

A History of the Auckland Indoor Bowls Centre

Written by Ian and Marilyn Wheeler and presented at the Centre's 60th Jubilee Prizegiving October 2002)

Before we concentrate on the 60year reign of the Auckland Indoor Bowling Centre, let's just go back a little further and see how our game of Indoor Bowls was formed – what its origin was in New Zealand, and mention some of the people who got this game 'on the map'.

As far back as 1908, a Mr John Jenkin saw a version of Indoor Bowls whilst on a visit to London. He was so intrigued he decided to bring a set back. Since those 2 ¼" diameter bowls that he brought back, they have progressed through many stages. There have been several different sizes. The early ones were made of hard wood - ti tree and puriri. Some have been biased and others weighted on one side. After several years trying to find the perfect one, it was felt this had been achieved when the Taylor Rolph, modernite composite bowl was first introduced in the 1920's.

The first mat used was a 12' green baize, but with the introduction of those perfect bowls, every one guaranteed to draw equally, the Onehunga Woollen Mills were approached to find the perfect mat and they came up with one 22' long and 6' wide, the same as we are using today.

Just a little aside, in our research, the earliest cost of 16 bowls and 2 kitties was £1/8/- and the mat was £1/1/2 - a far different cry from today, I would suggest.

They played the first game of Indoor Bowls under present day conditions in the old Orange Hall, Karangahape Road on 15 March 1912. At this stage, the mat was placed on a raised platform and the corners were secured to the floor by a leather strap in each corner.

Henselite bowls, that everybody uses today, didn't come in till about the 1950's. It is interesting to note that in 1968 at Marilyn's first Nationals in Wanganui, she had 4 different types of bowls in her Singles section play.

Now just 2 years after Mr Jenkin brought the game into NZ, Brother Skinner, from the same Lodge, saw a different version of Indoor Bowls in Melbourne. Such was his enthusiasm about the progress of the game over there, he made an all-out effort to promote the game in the Lodges back in NZ. They were sceptical at first, but then saw its potential. It wasn't long before the game really took hold. Besides the Lodges, the game spread into the Friendly Societies, the Business Houses, the Ex-Servicemen's Clubs, the Church Halls, the Band Halls as well as Clubs opening up, such was its popularity.

It would be a few years before women entered the arena, though. You have to realise the Lodges were "men only" domain. It is quite interesting how the introduction of ladies came about. One Club decided to be brave and change its policy and encourage the family concept. Another Club was called the Friday Night Club. The men would go and have a 'roll-up' whilst the women folk bought the weekly groceries - Friday night shopping, as it was in those days. Upon their return, the ladies would pop in and join in with the men and hence the introduction of the lady-folk.

At this point we would like to mention a couple of people who made a terrific contribution to the game and were very much responsible for its growth! Frank Harris and Lavinia Boles - spelt B O L E S

- the Mother of Bowls. We owe a great debt to these two people for the contribution they both made in getting our game on the map. They were responsible in part in helping to form the: United Friendly Society Bowling Assn., the Auckland Interhouse Assn., the RSA Association, the Orange Bowling Club and both were on several other committees including the Lodges. Mrs Boles was still in office of the Auckland Indoor Bowling Centre until the late 60's. In 1968, she even marked Marilyn's Umpires exam paper. They were also instrumental in getting a uniform set of Rules throughout NZ. This was probably one of the most important achievements for after this, and with the introduction of those 'perfect bowls and mats', and along with the introduction of the women bowlers, the game spread rapidly throughout NZ.

Just by the way, the rules set down then are just about the same as the ones we use today - only a few minor adjustments.

Here are a couple that might tickle your fancy though –

1. Don't drop your pipe tobacco, or 'knock out' your pipe on the carpet - a very common fault.
2. That if you are a spectator you're not allowed to show other than strict neutrality.

Now, we have been going back into olden times and a few other notable differences or things that we discovered are –

1. If a game was drawn, the game was replayed - not an extra head played.
2. If the jack was mis-bowled it was sent back to be re-bowled by the opposing lead.
3. The points away for a killed end were different for each position.
4. It was a game for 'little old ladies' for there was always a knitting club!!! We had to wait until the ladies picked up their dropped stitches!!
5. Smoking was allowed. You wouldn't be able to see the other end of the Hall, especially at the Nationals. There was a blue haze and the clothes would smell terrible.
6. A lot of men wore ties. The ladies wore pleated skirts, but never trousers.
7. Big events like Nationals were played in Agriculture Halls or Woolsheds.

1942

A Good Year. I was born that year. The Auckland Deaf Society was formed, and the most important, the Auckland Indoor Bowling Centre was born. How lucky we were that it was in the hands of the aforementioned people, Frank Harris and Lavinia Boles, for, as previously mentioned, they had years of experience setting up new bodies and Associations and getting this game established.

