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Spare Change

By Johnny Campos

Still Perfect at 83: Larry Weiland Keeps Rolling — and Striking — Against the Odds

Lifelong Pekin resident Larry Weiland earned some national publicity a few years ago when he was recognized as possibly the most prolific one-legged bowler in the history of the sport.

At the time, he was 75 and had rolled 14 career 300 games and two career 800 series, bowling with a prosthetic limb on his right leg, just below the knee. He lost that part of his leg in a factory accident more than 60 years ago.

His story was picked up by the Associated Press news service and Bowlers Journal International Magazine, giving the right-hander notoriety across the country.

“I got my leg caught in a conveyor in a factory, working at Corn Products,” Weiland recalled in the story. “It took a little while for it to heal up real good. I lost it in April, and by August I had an artificial leg.”

Fast forward to September 23rd of this year. Weiland continued to add to his already impressive bowling credentials when he rolled his 18th career 300 game at Sunset Lanes — at the age of 83!

And he did it with a 15-pound Hammer ball. “There are a lot of times that if the 15-pounder quits carrying, I switch to a 16-pounder,” he said.

It was his first perfect game since age 79, so it was important to him to get one after turning 80.

“I told myself I wanted to get one in my 80s,” he said with a grin.

For a man who only took up bowling *after* getting his prosthetic limb, the achievement is more than just numbers on a scoreboard. It’s a testament to perseverance, precision — and a stubborn joy for the game that’s carried him through six decades on the lanes.

Weiland was just 20 years old when his life changed in an instant. A workplace accident cost him his lower right leg. For many, that kind of loss might have marked the end of competitive sports — but for Larry, it was the start of something new.

“After losing my leg, I became very competitive,” he said. “So, I did everything — slow-pitch softball, industrial league and church league basketball. It pushed me to do that much better. I had never bowled before the accident, so I figured I’d give it a try.”

That first try turned into a lifelong passion. He learned to balance, to time his slide, to generate power from a stance that few others could imagine mastering. It wasn’t easy — but neither was anything else in his life.

“You just figure it out,” Weiland said simply. “You learn how to make it work.”

His motion might not match the textbook delivery taught in clinics, but it’s uniquely his — compact, controlled, and astonishingly consistent.

“It’s not about power,” he said. “It’s about hitting your mark. I can still do that.”

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Weiland's most recent 300 came on a quiet league night at Sunset Lanes. He started the night with a 248 game, and then the strikes started piling up.

By the eighth frame of Game 2, a few heads were turning. It turns out that the eighth frame has been the key to his success.

"I told the guys that, traditionally, if I struck in the eighth frame, then I went off the sheet," Weiland said. "And when I struck in the eighth, I knew I was going to do it again."

By the tenth frame, the bowlers in the small league stopped to watch him.

"I didn't even think about it until the last shot," Weiland said. "So, I didn't get nervous or anything."

The final ball hit flush, and the crowd erupted. It was a moment equal parts celebration and disbelief — another perfect game, rolled by an octogenarian with a prosthetic leg and a love for the game that hasn't dimmed a bit.

Weiland finished with a 741 series, which should help improve on his average, which is hovering around 200. He still bowls in three leagues and regularly subs in a couple of others.

He also keeps himself busy by running a lawn service and driving cars for a Pekin dealership.

The next goal for Weiland could be becoming the oldest bowler ever to roll a perfect game — with or without a prosthetic limb. The current mark is held by an unidentified man from Fullerton, California, who bowled a 300 in sanctioned competition at the age of 90 years, 9 months and 13 days.

Weiland believes he will still be bowling when he is that age, if he can keep up his ball speed, and if he can stay healthy.

"I've got a knee that's really bad," he admitted. "I might have to have surgery one of these days, because I can't even use it to step up or down when I'm using the stairs."

"But I'll still be bowling if I can keep my speed up. If I start taking a little bit of that speed off, I might be hitting the pocket, but I'm not carrying because I don't have a whole lot of turn in my hand."

The day might come when Weiland will no longer be able to bowl anymore. Until then, however, he plans to keep striking.

And if history's any guide, chances are good that somewhere down the line, perhaps Weiland's 19th perfect game will be waiting for him at the end of the approach.

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Larry Weiland relaxes after subbing at Potter's Alley in Morton.