

The changing face of lawn bowls-Western Australia.

For some time now, in fact a number of years, I have been desperately concerned about the way the sport of lawn bowls has progressed.

Interestingly, it has become more and more apparent in recent times that the concerns I have felt have also been felt by what I believe to be a large number of active bowlers.

What I propose to do hereunder is to set out my thoughts, experiences and suggestions. I do not intend to provide a formal manifesto in this regard. That can be done in the near future if required. However, in point form, I propose to make certain statements and recommendations which, to the best of my ability I believe are critical to the survival of the game of lawn bowls.

I will start with some rather provocative statements. I believe they are true.

1. Bowls in its present form is a throwback from the past and is, thus, its own worst enemy.
2. Young people (and by this I mean people under 65 years of age) generally speaking, do not aspire to become bowlers or to participate in bowling. They consider that bowls (and it is unlikely that they consider indoor bowls when thinking about bowls) is entertainment only for very old men and women, which should be undertaken as an occupational therapy exercise once one reaches about 80 or 90 years of age.
3. The use of the words "lawn bowls" or "bowls" in themselves conjure up a picture of octogenarians walking at funereal pace up and down flat grass, wearing floppy hats, their necks and arms covered by pieces of cloth, glasses, white clothes (and in the case of women, long pleated dresses with flat brown shoes), some brandishing flippers on the end of a metal stick as aids to enable them to bowl.
4. It is extraordinarily difficult to break this perception of what bowls is about.
5. It is almost impossible to entice anyone between 30 years of age and 65 years of age to even come to try bowls.
6. Pennants is currently, in effect, the primary driver and goal of all bowling clubs.
7. The main interest by the current membership of bowling clubs, when potential new members are encountered, is whether or not they are candidates to join the club's pennants teams, whether that be weekdays or weekends.
8. Pennants is a game which goes back longer than most people wish to remember and has a 4-player-per-side format.
9. In effect, there are then 8 players in a game of pennants, generally each having only two bowls.
10. Doing the maths gives rise to a frightening statistic. Players spend approximately 15 minutes actually playing the game (assuming 42 bowls at, say 20 seconds per bowl- time on the mat actually bowling), the game itself usually occupying about 3 hours but the whole event consumes about 4 to 5 hours.
11. According to my calculations, based on actual playing time only, 7% of the game is playing the game. The balance of the time is standing around.
13. A significant portion of at least the latter half of the 21 ends, which comprise a pennants game, is usually consumed by discussing the consumption of alcohol at the bar at the end of the game and various medical ailments.
14. There are, as stated above, four people on each side of the rink. Almost invariably, at each changeover, at least 2 people on each team, have a tendency to occupy what must objectively be viewed as "an eternity" to perambulate from one side to the other. The consumption in time caused by this sedentary, funereal perambulation is further evidence of the mind-numbing aspect of pennants.
15. Pennants has been played for far too long. It is dead boring. It is monotonous. And it is played by unadventurous players, on the whole, other than in the highest leagues. And it is not the highest leagues which will entice in novice players.

16. Pennants is an historical dinosaur. Playing in teams of 4 players is also an historical dinosaur. It is uninteresting, slow, and totally un-enticing for new players who, ideally, should be young. Or “younger” perhaps is a better expression.

17. Most bowling clubs are struggling to make ends meet. I am not aware of any one of them who has a materially increasing membership. In fact most o clubs are probably suffering from a case of impecuniosity.

18. A different position seems to apply where there are recreation clubs which include bowling clubs (often former bowling clubs which have converted to a broader recreational facility).

19. Lawn bowls as we know it is dying and will be dead within about 10 years, more- or- less, unless something is done and is done quickly and with great conviction. There is much support for a change.

Bearing in mind the demographic of lawn bowls (see above) a change in the existing system has been difficult due to the age of voters on any issues affecting change. However, if we leave the system as it is and introduce what is in effect an alternative, there should be no difficulty whatsoever as the support of the “reluctants” is not required, save that numbers will be drawn away from pennants which will inevitably come to an end by natural attrition a little more quickly than otherwise.

20. To the extent that it is not too late, the longer we pursue lawn bowls in its existing format, the more entrenched will be the long-term damage and the more difficult it will be to escape the inevitable demise of the sport. I am concerned that the long-term damage may in fact already have been fatal to the survival of lawn bowls.

What could be done to change the ultimate demise of bowls?

21. In my view there are a number of matters which need to be implemented, quickly and effectively, in order to salvage as much of the viability of the sport as possible.

