

State of Our Sport: US Open 2006

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Here is my Jan-Feb 2007 article for the Asian Bowling Digest. It focuses on the 2006 U.S. Open experience which saw a blizzard, a tie for the last qualifying spot and many challenges on the 40 foot flat pattern from hell.

State of Our Sport, Joe Slowinski, January-February 2007

As 2007 begins, I provide readers with my reflection on last year's U.S. Open. This year, more than 450 bowlers will return to the ultimate challenge in bowling to test their ability. Last year was no different yet held many unique moments. From a blizzard at the beginning of the week to a tie between room mates for the last qualifying spot, the 63rd US Open was memorable from start to finish.

For the 460+ participants who made the trip to the 82-lane Brunswick Zone Carolier Lanes in New Jersey for the 63rd United States Open, most would leave scratching their head. And, as one of these bowlers, I was no different. As a major event on the PBA tour, rarely do you see smiles from participants in the US Open. Rather, it is more likely to see frowns, heads shaking in disbelief and frequent expletives whispered under one's breath. Where else would you see exempt players on tour averaging under 180 for a tournament. In addition, I did see a few ball returns kicked by bowlers you are familiar with as bowling fans. One such exempt player, high-up in the points list, said to me that he would quit the tour if asked to bowl on this condition all year. But, this is one of the most difficult tournaments in the world. So, it is to be expected. Fortunately, I didn't see any bowlers crying in public. But, certainly, there were some very disappointed individuals. And, if you wanted to be humbled, then this is the place to be.

Although humbled, Michael Fagan wasn't one of these individuals who returned home disappointed. He made a 7-10 split in the second to last game of qualifying that would help him earn a spot into match play with 23 others. On a note of interest, he made the top 24 by just three pins edging-out PBA great Amleto Monacelli from Venezuela. Monacelli would earn \$1700 and watch match play rather than fight for the \$100,000 first prize. Interestingly, by virtue of the 7-10 conversion, Fagan would go on to make the top 4 and a chance at winning his first PBA title on Sunday. Ryan Shafer, Robert Smith and Tommy Jones were also not disappointed with their finals appearance in a Major.

On an international note, World Ranking Masters qualifier and 2005 World Bowling Writer Bowler of the Year Paul Moor of England was 82nd with a 199 average. Diandra Asbaty was 138th and Tore Torgerson was 142nd, both with a 193 average. The author, yours truly, finished 186th.

As a major, with a \$400,000 USD prize fund, bowlers expected a condition that would be challenging and the PBA didn't disappoint by applying a very demanding 40 foot flat oil (1-to-1 horizontal) lane condition. And, the scores tell the story. Qualifying leader Tommy Jones averaged just 219 for the three rounds and 18 games. Only 35 bowlers averaged over 205 in qualifying with a mere 15 participants averaging over 210. To make the cut and a \$1000 minimum cashing spot in the top 25%, 115th place, it would take minus 64 or a 196 average.

And, this last cashing spot would lead to another memorable event of the tournament. Rick Steelsmith and Lonnie Waliczek, who were rooming together for the week, tied for this last cut spot. Yes, room mates, had to bowl one more game, after 18 games of qualifying, for the last spot in the initial cut. Consequently, at around 10:30 PM, on the evening of the third qualifying day, a one game roll-off would be needed to determine who would earn a check for the week. In such a situation, a bowler has 30 minutes to arrive in the bowling center. After 5 minutes of warm-up, the roll-off began what would be a very exciting match. Waliczek could have forced Steelsmith to double in the tenth but his pocket shot in the 12th went high slightly leaving a pocket 4-9. Finishing last, Steelsmith could have won the match with a strike & spare. He left a pocket 8-pin with a flush shot and went 9 spare - strike. The bowlers tied again, at 203. Waliczek would eventually prevail in the one ball roll-off 20 to 19 after Steelsmith failed to strike on the second round of single shots. On a note of interest, Steelsmith and Waliczek both attended Wichita State University and trained under previous Team USA members, Gordon Vadan and Mark Lewis. Wichita State University has prepared such players as Chris Barnes, Partick Healey Jr., Sean Rash, Olivia Sandham, Clara Guerrero and Kristal Scott.

PBA officials were very concerned at the beginning of the week. Those who had arrived on Saturday witnessed blizzard like conditions in New Jersey with over 50 centimeters of snow falling in one day. Unfortunate for many, this required a quick response to travel plans as 100s of flights were cancelled at area airports, including JFK, Newark and LaGuardia, on this planned travel day for the majority of bowlers. Fortunately, for the author, he had made the trip on Saturday, before the blizzard, by traveling through six states and ten hours in blowing snow and rain. Overall, I would drive 2000 kilometers and 22 hours to participate in the tournament.

With such difficult travel conditions, the PBA scheduled an additional two-hour practice session for 11 P.M. Monday evening. Even with the additional practice, a number of bowlers couldn't make arrangements to arrive in time.

