold ball. In the summer it never leaked, no matter how hot it got in the trunk of the car. Ah, those were great times.

I knew absolutely nothing about bowling and maybe even less than that. All that was necessary for me to know evolved around the third arrow, where my ball was supposed to roll across.

Even lane dressing was a mystery, until one day I peeked through the iron doors at 35th and Archer Recreation, the home of the famous "Petersen Classic". There was the lane man walking backward and spraying something on the lane with a "flit" gun. He started at the pin deck and flit sprayed right to the foul line.

That seemed a bit odd, as I had never witnessed anything like that before. If that seemed odd, then there were the naked nearly white lanes with no arrows or dots and the approach on lane 4 was at a slight angle to the lane, because the first board was mislaid. Odder yet were the pins which were various shades of white. Much later I find out the pins were also of mixed weights. So unwittingly I became a protege, by default, of the lane man. Truly, I violated the no peek rule, I wasn't supposed to be looking through the doors.

My father was the most influential in getting me to take up bowling. While he and my mother bowled regulaly in leagues, Saturday nights were bowling time for me the youngster and the added benefit was that he paid. After Uncle Sam let me go, my father brought me into a "MEN" only League at 35th and Archer Recreation, this meant no women, but lots of beer and smoke.

In time, there were other houses to try and that's how I met Les Zikes Senior, yes, Juniors father, who got me involved in leagues of higher skilled competition. He even tried to convert me to a full roller from a three-quarter. It was a struggle and my scores fell. I could never completely stop rolling my wrist and the ball never carried the pins like before. But Less said that full roller was the way to go and I tried to stay with it. I needed a coach, but none were available. There were no schools or instructors at that time, and after my scores dropped through the bottom, I dropped out for a time.

A few years later, I was able to start bowling again, but I had missed some important changes. Now the ball was urethane and the hard rubber ball just would never come back after rolling through the third arrow and what was that wet ring around the ball? It was recreation, but not enjoyment.

Skip a few years of being non-competitive and I meet, Neil Neufeld, who drilled me a modern urethane ball that could be used as a three-quarter roller. After explaining about the drilling, he worked with me a bit, to give me more confidence and some tips, which in turn raised my average.

But, real help came much later in the form of John Suddeth, the regional manager of Bowl America. It was he who took pity on me and forced me to learn that there were places to use as a guide other than the third arrow. Shucks, dummy me didn't even know there were forty boards to a lane.

It was a real challenge for him to get me off the third arrow. The first arrow was impossible and after dumping a few in the gutter I was ready to quit. He even grabbed my wrist to hold the ball in alignment, then stayed with me until I got some confidence and could consistently hit the first arrow. Well, you probably guessed the rest, If you said that that's all I could play was 5 board, you get the prize.

Time marches on and then came some formal training as a student for the Bronze Level with Pat Costello, who tried to get rid of my five board left drift, and the rolling wrist. That really didn't work, but I managed to learn how to get some control over both, when much to my surprise, Pat sprung the second arrow on me. Ahah! Now there are three places to roll the ball and therein lies a new problem for a protege. When do you use which?

Then came books and tapes by Fred Borden, Dick Ritger and Bowling This Month Magazine, with articles by Mo Pinel and Denny Torgeson. I cannot believe how much I got out of these, especially the technical aspects of the equipment, the effects of drilling and lane conditioning, which to my great surprise appears to have greatly improved since my first encounter.

Now as a student of the game, there was the matter of learning how to layout a ball and take care of ball. My bowling partner, Dan Payne, would drill it up based on my layout and we would argue the merits of how it had been laid out.

After a bit, there was the challenge of building the perfect thumb hole. What, my thumb is not perfectly round. I didn't know that. So why is the thumb hole perfectly round? After some thought, modifying the thumb hole seemed to be the thing to do. All these things have been learned by default by an unwitting protege.

There were other helpmates for the protege. The prettiest ball I had ever owned was the Storm Red Pro Tour that produced my first 700 after many years of futility. Now 700s are no longer strangers to me. Alas, the beautiful Red is long gone and perhaps the recipient will roll his first 700 with it. And thank you Barbara Batt, who resurrected Cassat Lanes and soon after there is my first 300, after another bunch of years having gone by.

It would be nice to hob nob with an exempt pro bowler and bring him to our lanes for others to see. There are a lot of folks here that have never seen a PBA pro and that might be a lot of fun for them too.

THE PRODIGY

I did my best and a lot of folks helped. Because of them I can now relinquish my original lack of smarts.

Yes the lane is still 60 feet long, not counting the pin deck. There are 40 board markings across the "linoleum". The pins and lanes are no longer wood and the ball is no longer black hard rubber, but there's no smoke and it's still a challenge and a great game.

Bowling is truly a sport, contrary to what some of the less informed sports news readers of ESPN say. We have no caddies. We carry our own equipment. Try doing that PGA.

The PRODIGY wannabe, nee protege by default, THANKS Y'ALL for the help.