22. Firstly, it would be preferable if the format of pennants is no longer played. There is some difficulty with this of course, and that difficulty effectively lies at the feet of older players.

23. It is the fact that older players are the primary opponents of change in the game. Evidence of this is in the vote which recently prevented a change, albeit a very small one, proposed by WA bowls. It is also my personal experience at a club only a week ago, which suggested change from 4 players to trips. (The only people who voted against a change from fours to trips were those very old players who are hanging on by their fingernails).

24. The game needs to be played in single, pairs and at most trips format.

25. My suggestion is that pennants be continued to be played by those who wish to play it.

26. However, starting as soon as reasonably practical, a new format of bowls should be introduced for those who find pennants boring and oppressive. For the purposes of this note I shall call it “the bowls league”.

27. There is no particular fixed format for the format of the games in the proposed leagu . So for example, sets play, much like the recent preliminary indoor competition could apply for part of the time (see further below).

28. Subject to the availability of time to be occupied in games, the suggestion is 3 sets of, say 9 or 11 ends with a single shootout of 2 bowls each if there is a tie. That should occupy, effectively, the timeframe traditionally occupied by a four-man team pennants game.

29. This is what I would call a *standard competition format*.

30. Further formats should be identified, such as power-play, Jack attack and such like in order to vary the games and keep interest alive.

31. I have already received support for the change by a number of people and almost everyone has a proposal for a method of play.

32. What I therefore suggest is that we break the year into 4 quarters and that each quarter will be played in a different format. No format will be provided in this league for 4 players on a side. That situation may change, eventually, when the pennants format ceases operating. The nature and time if day games are played may be varied to accommodate the weather and other circumstances

33. Any proposed format to be included in a particular year of play must pass the “**excitement test**”. This means that the format of the game must be assessed on the basis of its rigour, speed, excitement and entertainment value. These critical attributes (and there may be more) must be ranked in order of priority to extract the greatest level of player satisfaction and community interest, acceptance and support).

34. I am advised by Mr Derek Boardman that he was in some way involved in the recent attempt at modifying the current pennants format. He apparently has at hand a large number of submissions which, I am advised, include format proposals. He is in support of a change and will give guidance on some format issues. I have already received a number of off-the-cuff verbal proposals and I am confident that *an exciting future lies just over the threshold through the door which is now open for us to walk through.*

35. Perhaps one of the most frustrating and contentious aspect of lawn bowls as I know it is the issue of “selection”.

36. I do not think that there is anyone other than the selectors who like and trust the selection process.

36. Unfortunately, all us bowlers are human beings with the usual foibles and we all like to think that we are the best bowlers on the green. Nothing could be further from the truth. Thus, when selectors select certain players and put them in certain divisions, there is often a significant level of dissatisfaction and discontent. This is nothing new. And it won't stop as long as the selection process is in the driving seat.

37. What then should be done? The answer is simple. Just like in most other sports, athletes should trial out for their positions to represent their respective teams/clubs. And this needs to be done on a purely objective basis, rather than leaving it to selectors who often subjectively allocate positions.

38. Further, and perhaps just as important, players should be invited to identify the positions in teams which they wish to play in, alternatively, a system should be set up for players to form their own teams and it would then be up to them to determine within their teams who plays in which position.

39. The self- selection process is undoubtedly what should occur in my view. This enables friends to play together rather than be separated and be forced to play with people with whom they have nothing in common and with whom, most often, they simply do not wish to play.

40. At all times we should remember that lawn bowls, like every other sport, is one to which people will be attracted on a voluntary basis. You cannot force somebody to come to bowls on a Saturday afternoon, and you certainly should not force them to play in a team in which they would prefer not

to play. So a choice needs to be given to the players in order to ensure that they come to their practises and games voluntarily, willingly and looking forward to spending that time together with their friends.

41. Some of the games set for the year (remember, we may have 3 or 4 different types of games in each year. Some of the games may remain in the “system” indefinitely and some might fall out and come back in. Player positions could be determined by player demand from time to time) and may be on the basis that they are self-selected and others may be where people are nominated by a coordinator on a drawn basis.

42. If one wishes to have a grading system to fit in with a new format, something like the selection process or grading process for pennants today, then that grading process should result in positions being attained based on.

43. How will that be determined? I have designed a system which will enable a score to be applied to a bowler with regard to his/her competency in his area of preferred specialty.

44. Firstly, if this type of format is to be adopted, bowlers should be asked to nominate in the positions they wish to play. They should then be tested in those positions and scored in respect to those positions.

