

## **Bowling is fastest-growing sport in Iowa**

Written by Tom Fruehling

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Too bad high school letter jackets are no longer in vogue.

Maybe then the newest group of prep letter winners would get more recognition.

Right now, high school bowling is mostly a sport followed by the bowlers themselves, their family members and few fans.

But that doesn't mean it's not popular.

"It is," says Linn-Mar head boys coach Andy Diercks, "the fastest-growing high school and collegiate sport in the country.

"It's had double-digit growth in terms of numbers in the past five or six years. And it just keeps growing."

As it turns out, Eastern Iowa – more specifically, the Cedar Rapids and Marion Metro area – is the hotbed of prep bowling.

"No question, the top bowlers in the state are right here," says Don Wilfong, the longtime boys and girls coach at Prairie. "And our league (Mississippi Valley Conference) is by far the toughest week, in week out."

### **The non-sanctioned years**

As a sanctioned high school sport in Iowa, it is a fairly recent phenomenon.

Barb Staub, who with husband John owns Lancer Lanes in Cedar Rapids, has been in the

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family business all her married life and has taught youths for close to 40 years.

For many years, as her own children Andy and Stacy were tearing up the local lanes, she informally directed an intramural club program at the former LaSalle High School.

“I can remember when we had 103 students in the school, and 78 of them were on the bowling team,” she says. “We’d get some of them together for a state tournament, but otherwise there wasn’t really any organization.”

Wilfong, who’s been a bowler since his grade school days of setting pins in his hometown alley at Belle Plaine, points out that it wasn’t until 1999 that bowling proprietors in the state formed a formal federation for high school competition.

It followed a nationwide trend.

“Iowa has always had good youth bowling programs, so the base was there,” says Wilfong, who has coached Prairie girls and boys for a decade.

“The kids wanted it, and the proprietors saw it was a good way to get more of their friends involved in bowling.”

### **Recently sanctioned**

The Iowa High School Athletic Association established girls bowling teams as a sanctioned team sport in 2005.

It became an official boys sports just last year.

Now schools have a set schedule of 12 meets in the school year, only on a weekly basis from

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late November leading up to the state tournament for teams and individuals in Des Moines in late February.

According to Wilfong, there are about 50 teams in Iowa representing the bigger schools (including all six from the Metro area in the MVC) and a similar number from smaller schools (including Marion High School).

His own Prairie contingent numbers three dozen boys and a dozen girls. And while that's one of the larger rosters among local teams, he says the rest are catching up fast.

"And all the teams are all competitive," notes Diercks, whose own passion for the sport is shown by the fact that he and his wife, Makala, met and were married in their hometown lanes in Cherokee.

"We have tight matches every week. Bowling around here is on a whole different level than the rest of the state."

Bowlers must abide by the same eligibility rules as other athletes, and coaches have to be certified by the state education association.

### **Benefits students, schools**

Diercks sees enormous benefits for both schools and students.

"Statistics show that students who participate in activities do much better in class. It's not really the case at Linn-Mar, but studies also show that at a lot of schools the bowlers aren't involved in other things.

"It gives these kids a chance to be part of a team."

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In addition, it's a relatively inexpensive sport for schools to offer since there are no equipment costs and bowling lanes charge minimal fees to promote participation.

### **Scholarship funding**

Besides, there's an array of college scholarship funding available to young bowlers.

Wilfong says more and more small colleges, and even some universities, are now fielding teams and recruiting athletes. (Mount Mercy, for instance, started one this year).

One of his four-year Prairie stars, scholastic state record holder Drew Balta, is a freshman full-ride scholarship bowler at William Penn College.

Also on full scholarship at Wichita State University is junior Linn-Mar grad Melissa Sobolik.

On top of that, Diercks points out, national and local bowling organizations have established scholarship funds just for participation in youth bowling leagues.

"There's a lot of opportunities out there," he says, noting that his own two young children already have funds set aside.

Wilfong's daughters Emily and Brianna, too, are getting money for books from bowling funds while studying at Kirkwood Community College.

"Unlike some other sports, there's not a lot of risk for injury," the lifelong bowler says. "Unless you drop a ball on your foot."

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