

# Seattle Post-Intelligencer

## Lawn bowling booms on Beacon Hill

No, you needn't be old to play

By JOHN IWASAKI

SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER REPORTER



THE “**MEN WITH LARGE BOWLS**” LEAGUE

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When five Americans from Seattle recently attempted to enter British Columbia, a Canadian border inspector peered into their car and asked the purpose of their trip.

The answer from the passengers, four of whom were younger than 45, stunned him.

"Lawn bowling?" the inspector sputtered. "Are you guys *old* enough to lawn-bowl?"

Traditionally the province of the senior set, lawn bowling literally might be dying in the United States. But at Jefferson Park on Beacon Hill, the game is making a comeback, among younger men who are defying tradition.

Forget white-haired players in white attire. Think younger, looser, louder, more formal and cerebral than beer league softball, but still accessible to baby boomers.

At the center of the revival: Men With Big Bowls, a league started by 44-year-old Willie Weir, a Seattle actor who wanted to be in better touch with his friends, most of whom are in their 30s through 50s.

Sixteen men played last summer. This year, the number nearly doubled. Men With Big Bowls ended its season Tuesday and already has a waiting list for next summer.

Weir chose the bawdy-sounding name on purpose.

"It let guys know we that we weren't going to take this too seriously and that it wasn't going to be a bunch of senior citizens with walkers," he said.

Some of his friends needed the reminder. Before Peter Smith got involved, the 36-year-old marketing manager associated lawn bowlers with "the movie 'Cocoon,' in all white, shuffling back and forth across the greens. Not a young guy's thing."

The Jefferson Park Lawn Bowling Club, headed by Chuck Caddey, 78, refers to the group as "Willie Weir's Fun League." Some older members can't bear to say the league name aloud, but most thank Weir for promoting the game with a younger generation.

MWBB, as the league is often called, has attracted players ages 17 to 64. Many are actors, drama instructors or musicians, with a dentist, landscaper, software engineer and a sprinkling of other professions represented.

Weir's league isn't the youngest in the country -- a large club in Minnesota has no bowlers older than 50 -- but is still highly unusual. The average age of players nationally is 62, said Frank Ransome, membership chairman for the U.S. Lawn Bowling Association. (Con't...)



Men with Big Bowls League

Jefferson Lawn Bowling Club, Seattle

**But Men With Big Bowls isn't about a place in the record book.**

**"Primarily, it's a social evening," said Gene Freedman, 51, an actor. "Meeting new people, chatting, eating, drinking and staring down weekly humiliation. Oddly enough, there's some exercise involved, albeit not terribly aerobic. It is also surprisingly and amazingly exciting for such a slow-moving endeavor."**

**He's talking about the speed of the bowls, not the players.**

**It usually takes at least 10 seconds for a bowl, a lopsided ball, to roll across the rink, part of a 120-foot-square bowling green. The flat lawn is mowed to a precise height of three-sixteenths of an inch. Players aim at a small white ball called a jack.**

**The skill comes in rolling the bowl at a direction and speed that places the bowl where the player wants it. That's more difficult than it sounds, because the bowl will curve left or right, depending on how it's held.**

**Players can knock the jack, their previously rolled bowls or their opponents' bowls, whatever it takes to score points for getting closest to the jack.**

**Landscaper Chris Davis, 50, said he is attracted by "the hand-eye thing, the concentration, the quiet, long duration of each roll -- 11, 12 seconds -- the challenge of getting it consistently close."**

**He accepts "often getting whopped by my elders. That's cool. How many sports are there where you can do that?"**

**To John Fulton, 36, lawn bowling goes beyond playing with his league buddies to competing against veteran club members, people he considers to be "the real gems."**

**"I've personally never hung out with many older people besides family," said Fulton, a computer programmer. "I really enjoy this sport because, unlike others, people get better with age. When I play a 75-year-old club member, I expect to lose."**

**One of the oldest members of MWBB is Richard Krueger, 63, a retired woodworker who was the 2000 national co-champion in the pairs division with Richard Broad of Seattle.**

**Krueger described lawn bowling as a mental game that combines "the best aspects of pool and golf."**

**He probably meant that players need to line up their shots, gauging the angle, distance, speed and target. Or it could be that bowlers can play, as some do in Weir's league, in shorts, untucked shirts and sandals, with chilled bottles of beer nearby.**

