

## INTERVIEWS

### **Bob Chase**

(Kansas City Stars)

When the NBL came into being I was already with the Professional Bowlers Association and a professional for the Schlitz Brewery and a professional for the Brunswick Corporation. So in traveling throughout the country for these organizations and teaching bowling what came to my mind was that the NBL finally would put bowling on the same level as any other sports (for instance baseball or football).

Then though I had an obligation to these other companies, which treated me extremely well, I also had an obligation to my family. The NBL represented an opportunity for me to bowl for a living, but not be traveling as much. So, I thought it was the way to go, especially because I loved bowling so much and the NBL put it on the same level of other sports.

One of my most memorable moments was opening night. We had Chick Hern who was from Los Angeles come in and do a pilot. The Loew's Midland Theater where the Kansas City Stars played was a 3500 seat former movie theater. And it was sold out for the first night. They made the pilot and we had the mayor and everyone there that particular evening. It gave me a great feeling because we had such a good turn out and it seemed I had made the right decision to join the league. There were no other major memorable moments because we were only actually in business for two months.

However, there was something interesting I noticed. Compared to the professional bowling tournaments NBL matches were like baseball games or football games where you have people hollering all the time. Professional bowling tournaments don't have that – you have people clapping for instance, but they don't holler people's names out. In the NBL you had people back in the audience who would holler at you. It was so funny. So one time when we were bowling at Bronco Stadium in Dallas there was one guy in the audience really giving Carmen Salvino the business. I remember he caught Carmen on his 3<sup>rd</sup> step one time and I think Carmen may have put one in the gutter. Carmen took off right after the guy...That was one of the most humorous things that I remember.

In general I have to say that I loved the team era of bowling the most. Before the NBL, we had the Schlitz team here in Kansas City. I was on the team from 1957 until 1960 and team bowling was great. We had a great team with great guys. You got to compete against the great bowlers from other cities, such as Don Carter, Dick Weber and Ray Blouth (on the Budweiser's), Patterson and Tom Hennessy – these were great bowlers and we got to compete against them all the time. It was hard, but probably the best time in bowling for me.

It can be kind of hard to understand when you look at bowling today. In those days, Salvino and myself and other guys in the 1950's – we all bowled on teams. There were the

Budweiser's the Falstaffs, the Stroh's out of Detroit, the Pfeiffers and Hamms Beer out of Minneapolis. It was the big breweries which sponsored the big bowling teams in those days plus we bowled in whatever tournaments that were available. There was the PBAA national team, PBAA doubles and then the great All Star tournament which was a 100 game tournament.

Such a high percent of the U.S. population was involved in bowling at that time compared with today.

Yes, I loved that time period and here came the NBL. All of a sudden it was the team-like atmosphere where we could pull for each other instead of being individualists. (When you go into bowl the PBA tour – whether you have a teammate or not – you're still an individualist. That's the way it works. So I loved the team era where you had a good team and everybody pulled for everybody.)

Unfortunately you don't have much of that anymore. The PBA pretty much well put that to sleep and all the former sponsors have gone by the wayside. In fact, you just don't see bowling sponsors like in those days. Used to be if you'd go into a bowling alley, everybody had somebody sponsoring them and they would wear their King Louis bowling shirts with the sponsor names on them. You just don't see that anymore. It's all gone. King Louis was here in Kansas City. They made the famous King Louis shirt and I don't think they even sell bowling shirts anymore – just jackets. But the bowling shirt in those days was big business. We sold those in our bowling supply business and did extremely well with them. Whether a gas station, beauty shop, barber shop – everybody in those days came in and bought shirts because they got the people with whom they dealt to buy them. It was colorful and good. It was the team era.

I heard about the NBL because I worked for the Mission Bowl here in Kansas City when John Mason got the Kansas City franchise. His name was John Mason and he put all the investors together. Naturally, since I was a hot item at the time, he contacted me and I became his number 1 man. I was named team captain and got to select all the other members to be on our team. I actually got to suggest who to go after in the draft.

We went to Minneapolis where we had the first round of the draft when they were getting everything settled even though I hadn't signed the contract at the time (but I was close). When we got back to Kansas City after the meeting I went ahead and signed. I joined the team in the capacity as player manager with responsibility for selection of the personnel that would be on the team.

Before I signed the contract I had had a lot to consider. Primarily I had to consider in my mind whether this league could possibly make a go of it. I had a nice thing going with Brunswick and Schlitz at the time and didn't want to throw it away. This is why I hadn't signed right away. I had a lot of thinking to do. I had a family to consider and wanted to be sure I was doing the right thing. But bowling was so popular back then, based on everything I had seen I really thought the NBL had a possibility of making it and I was so thrilled it would have put bowling on the same level as other sports. So in the end, I signed.

The whole experience did leave kind of a bad taste in my mouth when it folded so quickly. The Kansas City Stars only lasted two months, so I was pretty disappointed. I had thrown all my eggs in one basket, only to have it not develop. But I had to shake that off and go on. I had my family to think about, so I made my choices and was thankful I had had enough sense to keep my hand in the bowling supply business so I had something to fall back on.

In the end I think the league didn't succeed because at the time the Professional Bowlers Association and the NBL were both trying to get television and as it turned out the PBA got it and the NBL did not. Not only did that cost the NBL sports franchises valuable potential exposure, but they also lost the money which would have helped ensure they were successful. Most people believe if the NBL had gotten television it probably could have succeeded. Without it, however, the NBL didn't have a chance.

The pilot they filmed in Kansas City was so good that everybody was up and thought television was eventually going to happen. After they made the pilot in Kansas City, the local stations ran the program for a long period of time to help promote the game. But the league didn't end up getting television coverage as a whole, so I guess that's why it didn't make it.

And I don't think anything like the NBL will ever happen again. You have to go back and know how popular bowling was at that time. It was so extremely popular. That just isn't how it is today. Today major newspapers are not putting the major bowling stories on the sports pages. IF you find them now, they are buried in the very back in very small print. Compare it with those days when every major paper in the country would send a sports writer to cover events like the All Star. Consequently at the time there was great bowling coverage across the United States and even the world. Without such broad popularity there is little chance of another league like the NBL starting up again anytime soon.