

Necessity's Children

■ The first in a series on bright ideas that have changed, are changing, or will change bowling.

BY FRED GROH

Name an invention that has had a more profound effect on American life than the automobile. Now name an invention that's had a bigger impact on bowling than bumpers. Not many candidates there, either.

Alex Wortman doesn't claim to have invented the bumper idea. Brunswick beat him to that with a patent for a motorized gutter (it rotated and created a bumper wall) more than 10 years before Wortman started thinking about the problem. But if somebody at Brunswick was the inventor of bowling's version of the automobile, Wortman was its Henry Ford.

He is not part of the bowling industry. Never was. An educational psychologist by trade, Wortman got into his "deflection device" project because his girlfriend invited him to a local Ann Arbor (Michigan) center one day. Zena

a ball actually travel all the way down the lane and knock over some pins."

Frankly, it seemed to Wortman like a waste of time and money. Why not just roll balls across the floor of the school gym?

"Well," Sheinberg said, "it's more than that. It's a whole social thing. They're learning to come to a center and mix with people. It isn't just about knocking over pins."

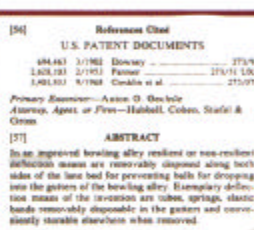
But he thought the game should be part of it.

"Well," Sheinberg replied, "think of something."

Like many inventors, Wortman's normal routine had already primed



Happy creators of the first successful version of bumpers, Alex Wortman and Zena Sheinberg.



12 Claims, 23 Drawing Figures



Door weldment rings—part of the Humpback ball return system—and their inventor, JR Lanzetta.

Sheinberg (today, Mrs. Wortman) was a special education teacher who wanted a chance to spend some time with Wortman during the regular workday. She also thought he might have some valuable input for the student field trips she was conducting to the bowling center.

"Nobody was getting any pinfall," Wortman remembers of that day in 1977. "Just gutter ball after gutter ball. Some of the kids were physically capable, but very seldom would

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Two weeks after his first time at the bowling center, Wortman re-appeared during one of the students' field trips and got the proprietor's agreement to try something.

"I guess I wanted to make it more dramatic. I could have gone, I guess, at a time when nobody was there and said, 'Could we try out this idea and see if it works?' but I was convinced it would.

"Without announcing anything, and with a couple of people helping me, right in the middle of their play, we quickly put carpet tubes in the gutter.

"Picture that? About four or five inches in diameter, maybe 10 feet long, some of them.

"It was really dramatic, actually. This one kid had miraculously knocked over four pins and her second shot was heading right for the gutter. It hit a carpet tube, caromed off, and she came up with a clean spare. People started cheering."

Wortman viewed his project as akin to creating training wheels for a bike or lowering the hoop for basketball on an elementary school playground. He thought the bowling industry had missed the boat, "hadn't done anything" to make the game appealing to children. Typical of innovators, he was conscious of the lock-step movement of tradition. The industry was taking a 42-inches-by-60-foot lane and saying "We're all going to do it the same way," he felt.

The commercial prospects were evident to him right away, especially since the deflection device he was now determined to perfect wouldn't require as much as a thumb tack in the gutter. Bowling lanes and equipment would not have to be altered in any way.

That moved him to call on a friend in Detroit who owned a large restaurant company, but the friend refused to underwrite the project. "You've got a good idea," he told Wortman. "Develop it yourself. Be a businessman."

"I thought, why not?"

He and Zena started brainstorming.

Carpet tubes were impractical. Where would a proprietor store 120 feet of tube per lane? Selling would be hard, too. Tubes would be difficult to handle and transport on sales calls.

Working in his garage with dryer duct hose, he made "a jack-in-the-box kind of thing." Almost 60 feet of dryer hose could be compressed and fitted into a carpet tube. At least everything would be in one very large canister, so to speak.

But it was still a heavy item. Why? Air. A lot of the volume inside the canister was air.

"When we thought about air, we said, 'Well, what about air? What about making inflatable tubes?' I pictured it like a very long sleeping bag that you would roll up. That was the original invention."

It was not the end of the story, of course. There followed a couple of years to develop a prototype (made by a waterbed manufacturer in Ohio), to decide on a name ("The Glancer"), to work out a marketing pitch in which the device would be a profitable addition to a center's birthday party business ("The Glancer Is the Answer"), and to come up with a marketable package. For \$400, Wortman sold two Glancers, a small portable inflator, a retrieval device so the tubes did not have to be rolled up by hand, and a cart on which to move everything around.

