

# Bowls in the World of Television

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Where does our sport really fit in?

**E**VERY TIME a televised bowls event is held, the question most asked by those in attendance is why bowls coverage has reduced on terrestrial TV channels? To even attempt to answer that question, it is important to look back to the 1980s and the growth in our sport at that time.

During that decade, bowls was at its televised pinnacle both indoor and outdoor. Sponsors almost queued up to get a 'foot' in the door of the extensive amount of BBC and ITV air time available to promote their products and services. The following are just a few sponsors from that era in the UK events:

Embassy, Liverpool Victoria Insurance, Gateway, CIS - (Co-operative Insurance Services), Kodak, Bradford & Bingley BS, Bristol & West BS, Barclays BS, Bass Brewery, Guinness, Midland Bank, Vaux Samson Brewery.

You may have noticed they are mainly insurance companies, banks/building societies or breweries. These, however, are only some of the main ones; there were also a host of secondary sponsors and smaller events that had local financial support. The reason why none of the above are still involved in any major televised bowls event is a question many have tried to answer.

Bowls still enjoys a strong relationship with the Co-op through the funeralcare services and as such is still under the overall corporate banner of the Co-op. This has been a long and productive relationship for both televised and grass roots bowls as the Co-op Funeralcare is heavily involved at this level as it is with many sports.

## AT ITS HEIGHT

Going back to the UK singles in 1989, the BBC coverage stretched to 12 days at the Guild Hall in Preston. The winner received £12,000, with the runner up getting £6,000. A year later, the same event was held at Carlisle Bowling Club for a first prize of £500 and ranking points with no expenses of any kind



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for the players. No television, no title sponsor and no fast running portable rink. Other events and sponsors had also disappeared during the previous year or two. It was as if bowls was suddenly toxic to the medium of television.

Bowls was on the cusp of making it into the 'Premier League' of televised sport. It had the BBC and ITV networks under contract and money was pouring into the Governing Body, who controlled the professional events, from eager sponsors. By the end of the 1980s, the BBC enjoyed audiences in excess of two million on a regular basis for events at the Guild Hall and Bournemouth Conference Centre. The Granada Superbowl topped four million viewers for its last final in 1988 at Studio 1 in Manchester. It was without doubt the time to be involved in professional bowls, yet it collapsed like a house of cards.

## LOSING TV BACKING

It is not my place to apportion blame but within 12 months bowls had almost disappeared from our television screens, with

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the exception of the world singles and pairs, which were two separate events at the time. There had to be a reason but there was no single person to point the finger at. So where did it go wrong?

The start appeared to be when the controller of the ITV network pulled the plug on bowls in 1988, at a time when it was crushing other sports with regards to audience figures and value for money in production terms. Bowls was going to suffer from that decision and suffer it very much did!

This is not a blame game though and any collapse of television exposure rarely lies with one decision. However, the ITV network certainly stopped one of the biggest and most entertaining events in bowls, the Granada Superbowl, in its tracks, and it ceased to exist after it secured the biggest audience of any bowls event ever recorded. Superbowl also had the biggest prize money of any event, a fact that Granada and Liverpool Victoria, the title sponsor, were very keen to promote.

With ITV now out of the picture, it was very much up to the BBC and to its credit it is still here today, though in a much smaller way than before, with only the World Championships at network level.

## CREATING THE PBA

There had to be other factors for this fall from grace but without the full facts it will

always be difficult to know the truth. By 1992, the players had had enough, they formed the PBA (Professional Bowls Association) effectively to try to uncover what had gone wrong and bring bowls back to being a force within televised sport. Most of the participants in the World Championships that year in Preston agreed to fund the new organisation by donating 5% of their prize money to get the 'ball rolling' - it was a generous but necessary move by the players.

But as is the case in a lot of things in life, this was to prove a difficult process and it took five years to wrestle control from the governing body; it was only then that the World Bowls Tour was born. However, in many ways, this was too late. The damage had been done in the intervening years and other sports took advantage of what appeared to be some poor decision making. Thus, sports such as snooker and darts flourished.