Some of the other well-known personnel of these earlier years included Margaret Davenport, Jas Lochead, Jos Lyes, Mac MacGregor, Colin Campbell, Bunny Burrows, Bob Tilby and Keith Osborne. Then sometime later, it was Wes Wyman, Bob Moore, Allan and Vi Kilduff, Maurie and Jean Graves, Harold Brewer and even more recently, Bruce Ardern, Ken Gash and Greg Baxter. I hesitate to mention these people for fear of leaving somebody important out, but thought it nice to mention just some of those who really made this Centre work.

The game spread like topsy during those early years for it was wartime. Indoor Bowls provided an escape from the heavy issues of the day. It was a cheap pastime, one that could be played by all ages, both men and women, handicapped, blind, deaf etc.

Such was the popularity of the Championships, that many clubs could see the potential of having Open Championships as a money spinner. We can remember the monthly Deaf Welfare Centre's Open Fours always being a full house with a large waiting list.

Auckland started with 7 Associations, including Franklin, which was to break away eventually, and later became known as Counties. But for the most part, Auckland consisted of 8 Associations, Western, North Western, Manukau, South Auckland, Central, Eastern, Combined Northern and North Shore.

Membership in total around the country peaked in the 1960's with between 70,000 - 80,000 affiliated bowlers from 35 districts. Auckland had a membership of over 12,000 at this stage.

The NZ Indoor Bowls Federation was formed by George Welch, amongst others, on 18 September 1948. It comprised 9 districts but Auckland did not affiliate until the 6th year.

The first National Champs began in 1950 with 120 entries in the singles, 75 pairs and 45 fours. Just as a comparison to the peak years, in 1977, when the Nationals were in Tauranga, there were 3,050 in the singles, 1,700 in the pairs and 835 in the fours.

The Auckland Competitions were very keenly fought. They used to have big numbers then. When I won the Auckland singles in 1972, there were 435 entries. When we used to play in the singles, the section play used to be on Friday nights, 3 sessions on the Saturday, with post section on the Sunday. They often used to use Eden-Roskill as well for the section play. It used to be our job, as we were one of the closest to the DWC to go and look in the foyer on the Saturday evening and find out the draw for the Sunday, to see who could have a 'sleep in'. We then had to go home and get on the 'grape vine' to give this info to all our friends. There were always big crowds and people would stay, even if they had gone out, to watch their fellow club mates.

It was always a perk of the time, a bit like the Nationals, that the Auckland President could mark the final if he wished. The last few rounds all had appointed umpires and markers. There was a lot of friendly rivalry to 'get one of these games'!! There hasn't been a lot of change really with the Auckland Champs though. A few events, The Interclub, the Mixed Pairs, Aggregate and the Nominated Fours have been added. The Nominated Fours has also been taken away again. There used to be two Mixed Fours events, the Rothmans - this used to decide on who would represent Auckland at the National event, and the AJS Brown Mixed Fours. The Rothmans didn't count as an Auckland Title.

In the 1970's it was decided that Auckland was getting too big. It was felt that more people would get more opportunity of playing reps, would be seen by the National selectors etc., if we were to be split up and so in 1979 North Shore and Combined Northern pulled away and formed the North Shore Centre. In 1982 Manukau went it alone and formed the Manukau Centre later to be renamed Roskill and Districts.

Unfortunately, the Auckland Indoor Bowling Centre has never had its own home. In about the 1950's, the Council offered it a site off May Road, Mt Roskill. Mac MacGregor even drew up plans for a 32 mat Hall with the provision of it being able to be extended to 64 mats, but the committee of

the day declined this generous offer because its financial position was such that it couldn't afford to build the hall. What a great shame!! What would it be worth today?

The first tournaments were played way back in the Orange Hall, Karangahape Road, but for a long long-time, the Champs were played at the Deaf Welfare Centre, Balmoral along with Eden-Roskill Hall just opposite and St Therese. DWC became sort of Auckland's home. The deaf people also used to play their bowls there and it was also their social rooms. One night, whilst a final was being played, somebody dropped a whole drawer of cutlery on to the floor. It made a huge noise. Talk about the 'Silent Society'!

REPS:

Auckland has won its fair share of rep fixtures over the years. It could be said that if it weren't for its old foe, Waikato, it would have won heaps more!! Auckland managed to win the coveted Welch Trophy, the pinnacle of rep bowls, 5 times during this era. This was not a particularly high percentage considering the number of opportunities it has had.