45. The scoring achieved by each bowler will determine the level (division) in which that bowler plays.

46. If a formal “pennant -like” format is adopted then I suggest that a set number of “trial games” be played prior to the relevant season starting, let us say 3 trial games, during which scoring of competency takes place. The scores achieved over the 3 games are averaged and applied to the player in the position in which he essentially wishes to play. If it is a game on a club by club basis, the clubs will have their players ranked into 1st, 2nd, 3rd and other divisions based on their scored points (level of competence).

47. It can readily be seen that the need for selectors will disappear. The perceived subjectivity also will disappear. It will no longer bug the players. If they are in 3rd division they are there because their own competency level has dictated that. If they are in first division then they are there, not because they drink with the selectors, but because their competency level dictates that.

48. It will no longer be necessary for selectors to rely on feedback from skippers. Such feedback may, of course, also be erroneous, subjective (or malicious) as the case may be and as it is sometimes claimed.

49. There will be no more complaints by players about the positions they occupy on the ladder. A format will be provided for players to trial at various stages during the season if they consider it appropriate to do so in the context of their improvement (or regression) which has occurred. This sort of detail needs to be ironed out but the principle is clear.

The clubs

50. There are many clubs around which, regrettably, look like they are RSL clubs from the early 20th century. This is one of the primary things which also needs to change. From a personal perspective I have no doubt that the words “bowls club” need to be removed from any promotional material, buildings and other advertising as this is simply prejudicial to the prospect of any new younger players considering the sport.

51. Accordingly, some thought should be given to removing these references and substituting them with names such as: (“here insert specific name such as Yokine or Cambridge or Bedford) recreation and entertainment centre”.

52. The premises should be upgraded to be bright, airy and inviting. This would include nice, modern signage and the like. Critically, what should occur is that other sports should be invited to participate in the facilities. This would include a futsal court for example, which could also be used for other purposes such as children’s parties, indoor golf (something I’m investigating at present) and I’m sure that some people will have some other good ideas. This will really just be space governed.

53. To the extent that it is possible, clubs should open themselves up to be entertainment centres including but not limited to the provision of decent quality food, good quality coffee, snacks, and general entertainment venues for weddings, seminars and the like.

54. The historically important, but now no longer really relevant, wooden honour boards and the like should, as is already happening in some clubs, be replaced with computer driven accolades (which, quite frankly, I don’t believe anybody would ever look at, other than those who are deadly bored) and generally modernisation should occur. It may even be that a “corporate get-up” be adopted throughout WA to get people to recognise these activity centres ie, so that they stand out and look enticing.

55. One of the issues foreseen with the changes in the formatting as proposed will be an outcry about “who is going to manage all of this”.

56. This is the era of artificial intelligence. We are in the process of changes which are already and certainly will continue to be as significant, if not materially much more so, than the Industrial Revolution. The answer to that question is computerisation.

57. Computer programs will enable people wishing to book competitions to do so on the Internet, just like one can book a golf timeslot, a dental timeslot or a medical timeslot.

58. Bowlers who are members of clubs would get logins to enable them to access the membership lists on the relevant club’s website. This list will include appropriate member contact details which would enable the membership to arrange amongst themselves the team’s which will book their team’s position/games on the computer.

59. A system of computerised scoring will be set up so that humans do not need to address that laborious task. Dual inputs or confirmations could ensure no nefarious activity.

60. Hopefully, this will start to enliven the game and concerted efforts should be made to have television coverage, particularly in semi - finals and finals.

61. It is my view that once this lead is up and running, it will attract significant numbers of players. There is a wealth of anecdotal evidence to this effect.

62. The proposal will not require anyone to vote for anything. Those who wish to stay in the dark ages may continue to play pennants until they can no longer stand up straight.

63. Those who are keen to play active, vibrant bowls will have a field day.

The solution to the fast degenerating situation within the bowling fraternity can be turned around within a very short space of time.

I have spoken to WA bowls earlier this week and, essentially, put this position to the Association. I am hopeful of getting a response from the association before the end of this weekend as to whether or not the association is interested in pursuing the ideals set out above.

If not, it is my intention to proceed to set up a league in any event. Anybody who is interested in assisting or supporting the new proposal should initially contact me by email please. Any assistance and ideas, essentially based on the above, would be most welcome.

PS. I have not checked the grammar and spelling in this document. There may be some errors in it. For those who may be interested I have dictated this document using DragonDictate. Anybody who types as slowly as I do will be delighted to learn that you can dictate what you want to type and the program will translate your voice dictation into words on your screen as you watch. It's amazing.

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