Specifically, many of the bowlers participating in the High Roller or Mini Eliminator in Las Vegas had difficulty getting to the tournament. Pro-Am events were cancelled for Sunday.

The week began on Monday, February 13, with a two hour practice session for all participants. Due to the size of the field, practice is held in two squads. During the practice squad, the ball representatives circulate the field providing advice on ball set-up and lane play. For me, Mo Pinel suggested a cover change and an increase in the size of my weight hole. I want to thank Mo for his support through the tournament. I had success with a Morich Total Shock and Awe as well as a Seek and Destroy. Mo helped me lay-out the Seek and Destroy on Wednesday evening so I could use it on my morning squad on Thursday where I started + 35 for the opening two games. In events, you are always looking to match-up better and need to punch-out new equipment during the event.

Over the week, Tuesday through Thursday, there were three squads bowling at 8, 12:30 and 6. The first and third squads are fresh oil featuring the 40 foot flat oil (1-to-1 horizontal ratio) while the second squad must bowl with the conditions after the 8 o'clock squad bowled 6 games. Each bowler bowls on each of the squads. I was on the C squad, bowling at 6 in the evening on Tuesday, 12:30 on Wednesday and finally 8 AM on Thursday. This is the best squad because you don't have a 30 hour wait between squad like the other two.

Bowlers on both A & B bowl an early squad on the day before they bowl the evening squad. This requires a 30 hour wait between squads. On the first day of qualifying, I saw Team USA member David Haynes at the movies, after his opening Round of 1359 for six games. He was killing time due to the long wait for his next squad. Long waits in such events require patience and time consuming activities. Over the week, I spent dozens of hours in the hotel pool with my wife and son. As on the lanes, a Major requires patience off the lanes as well.

After the third 6-game qualifying round, the top 25% make the first cut and have the opportunity to bowl an additional 9 games of qualifying. 115 bowlers made the cut needing at least a 196 average. As mentioned earlier, Michael Fagan earned the final spot into match play with a 206.96 average for 27 games. Match play begins on Friday evening and continued on Saturday including two amateurs, Team USA member Rhino Page and Jason Sterner. For those 24 bowlers who bowled in match play, they bowled 51 games over the week. This is another aspect of a major event that makes the US Open so challenging.

For the many amateurs who enter the tournament, the PBA rules proved to be a challenge. And, the non-PBA member meeting was cancelled due to the weather and was rescheduled after the second practice squad. This meeting is intended to prepare non-PBA members with the knowledge they need to compete successfully. Consequently, after practice, many participants learned that a number of equipment items were not eligible for use in the tournament. First and foremost, many bowling balls and other equipment are not allowed in PBA events unless the product is registered. This includes ball cleaner and finger inserts. Some companies not registered in 2006 included Roto Grip, Circle Athletics, Lane Masters and AMF 300. Participants must use a product from a company that is registered. Using an unregistered bowling ball in a PBA event is a \$500 fine for the first offense, \$1000 for the second and disqualification for the third offense. This leads to many creative fixes such as taping over an ABS logo on shoes and applying liberal amounts of black marker on the tape. Otherwise, a bowler will be fined for using unregistered equipment. Fines are listed in the paddock each day. Around a dozen names appear on the fine list each day. Bowlers must pay the fines prior to competing in the next round or they can't bowl.

When you bowl in a PBA event, the PBA also owns the rights to the right sleeve and the top of the back of your bowling shirt. These shirt locations are reserved for corporate sponsors and PBA logos. Participants can wear 4 logos, left sleeve as well as right and left breast, on their shirts but only of companies that are registered. The logos must be approximately 15 square centimeters. And, letters in your name must be at least 5 centimeters high. Violations to the dress code result in a \$100 fine. Specifically, there are more than 20 appearance rules. In competition, the PBA uses a "double jump" rule. Before a bowler on your pair bowls, one bowler on the pair to the right and one bowler on the pair to the left must throw a shot. Most of the time, this rule works well. But, unfortunately, it can cause some problems when individuals unaccustomed to the flow of the rule hesitate.

In the paddock, each bowler can have as many as 9 bowling balls. At full capacity, this would hold over 4000 bowling balls for the tournament. And, when you walk-in to the room you feel the lack of space. The ball spinners and work area tables also consume a good amount of area. Over the three days of qualifying, in the tournament, I did shake my head in frustration many times and must admit to a few unsavory words whispered under my breath.

Unfortunately, I missed the top 25% cut due a poor opening squad. Specifically, I finished in 186th position overall with an average of 189.56 for 18 games. I did beat a few Team USA members (Steve Weber and 2005 World Bowling Writers Bowler of the Year Andrew Cain) and averaged 198 for the last 12 games, 6 on the burn and 6 on the fresh. And I was in the position to make the cut when I was down to minus 144 with four games to go. With this level of performance, for all three squads, I would have qualified around 100th ahead of Patrick Allen and Mike Scroggins. What could have been...