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Up from the Gutter

FROM ESQUIRE

It was after midnight. I knew that sometimes in matches like this, you either lose a lot of money or, if you win, you're lucky to get out of there. We look around the parking lot. I'm thinking, We're gonna get mugged. I'm thinking, This is ugly.

— Professional bowler David Ozio, remembering bowling an action game against Rudy Kasimakiş

MOST MEN don't leave bowling alleys at sunrise, but he has left many then. He has staggered out of bowling alleys into cold dawns. He has opened bowling-alley doors and blinked at fragrant mornings and hot, sticky mornings and cool, autumnal mornings, exhausted but fulfilled, his pockets bulging with so much cash he would rather not discuss it. He has walked out with nothing: "No gas in your car, no toll to get home, sometimes you're not eating for three days." This has been his job. He has driven five hours to bowl six hours. He has drilled holes in hundreds of bowling balls, until he made himself expert in the ways they were balanced and weighted. He has carted bowling balls to a hospital, where a medical technician allowed him to watch as the balls were X-rayed. (In self-consciously ironic moments, he refers to himself as "a recovering ballaholic.") He has bought advertisements in small bowling newspapers and challenged top professional bowlers — "professional" in a legitimate, corporate-endorsement type of way, from the clean, well-lighted world he once tried and failed to enter — to meet him after midnight in smoky, loud places filled with hard, unsmiling men, and many of the professionals have come. Hours later, oftentimes, he has swaggered into the sunrise with gas money

to burn. He has taken money from many less-famous bowlers, too. He has made a good living at that — a much better living, it is safe to say, than many of the bowlers who labor in the clean, well-lighted world he once tried and failed to enter.

He has bet on frames, high odd scores, and high even scores. He has bet on a single ball and on "concourse games," in which bowlers fling their balls from behind the scorer's table. (He has not bet on "towel games," in which bowlers fling their balls from towels, though he has beaten players who have played that way.) He has bowled when the lowest score won (but only if the bowler hits at least one pin per ball). He has bowled "telephone-book matches," in which two bowlers meet in a town and open a phone book, one player closes his eyes and stabs at the page listing the bowling centers, and, wherever his finger lands, that's where they bowl. He has bowled badly on purpose, but only to persuade other bowlers to play and to bet against him. "To keep the fish interested," he says. "I was always cleaning the bottom of the tank. It was dirty, and I had to clean it." He has bowled "four-game freeze-out," which means the first bowler to win four games wins everything. In the world of action bowling, which is where Rudy Kasimakis has ruled for the past fifteen years or so, "everything" can represent an impressive sum of money, oftentimes bet by hard, unsmiling men. Think of a good year's salary. That sum, large but intentionally vague at Rudy's request, might be what's at stake in a single action game.

But action bowling's most successful practitioner is pulling himself from the game now. He is once again trying to leave the four-game freeze-outs and bleary sunrises behind so that he can enter the clean, well-lighted world with the television lights and corporate endorsements. This spring, he is attempting success on the Professional Bowlers Association tour — at thirty-four years old, going legit. But like Michael Corleone and Joseph Kennedy and Don King and Mark Wahlberg and other skilled men who have tried to leave one disreputable world in order to enter a different, better-lighted, and more complicated one, his trip is fraught with difficulties. And in the case of action bowling's greatest action bowler, a question: Why?

Most bowling fans know him as Rudy Revs, because, when he cocks his bowling ball back, his right hand points straight up and he

torques his wrist and then releases the ball with more power than almost any other bowler alive. Among bowlers, Rudy is said to possess a "high revolution" ball. Thus Revs. He weighs 240 pounds and stands 5 feet 7 inches, and he has forearms like thighs and a neck like a waist and dark eyes that glower and burn in a head like a boulder. He is loud and swaggering in victory and moody in defeat. He is obsessed with winning. His survival depends on winning. Professional and top amateur bowlers speak of "throwing" a bowling ball. In Rudy's case, the expression is accurate. When Rudy strikes, pins jump and scatter with cartoonish alacrity. When he doesn't strike, he leaves more pins than a professional bowler should or can afford to. He is known as an all-or-nothing bowler. He has a heavy New York accent and a reputation for betting big money on games whose outcomes have, for whatever reason, never been in doubt to Rudy. He looks and sometimes acts like low-rent muscle, and he is making a life change for the loftiest kind of ideal.

