

The Match

By David Keener

It's January, 1936. The Depression's been going on for almost seven years now.

You're walking down the street in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, the shipbuilding capital of the country – but hardly any new ships are being built. You pass by men leaning against walls and gathering at street corners, all hoping that someone will drive by on this fine, blustery early morning looking for some workers.

Midway up the street, you stop. You've reached your destination.

You're standing in front of a bowling alley.

As you enter the building, a friend greets you and says, "Yo, Red! He's already here. He was early."

You nod and continue towards the main desk. The manager comes out from behind the counter to welcome you, saying, "Mornin', Red. Everything's set up. You're at the end, lanes 19 and 20, so you shouldn't be bothered by nobody." He shakes your hand, and then adds, "You've got all the time you need, Red. I'll keep the place open late for you. Good luck."

You thank him, and then make your way to the end of the alley. Lanes 19 and 20. Your opponent's waiting for you impatiently. There's already a small crowd of on-lookers, as well.

You walk up to your opponent, giving him the eye as you approach. He's bigger than you, and stronger, and younger, but you're not intimidated. You pull your paycheck out of your shirt pocket and slap it down on the table.

Half a month's pay. That's the stakes for this match.

Your opponent slaps his paycheck down on top of yours.

The match is on. The stakes are high. The winner takes both paychecks. The loser starves. Welcome to the Depression.

Here's how the match is going to work. You're each going to bowl a hundred games. Add up the score for all those games – and the highest total wins. At roughly 10 minutes per game, that's a minimum of 17 hours of continuous bowling.

Now, this is candlepins bowling, not that sissified tenpins bowling you've heard that they play elsewhere in the country. In New England, it's candlepins.

In the sport of candlepins, the pins are smaller and narrower. The balls are smaller, too, about the size of a softball, and undrilled. You get three chances to knock all ten pins down. If you do so on the first ball, it's a strike; on the second, it's a spare; on the third, congratulations, you just got ten pins.

But the biggest difference is the deadwood. When you knock pins down with a ball, the pinsetter boys don't remove them in time for the next ball. If a pin falls and stays on the alley, well, it stays on the alley. It's deadwood now, and it might make knocking down the remaining pins easier or harder, or sometimes both.

The secret to playing candlepins is playing the deadwood.

You both warm up for a few minutes. Then it's time for the first game.

Your opponent goes for, and gets, the early lead. He's loud and enthusiastic. When he gets a mark, he pumps his fist and eggs on the crowd.

You're not concerned. This is a marathon, not a sprint. You play steadily and consistently, without any wasted motion.

At five games, he's ahead by 35. By the fifteenth game, he's 86 pins up.

At 23 games, your opponent is ahead by 157. It's lunchtime, and the crowd has gotten bigger. The bookie's are here, too, and people are betting on the match.

At 59 games, you've been playing for more than ten hours. Your opponent is ahead by 275 pins, but he's beginning to look a little wilted. And his high-energy antics are over. It's dinnertime now, and people from all over are stopping by to see how the match is going.

One of your opponent's friends begins heckling you in game 62, taunting you about surrendering now because the match is all but over. Apparently, he's mathematically challenged, because you've shaved 15 pins off your opponent's lead in the last three games.

At game 64, you decide that the heckler's interference in this high-stakes match can no longer be tolerated. You've got a wife and a baby daughter to support, and this joker's trying to mess you up.

You're standing on the alley approach, back to the crowd, with a bowling ball in your hand. Your heckler is

standing directly behind your lane. You whirl around, winding up like a baseball pitcher, and throw the ball as hard as you can at the heckler's torso.

You're 5'11". You've been working since you were four years old. Much of the work you've done over the years has been grueling physical labor, so "hard" for you is pretty damn hard.

The ball hits the heckler in the stomach. He folds over and hits the ground so hard he breaks his nose. As he's gasping for breath and holding his midsection, his friends rush onto the lanes to attack you. Your supporters rush onto the lanes to defend you. The fists start flying. Somebody throws a bottle. In moments, there's total pandemonium in the bowling alley.

It takes almost ten minutes before order is restored. Strangely, the fighting never actually reached you, like two waves hitting a beach from different directions and canceling each other out.

After some additional shouting and arguing, the crowd comes to the consensus that your actions were warranted. After all, everybody knows you don't mess with a high-stakes match. Your heckler is unceremoniously thrown out of the bowling alley.

The match resumes with game 65. Your opponent looks a little nervous now. You're not acting like someone who's almost beaten. You like the fact that he's nervous. You can work with that. Now, it's time for you to really focus on reeling in your opponent.

By game 85, his lead is down to 61. By 90 games, it's down to 19. It's 2:30 AM, the air is thick with cigarette smoke, and the alley is packed with people, all watching

the match. The only people still bowling are you and your opponent.

At 95 games, you're dead even on score. But you're in the zone now. You can feel it coming together. Your 97th game is your highest score of the entire match, with some seemingly miraculous deadwood plays. Your 98th is even higher.

By the end of the 100th game, you're up by 51 points, even though you never had the lead in the match until the 96th game. 4:15 in the morning, and the crowd is cheering for you, all except those who bet on the wrong player.

Your meager salary as a junior carpenter isn't enough for you to support your family during these tough times, but now you've supplemented your income -- because you've won the match. And when you add in the bets you had your friends make when you let your opponent run up the score, you've more than tripled your paycheck.

This is the fifth time you've engaged in a high-stakes match in the last two years. It's the fifth time you've won.

Your name is Bob Hjort.

You're a Danish immigrant.

You're my grandfather.

In 28 years, your baby daughter will be my mother.