

Wednesday December 23, 2024

Spare Change

By Johnny Campos

Peoria-area bowling family and friends mourn the loss of Gary Smith, the man with the golden arm swing

Anyone who knew Gary Smith was aware that even his closest friends were not immune as targets of some of the brutally honest comments he would make from time to time. Or often.

But Smith's sense of humor, sharp tongue and unfiltered honesty just added to his legendary status as one of the area's best bowlers ever.

He had an abundance of natural talent on the lanes and was blessed with a golden arm swing. His physical game was second to none. Smith racked up countless honor scores, city titles, state titles and PBA regional titles during his career on his way to being inducted into both the Peoria and Illinois State Halls of Fame.

He died on December 8, at the way-to-young age of 71, ending a long battle with Wegener's Disease and a recent bout with COVID. There was no funeral or cremation service because he donated his body to science for research.

That's the kind of guy he was.

And nobody knew that better than Pete Argo, one of Smith's closest friends for the past 43 years.

"His daughter notified me on Saturday that he was getting really bad," Argo said. "I asked if I could come and see him, which I did. I talked to him on Saturday night, said my peace, and he died the next day.

"But we were very close. He and his wife were with me and my wife Linda when we eloped."

Smith was quite the character and made no bones about displaying just how good he was on the lanes. He would walk into Bowl-Mor Lanes for the DuPont League, carrying just his bowling shoes and one ball. One season he used a different ball every week for the first 16 weeks.

"He showed up with a Turbo X one night, shot 300 with it and said, 'I'm never bowling with that ball again!' " said Kenny Combs, who won a team title in the Peoria city tournament with Smith. "He said the ball left about four pins on the deck every time."

For many years, Smith and Argo teamed with Terry Hoesly, Barry Irwin, Dinky Harris and the late Bill Mastronardi for some very formidable line-ups in league play.

"We won a lot of city team titles together, singles and all-events, but we never won a doubles title together," Argo said. "I finally won doubles but it was with Terry Hoesly, not Smith. I won a lot of other doubles titles, but never with him."

They also usually were captains of teams on the traveling Masters League, which had a draft. So Argo and Smith didn't usually bowl together in that league, because the bowlers with the highest averages were all captains.

Argo and Smith also were members of the Professional Bowlers Association, and both finished their PBA careers with four regional titles. Smith had one on the non-senior portion of the region and three as a senior player after he turned 50.

But the two bowlers also were friends off the lanes, which wasn't always a good thing.

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“One day we were playing football with his kids,” Argo recalled. “On back-to-back plays, he broke his wrist and I broke my hand! And both of us were captains of our Masters teams. We both were out for six weeks, and (former Peoria Journal Star bowling writer) Wayne Raguse wrote an article about it.”

There also was the time when Argo and Smith wanted to bowl in a Sunday league at Landmark Lanes, but the rest of the league members wanted to keep them out.

“They said we were too good,” Argo said. “But we wanted to bowl, so we said we’d take negative handicap. So that’s what we did – and we still won the league!”

“Gary shot an 847 in that league one night,” added Combs. “And it ended up being an 812 with the negative handicap!”

Smith was the pro shop operator at various times at Crossroads Lanes and at Landmark Lanes for many years. But he could have probably used a little training on customer relations.

“Gary was really nice and sweet. but he was also very misunderstood,” Combs said. “When he ran the pro shop, somebody would come in and want to buy the newest latest and greatest ball, Gary would hand him a White-Dot and say, ‘Go learn how to bowl, then I’ll sell you those balls.’ He wasn’t the best salesman when it came to that kind of a thing.

“He was very critical of being physically good and mentally good – and making your spares. He did not like short oil, either. He did not like the fact that guys like me could throw strikes now. And he made it well known.”

When Smith did turn 50, he had not bowled in a few years.

“He went out and drilled four balls, went out and bowled the USBC, then went out on the PBA Senior Tour – and did well out there for a few years,” Argo said. “It’s too bad the young bowlers of today never got to see him bowl.

“I would almost bet that with a little work, he could still throw the ball the way he always did. His arm swing was just so smooth. He would never practice, just show up in league and kick everybody’s butt the whole time.”

Smith was a mentor to some of the area’s rising stars when they were youngsters.

“On Friday mornings, he would let me in through the health club before it opened to let me practice,” said Travis Anderson, who got to bowl with Smith a few times at the USBC Open Championships. “And that’s even before I started working at Landmark.”

Smith also would pick on both Anderson and Tommy Barnwell while helping them on the lanes. But it was worth it to them, because it meant they also were gathering a little more information from his wealth of knowledge about the game.

Smith took occasional breaks from the lanes, including bowling in the American Bowling Congress (now United States Bowling Congress) Open Championships.

“He quit before getting his 25th,” Argo said. “But I was getting close to my 25th and got him to start going again. So, we ended up getting our 25-year plaques in the same year (2016).”

And after bowling in that event, Smith unofficially retired from the lanes.

“The last year he bowled nationals, he got done with the last shot, took his bowling ball and put it in a little cubby hole they had back there,” Combs recalled. “Then he took off one shoe, put it in the garbage can, took off his other shoe, put it in the garbage can, put his other shoes on and said, ‘Let’s go play craps!’ That’s how he retired. He was done.”

There was a celebration of life for Smith at the Par-A-Dice Hotel. Smith worked at the casino for many years, right up until just before he took a recent trip to Italy with his wife Denise.

A few members of the bowling family showed up to pay their respects and share their favorite stories about Smith.

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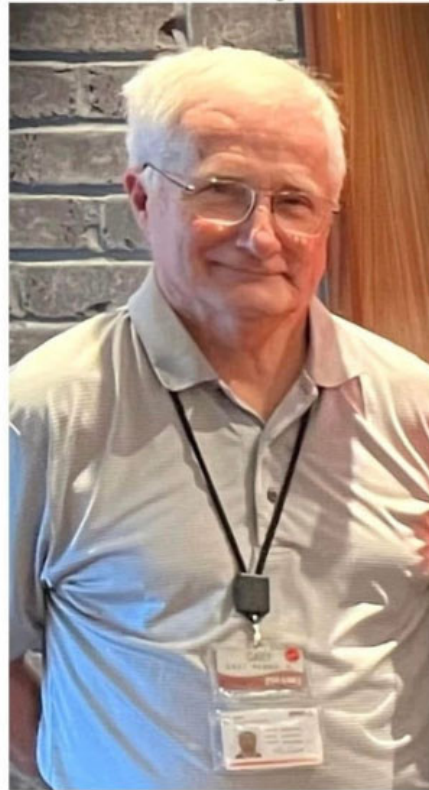
Most of them remember him as the guy who pushed them to be better – sometimes with a kind word, and sometimes with the hard truth!

Smith was a great family man, a great friend, a fierce competitor, a dedicated mentor and a man who left a lasting mark in the Peoria bowling community.

He was the man with the golden arm swing.

IN LOVING

memory of



GARY SMITH

AUGUST 19, 1953 --- DECEMBER 8, 2024

YOUR PAD FAMILY WILL MISS YOU.
THANK YOU FOR EVERYTHING.