> He gets right in your face and says, "I'm the best, you can't beat me. I'm the best, there's no way you can beat me." He'd just demoralize a guy; the guy would just be shaking.
>
> I bowled him twice, beat him twice. The last time, I beat him two straight games, and he was in my face at the end of the second game, still screaming, "You can't beat me, you can't beat me!"
>
> — Former professional bowler Brian Berg

There are two commandments that action bowlers live by. The first, especially for an action bowler who wants to keep his belly and his gas tank full, is that you play the percentages. "You don't play a straight guy in a straight guy's house if you're a hook bowler," says David Ozio, the thirteenth-winningest professional bowler in history, a man who has bowled his share of action games, and who still does.

The second imperative is, you play anywhere. "The code of any good action player," says PBA commissioner Mark Gerberich, a man who has a strange and twisted relationship with action bowling and action bowlers like Rudy, "is 'Anytime, anywhere, any amount of money.' That's what action bowling is — you and me, you get done working, I get done working, we're gonna lock the doors, and we're gonna bowl."

To thrive as an action bowler — and Rudy has thrived better

than any other — means devising a way of synthesizing those two absolute but ostensibly conflicting imperatives. In some ways, it's like being a pious murderer.

So action bowlers try to make sure the lanes they are bowling on are oiled to their liking and not to their opponents'. Oil patterns influence how a ball hooks, where it hooks, and even *if* it hooks. Some action bowlers arrive at a lane early and tinker with the pin-setting machine so that the resulting pin configuration favors balls thrown from certain angles, angles that happen to be the ones those bowlers who tinker are best at. One action bowler, a man who throws the ball even harder than Rudy — "His ball could basically knock down tree trunks," Rudy says — used to travel to action games with four cases of 3–8 Brunswick Red Crown bowling pins in the trunk of his car. "That's three pounds eight ounces." At the time, the Red Crowns were heavier — and more difficult to knock down — than normal pins.

In the world of action bowling, where Rudy has long been the chief aquarium cleaner, strange and exotic creatures scurry and skitter in the murky light. There are "gutter players," men with sweeping hooks who spend their entire careers bowling on the board right next to the gutter, because they've made sure the rest of the lane is heavily oiled. A gutter player's ball avoids the oil before hooking into the headpin at the last minute. A gutter player's opponent usually bowls down the middle of the lane, only to watch helplessly as his ball slides and slips out of control. There are "dump artists," excellent bowlers who make most of their money placing secret bets against themselves and on other, lesser bowlers, then losing on purpose.

One dump artist became so notorious that one night, with one ball left to bowl, a ball that would decide the outcome of the game, many of the hard, unsmiling men who had — perhaps foolishly — bet on the dump artist thought he might throw the game, so they threatened him with grievous bodily harm if he didn't make his spare. But other hard, unsmiling men, who were counting on him dumping the game, threatened him with grievous bodily harm if he *did* make his spare. So the dump artist faked a heart attack. "Clutched his chest, yelled, fell over, the whole bit," says Rudy with a laugh that is at least a little admiring. "Made an ambulance come to get him outta there."

Dump artists and gutter players are unpopular creatures, shunned by other denizens of the action aquarium. But, among bowlers, their cunning and skill are recognized. Sometimes they are even honored. Such is the case with the pro bowler who discovered in the early seventies that if he soaked his bowling ball overnight in a chemical resin that he had found in a hardware store, the ball would become soft and grip the wood of a bowling lane with amazing traction and hook powerfully into the headpin. The year he made his discovery, the bowler, a career journeyman, made more money than any of his colleagues and was named PBA player of the year. He is described at the International Bowling Museum and Hall of Fame in St. Louis as "an innovator in the game."

Rudy is not above gimmicks and trickery. When he bowls at his favorite action spot, Deer Park Bowl in Deer Park, Long Island, he tries to make sure the match takes place on lanes 11 and 12. "Lane 11 is the easiest lane in America to throw a strike on," he says. "Lane 12 hooks early and stops in the back. You have to circle the lane, make sure you get the ball to come around the corner and kick the ten." It takes a while for Rudy's opponents to figure that out.

Bowlers who have opposed Rudy at Deer Park Bowl refer to the venue as the Cage, in part because it always seems to be crowded with Rudy's hard, unsmiling friends. "A lot of hassles, fights broke out," David Ozio says, "and you could tell Rudy was the general there." Rudy yells at other bowlers there and slaps his hands in front of them after he has bowled a strike. He'll say, "Now, that's a *real* strike." He belittles his opponent, insults his game, and then watches him. Rudy knows that when a man is bowling with his own money, he is often scared, and Rudy senses others' fear and feeds off of it.

"I'm kind of like a dog that way," he says. "When I can sense him shaking, it's kind of like a high."

"He was an animal," says Norm Duke, the eleventh-winningest man in the history of bowling. "The hardest thing about beating Rudy was not being intimidated. He takes a sixteen-pound ball and makes it look like a piece of popcorn."