**Between shots, players enjoy tranquil views of Puget Sound and the Seattle skyline, framed by pine trees. ("Time out for the sunset!" Weir shouted during a recent game.)**

**Players vie for the league "trophy," an engraved silver turkey platter that was someone's unappreciated wedding present.**

**The competition, like the players, seems casual.**

**"I never had been lawn bowling before MWBB. I'd seen some unshaven, chain-smoking old guys in Italy playing a few years back. But now that I think of it, that was bocce -- and we're a bunch of unshaven, chain-smoking old guys," joked Bill Johns, 48, an actor and drama teacher.**

**The baby of the league is Harry Jamieson, 17, who will start his senior year at Garfield High School. He was invited to play last year in place of his father, actor Todd Jamieson, who died of cancer before the season began.**

**"I couldn't say no to the opportunity to get to do something so unusual with a group of guys who I've known and respected for some time," said Jamieson, who's been known to bowl while chatting on his cell phone.**

**Though "my female friends think it's pretty funny that I'm part of this group of middle-aged men," he added, "there is nothing that will get in the way of Tuesday night bowling."**

**Now that the men have popularized their league, the women in their lives have started their own evening event, a "grrls nite on the greens."**

**Showing they can break with tradition as easily as the guys, they've given their league a name men can't utter without flinching: Bowl Busters. []**



Pete Smith lets loose his bowl as Gene Freedman (left) and Harry Jamieson watch during an Aug. 2 match. Lawn Bowling is dying in the U.S. But at Jefferson Park Lawn Bowling Club on Beacon Hill in Seattle, the sport is making a comeback among younger folks, as evidenced by a men's lawn bowling league called Men With Big Bowls that competes on Tuesday nights. Jamieson, for example, is 17 and going into his senior year at Garfield High School. August 10, 2005)  
Scott Eklund/Seattle Post-Intelligencer



Gene Freedman (right) and Harry Jamieson (center) celebrate the point-winning bowl of teammate John Johnson (not pictured) Aug. 2 as Pete Smith (left), a member of the opposing team, looks on. August 10, 2005) Scott Eklund/Seattle Post-Intelligencer



Buddies Willie Weir (left) and David Branch laugh between bowls as they compete against each other Aug. 2. Weir started the men's league, called Men With Big Bowls, to keep in better touch with his friends. August 10, 2005)  
Scott Eklund/Seattle Post-Intelligencer



A couple of the 30 or so members of the men's lawn bowling league called Men With Big Bowls walk down the lawn to check out their bowls as they compete on Tuesday nights at Jefferson Park Lawn Bowling Club on Beacon Hill in Seattle. (August 10, 2005)  
Scott Eklund/Seattle Post-Intelligencer

John McIntyre releases his bowl during Tuesday night lawn bowling league Aug. 2 at Jefferson Park Lawn Bowling Club on Beacon Hill in Seattle. (August 10, 2005) Scott Eklund/Seattle P.I.



A testament to the casual nature of this group, and to lawn bowling in general, Chris Davis strolls over in his bare feet to grab his beer Aug. 2. (August 10, 2005) Scott Eklund/Seattle P.I.