### MOVING FORWARD

The BBC reinvented the UK singles in the 1990s and rebranded it as the International Open and coverage was again extensive, as was the World Championships at the Guild Hall. This continued when the move was made to Potters Leisure Resort, where the World Championships was developed further to include the pairs and additional events, including a Ladies' Potters Leisure Resort Invitation Matchplay Singles. The Potter family already had bowls as an integral part of their resort and the marriage of the World Championships and the resort was perfect. This 5 star resort is very much recognised as the the home of the World Professional Championships and has been for the last 14 years.

### MARKETPLACE NARROWING

During the last two decades, bowls has been up against a plethora of sports, all fighting for their cut of air time. Some may say it has been very lucky to recover from the early 1990s and to still have had a substantial amount of hours on terrestrial channels well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but it wasn't without a lot of hard work. During the last few years, coverage was expanded to include Sky Sports and now Premier Sports.

Regional BBC sport in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland also continued to cover international events during this time. Sadly, BBC Wales and Northern Ireland have both suffered the effects of budget cuts and their events have disappeared off the bowls calendar.

Even with hundreds of television channels now available, the marketplace for bowls has actually contracted in many ways. The sports budgets for channels are under so much pressure that football, rugby, athletics, horse racing, tennis, snooker, darts and F1 have taken the lion's share and other sports have either diminished or disappeared altogether

from our television screens. Other than the Olympics, when did you last see some of the smaller sports covered?

### THE OLYMPIC EFFECT

In many ways, exposure is critical to television recognition. Cycling, for many years, lacked any substantial funding and appeared to be overlooked by the UK sports governing bodies. Look at it now with £20m ploughed into gaining Olympic medals. The return has been excellent with medals at almost every discipline for GB & NI and the sport of cycling has never looked healthier, apart from the occasional doping issues that seem to blight a number of performance sports. Many sports in the Olympics are actively played by fewer participants in the UK than bowls, yet as Olympic sports they attract considerable development funding. It makes sense to say that Olympic exposure is the key to securing television coverage. Although not all sports have benefitted from this alliance, it is better to be in that 'family' than languishing outside it.

Will bowls ever be an Olympic sport? I doubt it; that ship sailed over a hundred years ago when it was an exhibition sport. The chance was there to forge ahead for bowls but yet again the opportunity was missed. In the meantime, bowls continues to try to be accepted into the Olympic movement and many thousands of pounds have been spent working in tandem with other ball sports to this end.

Furthermore, bowls, at a sufficiently influential level, doesn't have the support

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of the USA, Russia, China, Germany, South America as a whole or most of Asia. It just doesn't have the numbers of participants or organisational structure in those areas to 'battle' with other sports.

Bowls is fundamentally a Commonwealth sport and whilst the UK may have influence in the world of global politics or defence, it doesn't appear to be the same when it comes to Olympic sports, at least not in the case of bowls. If bowls ever secures its place at the greatest of all sports events I can guarantee one thing, the gold medals will flow for GB & NI. But don't hold your breath.

### THE FUTURE

Should we be happy with the coverage we have at present? Well we all want more. We love our sport and the vast majority of us are passionate about it. The world of instant media has changed and with television the challenge is different but no less difficult. I believe if the events that have been lost over the last few years can be replaced then bowls will be in a good place but for now we just can't compete against the 'beautiful' game of soccer or any of the other 'premier' sports I have mentioned.

What we have, though, is top class productions on terrestrial television but we must be realistic. The components needed to secure a successful and sustainable televised event are complex and in today's world of economic austerity, the job of securing events is not one to be relished. Unfortunately, the halcyon days of the 1980s are but a distant memory but that doesn't mean we can't be optimistic, it just means we have to meet the challenges head-on and strive to secure more events.



A view from the commentary box: Bowls on TV has declined over the years, but the bowling community must not be despondent and must keep trying.