



PHOTOS BY LEE HOWARD/THE DAY  
 Brian Ewing, the No. 1-ranked duckpin bowler in Connecticut and a teacher at Norwich Free Academy, bowls a strike on his first attempt at the Thames Club lanes in New London last month.

# NFA teacher writing book on duckpin bowling history

By LEE HOWARD  
 Staff Writer

A group of duckpin bowling experts — and whoever knew such a group existed? — converged on the venerable Thames Club in New London last month to try to solve a longstanding mystery: Did the basement of the club contain a prototype of one of the first pinsetting machines produced in America?

Alas, the answer was no, but the mystery wasn't solved until a group of men survived a trip to a sweltering attic and a visit by a swooping bat — apparently a common occurrence in the basement of the State Street club.

Thames Club members had heard the story of an Electric Boat engineer back in the 1940s who created the world's first duckpin bowling pinsetting machine. What they didn't know but suspected was that the engineer, Ken Sherman, might have installed a prototype of the machine at the Thames Club, which has a record of keeping two bowling lanes back to at least 1905.

A group of diehard duckpin bowlers who compete out of the Lucky Strike Lanes in Mansfield, recently read about the Thames Club's mechanical duckpin setters and arranged a visit Aug. 25 to authenticate the machines' origins.

"It's similar to our machine," came the quick diagnosis from Rich Dunnack, owner of Lucky Strikes Lanes, after he had a few moments back in the innards of the pinsetting area with mechanic Mark Mead.

Disappointed, club members nevertheless trudged upstairs to an attic storeroom where a bunch of spare parts lay on the floor. Again, the experts on duckpin found nothing extraordinary among the lot.

Nevertheless, they reassembled in the basement near where club members were congregating in the speakeasy, a convivial place to eat or drink, to hear Norwich Free Academy

English teacher Brian Ewing expound upon the history of duckpin — and the legendary pinsetting machine first conceived at EB. In addition to being the No. 1 ranked duckpin bowler in Connecticut, Ewing is writing what he hopes will be the definitive history of duckpin, which uses smaller balls than the more common ten-pin or candlepin bowling.

According to Ewing's research, EB engineer Sherman was an avid bowler who came up with the idea of a pinsetting machine in the early 1940s while involved in a competitive team game in the Groton-New London area. The teams had split the first two games of a friendly match when the teen-age pinsetter told them he had to leave to complete some homework, disappointing the competitors left without a way to finish.

"That night, Ken Sherman went home and said 'How can I design a machine to set up these pins?'" Ewing said.

At about this time in Ewing's presentation, a bat began swooping around the speakeasy, causing the group of about 15 to 20 men to retire to an upstairs dining room, where the lecture continued.

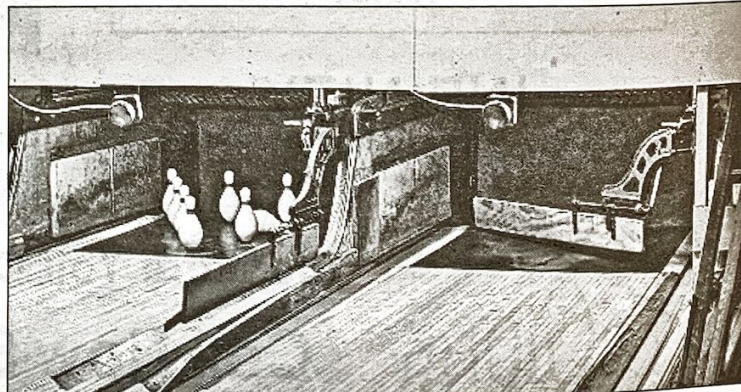
"Happens all the time," explained Bill Richmond, president-elect of the more than century-old Thames Club.

Ewing continued by explaining that by 1945, Sherman had developed a prototype that was being tested 24 hours a day at the EB shipyard by employees after hours and during breaks.

At the same time, AMF was working on its own pinsetter and other companies were entering the fray as well, for ten-pin and candlepin (which both use big balls). In 1947, Sherman and Electric Boat filed the first patent for a duckpin bowling pinsetter, an entirely mechanical device using gears, belts, chains, relays and microswitches.

But it took a long time to develop the proto-

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Duckpin bowling has been a staple in the basement of the Thames Club in New London for decades.

# Pinsetting machine's origins go back to EB engineer

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typo into a machine that could be mass produced, and by 1951 EB, flush with government military contracts, had lost interest in the project. It was ready to sell the patent, but Sherman was able to block the sale even though EB wouldn't turn over the patent to him.

That left Sherman with only one option if he wanted to be the kingpin of duckpin: leave EB and work to develop an entirely different mechanical pinsetting device for which he could get a second patent. And that's just what he did.

He formed a new company called Sherman Enterprises, working with a company out of Worcester, Mass., to produce the new duckpin pinsetting device. He started producing the machine in the early 1950s, filed a patent in 1955 and was granted the patent in 1960, according to Ewing's research.

"He gets it out before AMF's machine is ready, and it's a lot better," Ewing said. "AMF's was breaking right and left."

But Sherman was a better engineer than he was a businessman. His second big mistake after not being able to secure his initial patent was a plodding approach toward introducing the machine to the rest of the country.

According to Ewing, he insisted on slow, incremental growth, which explains why duckpin is still largely a Northeast and mid-Atlan-

tic version of bowling and why the Carolinas, Georgia and Florida are almost exclusively ten-pin territory.

By 1978, the manufacturing plant that had produced Sherman's pinsetters had closed down and his company basically went dormant, Ewing said. The ten-pin giant Brunswick apparently tried to buy Sherman's patent later on, but he turned them down.

"I can't find out why," Ewing said. "But the rumor is that he was worried they would sit on it and kill the game of duckpin bowling."

No Sherman pinsetter has been produced since 1978, yet many are still in operation today.

"Maintenance is the big thing ... it's a lost art," said Dunnack, the Mansfield duckpin operator.

"Whenever we roll, we have a mechanic on duty," agreed the Thames Club officer Richmond.

Dunnack's duckpin bowling center, which opened in 1925, currently has 24 lanes. He said it boasts the nation's longest continually running duckpin bowling tournament that dates back to 1931 and in 1937 featured an appearance by Yankee great Lou Gehrig and Gus "Lefty" Dugas, the Norwich outfielder who played for a variety of major league teams (Babe Ruth was supposed to show as well, but never made it).



Mechanic Mark Mead shows off the mechanical pinsetter at the Thames Club to Rich Dunnack, owner of Lucky Strikes Lanes in Mansfield on Aug. 25.

Still, Dunnack admitted there are very few duckpin lanes left nationwide, and every year a few more drop by the wayside. A few years ago, for instance, the Willimantic Elks Club removed its four duckpin lanes.

The Thames Club has only two lanes, but they have been in constant use for generations and are considered one of the perks of mem-

bership. President-elect Richmond is hoping to entice young men and women working at EB to join for a little over \$100 a month to help add some new blood to the traditional social club.

"Bowling is big here," Richmond said. "We don't want to give up on that." [l.howard@theday.com](mailto:l.howard@theday.com)



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