In 1979 he went to the Patent Office. U.S. patent number 4,330,122 was issued on May 18, 1982.

On the other hand, Wortman's marketing efforts were so sporadic that he doesn't remember selling a single unit until 1986. In that year, he hired his nephew as a road rep, and business began to pick up—especially when Brunswick, AMF and DBA got wind of the invention via their salesmen.

Wortman hasn't become a rich man. Too much money has gone into fighting off patent infringements. He jokes that he sold \$100,000 worth of Glancers out of his garage before he signed a licensing deal with DBA, but that he had to spend \$100,001 to make it. Yet he has the satisfaction of having successfully bootstrapped the project all the way. He never went to a bank, and was never more than \$7,000 in debt.

Best of all, perhaps, he has the satisfaction of knowing that his invention (and his wife's) changed an industry.



JR Lanzetta is not an outsider. He's worked in bowling centers most of his 47 years, starting with painting pin-

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setters when he was in high school. When the machines broke down, it seemed the regular mechanic was always in the bar drinking, so Lanzetta would scramble under the masking units to fix the problem himself. "I'd seen him do it, and I just got interested," he says now of his affinity for the technical side of bowling.

Like Wortman—like many inventors—Lanzetta is a self-starter. Not having the money for college, he discovered the public library and schooled himself in engineering, drafting, mathematics and marketing. "I taught myself electronics in three weeks," he says, enough to start making gadgets.

The first device invented by the creator of the Humpback Ball Return was a dual-vial nail polish bottle. One compartment held a clear-coat, the other a quick-drying conditioning oil. It was also his first patented item, marketed through his own company.

The Humpback was his first bowling patent. Except for a moving belt, the device has no mechanical parts. A thickened section of the belt rolls the ball up and out of its receptacle under the ball lift.

Desperation led to its invention, Lanzetta says. He was helping a friend, Bill Petty, re-do Petty's center, Rainbow Lanes in Clearwater, Florida.

"Every week he would average out how many 700-series they would have during scratch leagues, and keep playing with the oil level until the [number of] series stopped increasing. The balls wouldn't come back. They just kept yo-yoing. He didn't want to cut the oil back because everyone was really happy; scores were good. That's when I came up with the idea.

"I remembered when I was a kid, probably 30 years ago, I had done something similar with balls slipping on the way up. Sometimes the ball would go halfway and just sit there and spin because the up-rails were slippery. I glued an extra piece of rubber on the belt to kick the ball up. It worked but kept coming off. It was under too much pressure.

"I just thought it would work, right from the beginning."

As it turned out, the idea for the Humpback was a holiday present from Lanzetta to himself. He had the brainwave shortly before Christmas 1997, then quickly jerry-rigged a rough prototype out of canvas and rubber at the back of the bowling center to test the idea. The first time the prototype worked was that New Year's Eve.

Lanzetta confesses to having celebrated a little, but the invention clearly lifted him higher than the holiday did. "It was an experience," he says, "seeing a ball go up with no mechanical devices at all. It was exciting at the time. And it works!"

Like Wortman, he wanted to make as sure as he could that he had a salable item, so he set to work on special machinery to make the belts. Hence five months between the first test of the prototype and his filing for a patent. "It was harder to tool up to make the item than to design and make the item [prototype] itself," as it turned out.

He applied on May 18, 1998—16 years to the day after

Wortman was awarded his patent for the Glancer.

Next, Lanzetta hit the road himself to peddle his invention to bowling centers, initially more interested in placing it than in making money.

Unlike Wortman, Lanzetta has stayed in the industry and worldwide sales of his Humpback Ball Return have been so successful that he's been able to move into new, 20,000-square-foot quarters in Hudson, Florida where everything will be made in-house.

"There's very little quality control in the industry," he notes. "All I need to do if I find out there's a problem with our products is walk out of the office down to the shop and say, 'Do this' or 'Do that,' and the problem is resolved."

Lanzetta speaks deliberately about his "products." With four patents to his credit and several pending, the bowling industry will soon see more innovation from the brain cells of JR Lanzetta. ♦

We wish to thank Bill Morrissey, vice president of marketing for Brunswick capital equipment, for background for this article.

Have you patented an idea that has been used in bowling? Know someone else who has? Write us at <info@bowlingindustry.com>. Your (or their) 15 minutes of fame could be at hand!

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