Anyway, nothing can quite compare with the golden record breaking run, which spanned 11 years from 1974 - 1985. Auckland first took the Paterson Trophy from Hawkes Bay in 1974 and then withstood over 50 defences to create a new record. Canterbury lost theirs on the 46th defence. Auckland achieved the 50th win on 14 August 1983 by defeating Manukau 31-25 in a tense encounter after being 24-24.

Manukau was to get it's revenge a couple of years later, though, for it turned the scores around to beat Auckland 31-25 at the Blind Institute in June 1985. Surely 'D' Day!! I can remember one incident on this day. Terry O'Connor used to push his bowl backwards and forwards umpteen times. Marilyn was counting on this day, and she got to 33, 34. Terry must have heard her, stopped, looked her straight in the eyes and then proceeded to go through the whole motion yet again.

During this record time Auckland used over 50 different rep players, including 5 women. The Federation also made some format changes of these challenges over the years including changing the number of points for each event, and the order of play.

In 1977, the Welch Trophy, which had always been a 2-way Inter-Island contest changed to a 3-way event and then again in 1991 it became a 6-way play off.

After Auckland's record breaking run came to an end, the Federation changed the Paterson format from the Ranfurly Shield type of challenge to the present 6-way play off.

ACHIEVEMENTS

Auckland has done very well in all spheres outside the Centre. In administration, it has reached the top having had a National President and others on the National Committee and had NZ umpires on its National Committee. Auckland has also had many NZ and North Island reps. We have won many NZ events, including the Mixed Fours, NZ Champ of Champs Singles, the NZ Junior Singles - on more than one occasion. We have had many winners of the National Singles, Pairs and Fours but the Triples still eludes us.

SUCCESSFUL BOWLERS

We shouldn't really single out individuals, but we would just like to mention a couple of very successful Auckland Indoor Bowlers. Undoubtedly, our most successful bowler would have to be Sen Smith. He was the only bowler to have won the coveted Gold Star for 5 National Championship wins until this year. His wife, Kathy, was with him on 4 of those occasions. Sen has won numerous Auckland, Association, Deaf and Club Championships. Sen and Kathy were not only very competitive bowlers but did an enormous amount of administrative work. They helped to form both the Auckland and NZ Deaf Associations. They were also Manager and Chaperone of the Deaf team to the British Empire games.

Our next most successful bowler was Rod Fleming. He had won his 4th National Championship way back in 1982 and looked set to be the first Gold Star holder but such is the competition these days, Rod is still waiting for that elusive 5th. Perhaps, he should join forces with Aucklanders as all of his other titles were with people from North of the Bombay!!

DECLINE

Unfortunately, in recent times, there has been a decline in numbers and this has resulted in many Clubs and even Centres having to fold. There are probably several reasons for this - TV, other sporting activities, finance, computers, the Internet, apathy, the overlapping of the two bowling codes, but the biggest cause has probably been the introduction of the 7-day working week. It has affected just about every Club who got used to having a 5-day working week and then a full family weekend. Because of the finance situation, women have gone back out to work, when, in the past, as soon as they had got their children off their hands, they would put their heart and soul into voluntary work. Hence the clubs have lost a lot of Committee power.

What can we do to remedy this situation is the burning question. It is good to see that this year the Federation has selected teams to represent Maoris, Cook Islands and the Academy team - what about us oldies?

We hear that something positive is in the pipeline re targeting the children in the Schools. This must surely be a wonderful thing. A couple of stalwarts did that very thing about 25 years ago in Palmerston North and look at the Manawatu rep team now. Those 'boys' from way back then have formed the backbone of their team and they have gone on to win 4 Welch Trophy medals.

Just as an aside - has anybody considered tapping into the Asian fraternity?

Now, we were going to mention a few funny incidents involving Aucklanders at this stage but I have waffled long enough so I will give you just one. A car load of young bowlers were cruising the streets of Timaru when a mufti cop pulled them up. When the driver was asked where he came from, he quickly decided not to admit he was from Auckland because he would be sure to get a ticket, so decided to say he was from up Hamilton way. He got away with a warning!!

We could go on and on. This is just but a very brief summary - just the tip of the iceberg!! How could you get more than 60 years in just a few minutes? Anyway, we hope you have enjoyed what we have said.

Now, finally, we would like to thank all the people, the volunteers, the workers, who have put their whole heart and passion into the sport we love. We can't mention them all here, for there have been so many, but all the Committee people over the years, many of whom the Centre has recognised as Life Members, the Umpires, the Publicity people, the supporters, but mainly those pioneers, for without their foresight, their enthusiasm and their dedication, the game wouldn't have grown to the heights it has.

Marilyn and I have many happy memories of all the wonderful times we have had bowling, we have been on many trips, had the camaraderie of fellow reps, and made many lifelong friends. Thank you to all those people who have made this all possible. Long may it continue!