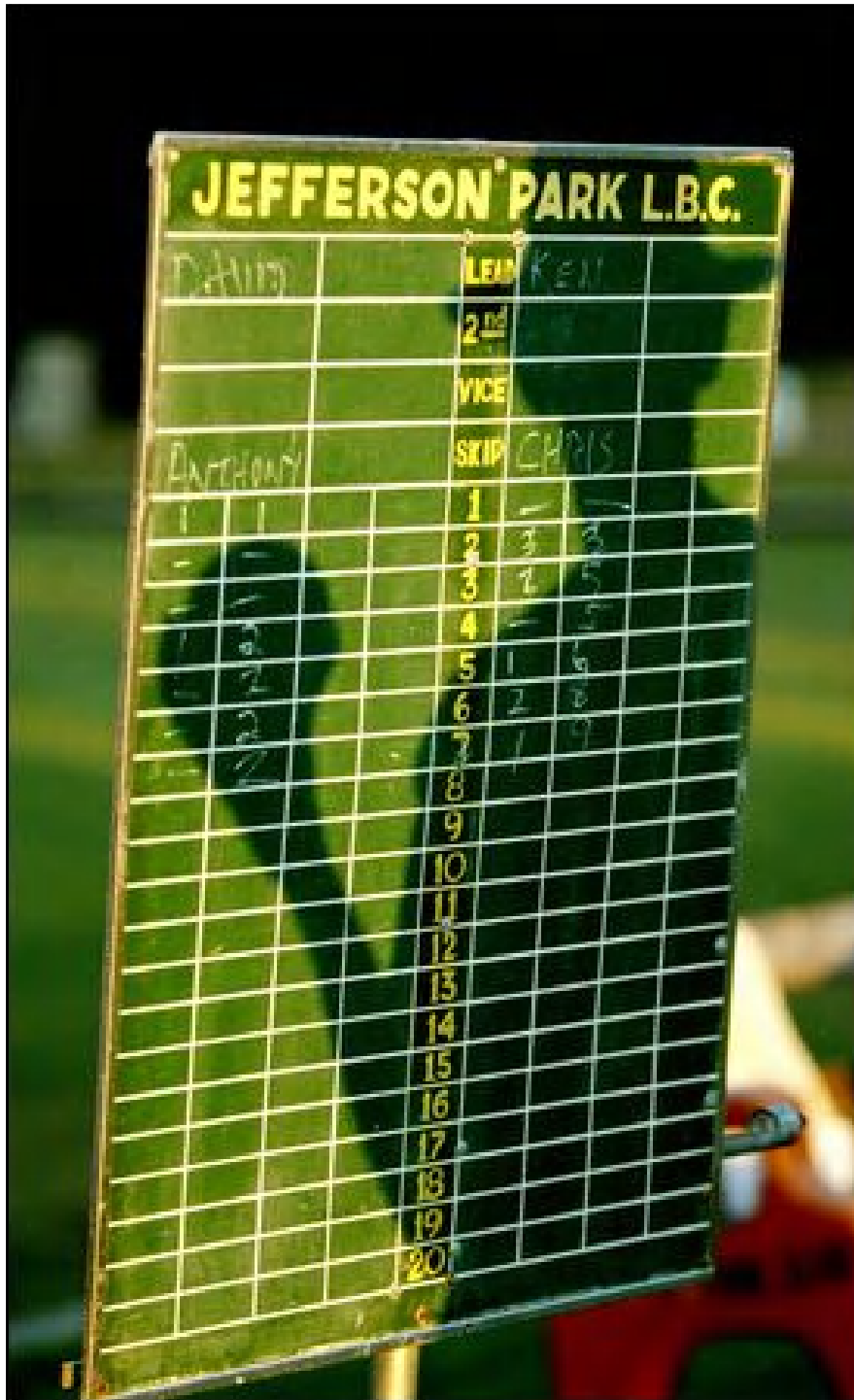
Pete Smith lets loose with a practice bowl prior to the start of the Tuesday night lawn bowling league Aug. 2 as (left to right) Ken Leu, Ryan Leu and Anthony Peiffer look on. (**Note:** Ken Leu and Ryan Leu were misidentified when this photograph was originally published.) (August 10, 2005) Scott Eklund/Seattle Post-Intelligencer  
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Chris Davis bends over backwards as he gets stretched out by fellow lawn bowler Christian Swenson prior to the start of Tuesday night lawn bowling league Aug. 2 at Jefferson Park Lawn Bowling Club on Beacon Hill in Seattle. (August 10, 2005)  
Scott Eklund/Seattle Post-Intelligencer



Willie Weir in full flight at Jefferson Park Lawn Bowling Club on Beacon Hill in Seattle.  
(August 10, 2005) Scott Eklund/Seattle Post-Intelligencer



A lawn bowler's shadow is cast on the scoreboard at Jefferson Park Lawn Bowling Club during the Tuesday night lawn bowling league Aug. 2. (August 10, 2005) Scott Eklund/Seattle Post-Intelligencer

**COMING SOON!**  
**BOWLS BUSTERS**  
**THE WOMEN'S LEAGUE**