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ALTA'S BLIND BOWLER ROLLS PERFECT GAME

Dale Davis, 78, scores first 300 at Century Lanes

"When I got to the tenth frame, I said 'Lord, let me throw three more good balls.'"

THE HAMMER COULD HEAR THE CRACK OF 12 STRIKES

BY JAKE KURTZ

A perfect game. The most difficult achievement a bowler can accomplish.

It's even more impressive when a blind World War II veteran does it.

That was the scene at Saturday evening's All-League Playoffs at Century Lanes in Alta. Dale Davis, just three months from his 79th birthday, his sight stolen years ago by macular degeneration, rolled 12 consecutive strikes in front of an enthusiastic and supportive crowd. The effort was the first-ever 300 game at Century.

"It was quite a thrill," Davis said of the achievement. "When I got to the tenth frame, I said 'Lord, let me throw three more good balls.' When I did, people on other teams were yelling and cheering. A few guys were hugging me and almost broke my skinny bones."

With his neatly combed back hair and 115-pound frame, Davis is proud of the fact he still uses the heaviest ball available, explaining that he and his ball "weigh over 130 pounds together."

His first introduction to bowling was as a pin-setter in his early teens, making roughly 45 cents per night. Since that time, the former truck driver and carpenter has amassed over 65 years of experience with the sport. As he grew up, Davis' bowling skills flourished and he began to play in leagues and tournaments. He even won an event in California to take home \$2,500 after his days served with the Navy.

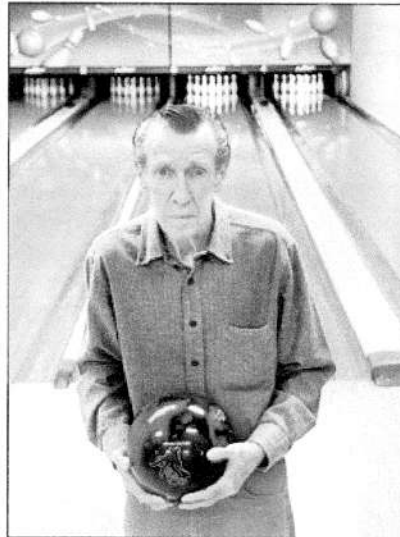
In 1996, Davis lost all vision in his left eye. He believes heavy smoking and his previous lifestyle were perhaps factors in the loss. A year later, the sight in his right eye began to blur and eventually darkened as well.

Davis, who is divorced, was living in California at the time of his blindness. He made the decision to leave the west coast and move back to Alta, where he had been raised. His sister, Thelma Shorewood, lives in Storm Lake and makes life easier today by helping with errands and some meals. He has two sons in California and two in Illinois.

"When I moved back, I asked if I could stay with her. I said it would only be for a few months," Davis explained of the aid Thelma provided. "Instead, I lived with her for just over four years — even remodeled her basement. She isn't just my sister, she's a great friend to me. I wouldn't be bowling now if it wasn't for her."

The only sight Davis has today is a foggy spot of peripheral vision in his right eye that requires him to turn his head to use. He uses what remains of his sight to maintain his small apartment, take care of his dachshund, and find where he needs to line up on the lane.

He even sits a few inches from his television screen sometimes and tilts his head to get a meager, tunneled glimpse of professional bowling when it's on.



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Times photos by Dolores Cullen



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"He gets around and does pretty well for a blind guy," Thelma said of her brother.

In the wake of losing his eyesight, Davis gave up his bowling passion for a few years. Thelma, though, continued to be active in area leagues and eventually talked Davis into picking the sport back up three years ago. Now he plays six games a week, in two leagues.

Thanks to his sister's support, Davis is back in form with a 188 average to show for it. Fellow bowlers nicknamed him The Hammer for the surprising punch his shots can pack.

"I can't see the lane or the pins and have a heck of a time finding my ball sometimes," Davis said with a laugh of his bowling skills. "I can kinda see the dots on the floor to know where I start. After that, I rely on my hearing and other people to tell me what's going on."

When he doesn't throw a strike, fellow bowlers like Century Lanes owner and good friend Clem Ledoux tell Davis what pins are still standing. The blind bowler then finds his bearings with the dots on the lane, approaches and hurls his next shot.

"The Hammer has a great knowledge of bowling," Ledoux remarked. "It's hard for some to believe, but he gets more strikes than spares. There are times you think his ball has eyes. It's almost like the ball sees for him when he bowls. He remembers things so well from when he could see that he just pictures the lane and the pins in his head and uses his imagination.

"There isn't a bit of luck when it comes to the Hammer's game. He really is that good."

Davis has four balls he uses for different circumstances. One is for the 10-pin and tends to curve toward the right. The others are used depending on how the lane is playing on a given day.

"I've also got a new pair of bowling shoes, too," the Hammer added. "I'm not using them until Clem gets the new lanes finished."

Century is in the expansion process, as Ledoux plans to have four more lanes in working order by Labor Day. Davis, of course, wants to be one of the first to test the new lanes in the new bowling shoes he bought in honor of the event.

It's believed that when a person loses one of their senses, the others get stronger to make up for the loss. In Davis' case, his sense of hearing has greatly improved since 1996 and is evident with his bowling game.

While he took in some practice throws Monday afternoon, Davis' bowling routine was on full display. First, he lines himself up on the floor dots. Once situated, he pauses for a moment to relax. Davis then takes a few steps toward the lane and releases his ball of choice.

His first toss of the day started off to the right and faded back left, eventually leaving only the 3 and 9 pins standing after the collision.

"That ball went south," Davis said accurately of the throw without seeing anything. "Some pins are still standing off to the right."

Ledoux informed Davis which two pins were left. The 78 year-old then again found his position with the dots, followed his routine and hurled his ball down the lane. This time, the 3 pin was all Davis took out in his effort to pick up the spare.

"Shoot," Davis said in disgust after hearing just one pin fall. "I left one."

The variation in sound as his ball makes contact with the pins allows Davis to sometimes "see" what type of shot he had without actually laying eyes upon it.

"The sounds of the alley let me know how I'm doing," Davis said of his hearing. "There's a loud crack when I get a strike. When I hear that crack, usually it's followed by someone telling me I can sit down."

"Saturday night, all I heard was 12 cracks in a row."

Those 12 consecutive cracks also lifted a burden off Davis' shoulders. With bowling such an important part of his life, Davis said it was good to finally reach his goal of getting that elusive 300 game.

"After I went blind, I just assumed it wouldn't happen," he said of the doubts he had. "I always knew I wanted to have a 300, but I never thought it would be possible, especially as I got older and couldn't see. Bowling rejuvenated me. I've got a love for this game I can't even describe."

Bowling being a part of Davis' life again has also taught him another important lesson: You're never too old to set goals for yourself.

"Hopefully I'll do this again when I'm 90."