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Bowling for Columbia

Personalized polyester shirts aside, bowling is right up our alley

If it could grow tired and forget its rhythm, the ocean would sound like a bowling alley.

With endless little crashes, never more than three seconds apart but never quite coming into cadence, the falling pins beckon the league players like surfers to their wooden shore. Awaiting the wrist-braced clans are athleticism and beer, competition and leisure — the happy balance of everything they could ask for on a Thursday night.

By 9 p.m. at the Oakland Plaza Lanes, there are 120 bowlers — as many as the

24 lanes will hold. We've seen all of these folks before. They fix our cars. They teach our classes. They serve us dinner, and they represent us in court. It seems as if almost anyone in Columbia could be found here, sipping a beer with friends and staring into the wide expanse of shining, greased pine.

The phone rings.

"I can't take no phone calls on Thursday; I'm too busy," says a harried bartender from behind a tray that holds at least 15 pounds of beer-filled glasses. She hands off the tray to a waitress and lights a cigarette before she pours us another Coors Light. Her confident bartender's composure returns, and the call is forgotten.

Meanwhile, the waitress and tray of beer make their way through the crowded tables that overlook the lanes.

They pass Kay, who is watching her son set his average for the season in one of his first games in the men's league.

"It's an alternative sport," Kay says to describe bowling's appeal. There aren't tryouts, and

just about anybody can do it, but there's still big money in the tournaments. She says her 17-year-old son has been bowling since he was 7.

He's still eligible to play in the youth leagues, which regularly award sizable

scholarships and prizes. Kay says he switched because there is more money in men's though there's some money to be made in almost all of the leagues.

Behind quite a few of the lanes, decks of cards sit atop small piles of cash along the rail. Kay explains that everybody has a different way of doing it, but usually a player takes a card for each of his or her strikes, and the bowler with the best hand seizes the wrinkled assets at the end of the game.

A few lanes down, the King Pins don't seem too concerned with money. They prod one another and casually make inside jokes between throws.

But when a member of the opposing team curves the ball far to the right and picks up a tight spare, one could almost mistake the King Pins' renewed concentration for a serious approach to the game. However, a team member wearing an "I'm on a drinking team with a bowling problem" T-shirt gives them away.

Bathing in the fluorescent light, the Sonic Rookies, the Pin Pals and the Bowling Stones prepare to bowl the night away. This is nothing new for many of them.

Mary Garver, a member of the Bowling Stones and a retired teacher, says the majority of women on her team has been bowling for at least 18 years.

Some members of the teams are colleagues, as revealed by the abundance of players dressed in company shirts. But other teams simply start with a group of friends.

"Those are the ones that last and last, years and years," says Steve Spaur, manager of Oakland Plaza Lanes.

He tells us about his customers while he watches the Stones flaunt their skills, and we begin to understand that a sport in which athletes can spend most of their time sitting and smoking cigarettes cuts across all sorts of social lines. Spaur says he has seen doctors bowling with lawyers and construction workers throwing balls beside bank vice presidents.

Something about bowling seems as therapeutic as a small vacation, even if it is only for a few hours and the closest beach is a thousand miles away.

Spaur tells us how he's seen bowling ease the suffering of bereaved elderly people who have lost their spouses. He shares a story of one older couple who got married after meeting through a bowling league and realizing they had been in second grade together.

Whether the bowlers are old or young, their end goal is the same. "I'm a lousy bowler," says Spaur. "But I have fun."

Behind him, players don their bowling shoes and partake in a sport that seems as immune to changing fashion as the shirts that make the sport famous. It's another Thursday in Columbia, and fingers grip, arms fly, and feet shuffle as another wave of shiny balls fade into the pin-lined horizon. This cheap paradise is only a stiff pair of rental shoes away.

— Peter Barnes

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