"I bowled him at the Cage," says Ozio. "That was suicidal on my part. Everyone feared Rudy in the Cage."

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He tried the pro tour twelve years ago, but he didn't make it. There are no fish on the pro tour, and there's more oil than on regular lanes, and the oil patterns are equally tough on everyone. And while Rudy's all-or-nothing ball scares opponents in dark, dim alleys, it didn't scare anyone on the PBA tour. Too many times, the all-or-nothing ball was nothing. The most successful PBA bowlers aren't the men who make the pins jump or whose balls can knock over tree trunks. The men who make the money on the PBA tour are consistent, mostly quiet men with consistent, mostly quiet bowling styles. They could even be considered boring. The man Rudy says is the greatest clutch bowler in the game — the man "I'd bet my last dollar on to throw one single ball" — is Norm Duke, who is 5 feet 5 inches, 123 pounds, and unfailingly polite to bowling fans, and who says thank you and dips his head when people applaud. The Duke, as he is known, is not flashy, but he's consistent. The richest bowler in history is a man named Walter Ray "Deadeye" Williams Jr. Williams doesn't throw a particularly powerful strike ball, and if his style is notable for anything, it's a certain clumsiness. But he's accurate, and he's consistent.

To succeed on the tour this time, Rudy knows he'll have to adjust more and go for broke less. He also knows that even with his two sponsors — Hammer bowling balls and Turbo 2-N-1 Grips — giving him monthly checks, plus incentives if and when he wins, competing on the PBA tour means spending about $1,300 a week on travel and expenses. When you do the math, Rudy stands to make much less money as a pro than he has made as an amateur. In fact, every Saturday you see him on TV, he stands to lose money, a concept that is anathema to an action bowler.

"Everybody's ego exists to the next level," says David Ozio, by way of explaining Rudy's otherwise inexplicable return to the PBA. "If you don't do it, you'll always wonder how you would have stacked up against the best of the best."

Rudy is having lunch with Mark Gerberich at an Applebee's restaurant in a mall on the outskirts of Scranton, which is like the most notorious and trash-talking street-basketball hustler you never heard of sitting down to break bread with David Stern, though they probably wouldn't end up at Applebee's or in a mall outside Scranton. Gerberich is at the table because he knows what an ac-

tion bowler with Rudy's dark charisma and big hook and boulder head with glowing eyes can do to draw fans to the sport; because he knows what Rudy's penchant for mano a mano, in-your-face confrontation can do for television drama; and because he also knows that some people already think badly of bowlers — think they're less skilled than other professional athletes, somehow ruder, louder, meaner, *seedier* — and he worries that too much of Rudy's dark charisma and boulder head and mano a mano confrontation might reinforce that notion. So Gerberich, who has bowled action himself and loves the color and drama of action, who loves the *action* of action, wants people to know about Rudy. But the commissioner also knows about the bad image some people have of bowling, and he doesn't want them to know *too* much about Rudy. Rudy — who honestly seems interested only in the next week's tournament — is here because Gerberich asked him to be here.

"There are some pro players who couldn't win an action game if their life depended on it," Rudy says.

"What Rudy means," Gerberich says, "is that while pro bowlers are the best in the world, when it comes down to a single match, with everything on the line —"

"Bowling action," Rudy says, "means you're putting up your own money on one game, everything riding on it, and it means you're facing some serious consequences depending on how you bowl."

"What Rudy means —"

"What I mean is, to bowl action, you gotta have ice water in your veins and a set of big keisters. I remember one match — it was in West Hempstead — I got beat up so bad, I left that place in a body bag and —"

"He doesn't mean he literally left in a body bag," Gerberich says.

"Yeah," Rudy says. "Not literally. But he beat me up bad. I was talking to myself that night."

Gerberich thinks Rudy could be just what the PBA needs. He hopes he'll bring some of the drama and flair of the action game to the PBA. But Gerberich worries that too much drama and flair might scare some people, might jeopardize the already-fragile alliance the PBA has built with its corporate sponsors. Gerberich would like to make professional bowling more colorful without alarming the middle-class audience it is trying to broaden.

"You wanna do that?" Rudy asks. "Here's how you do that. When Walter Ray wins the next TV tournament, I walk up to him after, while the cameras are still rolling, and I say, 'Hey, Walter Ray, you might have won the tournament, but I don't think you're so hot.' Then I say, 'How about me and you just go to an alley down the street and we just rough it up, just me and you?' Then we do it, and the cameras follow us. Now, that would be something."

Gerberich tells Rudy to hold off on that idea for a while.