

Biased Heritage - 50 years of Indoor Bowls in Southland

Written by Graham Low, Chairman Southland Indoor Bowls Centre and presented on the occasion of their 50th Jubilee celebrations (2002)

Introduction

Late August 2002 and a special welcome is extended to a group of past and present members who have gathered at the home of the Southland Centre in Invercargill, to celebrate 50 years of competition in their chosen sport – Indoor Bowls.

This will be an opportunity to talk about the 'good old days', to reminisce about those days gone by, to regale stories about those shots that turned the game to your advantage or disadvantage depending on how you fared in the final result, and more importantly to remember all those bowlers who are unable to be with us today.

Unfortunately for the Southland Centre our original minutes and records were lost some time ago. This loss has meant that today's executive has had some difficulty in tracing our early history and some conflicting information remains unverified. In particular, the missing years between 1952 and 1956 will require assistance of any of those original club members able to authenticate some of the early history.

Inaugural Meeting

The sport of indoor bowls was being played in Invercargill in the Georgetown Hall in 1950 but it was not until late 1952 that a meeting was held to establish a provincial association and ensure that games were played on an organised footing. The Southland Indoor Bowls Centre as we know it today was originally known as an Association and it was not until 1957 that the Centre title was adopted.

The inaugural officers were:

President - George Frampton (Georgetown)

Secretary - Laurie Smith (Police)

Treasurer - Jim Clarke (North Invercargill)

Mr Frampton was President for only one year but Mr Smith continued as secretary until 1957. The Southland Centre was elected as an affiliate to the New Zealand Indoor Bowls Federation in 1954.

Clubs and Membership

Awarua, St Johns, Hawthorndale, Kew, Georgetown, State Hydro, Police, Aparima, Wyndham, North Invercargill and St Marys were the original clubs affiliated to form the Centre in 1952. Invercargill RSA first affiliated in 1953 but decided to backdate their affiliations to include the previous year so they could join the original group.

The number of clubs continued to grow and membership increased considerably in the years following the inception of the Centre. Otatara and St Andrews joined the original 12 in 1954 while Wyndham Ladies, Tussock Creek, Waikiwi and St Patricks joined in 1955; a total 18 clubs and 448 members. There was further growth the following year with Greenhills, Winton, Lumsden, 2NZE, and

UFS, Waverley, Ohai Buffs, Southland and St Marys (Gore) joining to give the Centre 27 clubs with a geographic spread right around the province.

In 1958 the number of clubs had tripled to 54 with 1,402 affiliated players and by 1962 this had increased again to 130 clubs and a total membership of 3,600. In 1967 there were still 130 clubs in operation but the membership levels had reduced to around 3,028. Regrettably, this was about the time that the Centre started to experience a gradual decline in the numbers of players participating in our sport and by 1972 affiliation levels had dropped to 2,401 representing 110 clubs. Despite all the efforts of Centre executives to arrest the trend in the ensuing years, the decline in playing numbers continued (until our Jubilee year that is). It is pleasing to note that this long-time downturn in numbers has been reversed with a small but significant increase (2%) in affiliation levels. In 2002 there is now a total of 51 clubs with a total membership of 825. The challenge for the current Centre executive is to preserve this upward movement in future years.

Centre Executive and Sub-Centres

Limited knowledge is available about the number of delegates, which constituted the Centre executive in those early days. In 1962, however, the large number of clubs and the vast area they covered made life very difficult for the Centre Secretary and a decision was taken to establish six sub-centres who would in turn elect their own governing body, run their own championships, inter sub-centre events and liaise with the Southland Centre as the controlling authority. In the early 1990's the Centre executive consisted of as many as 27 delegates and a meeting was convened to review the way the sport was governed locally. In 1998, as a result of that meeting, the Centre was restructured with the formation of a management team, elected from a greatly reduced number of representatives from the respective sub-centres, and the appointment of an Executive Officer.

Life Members

Our sport, like many others, has received an immense benefit from the enormous levels of volunteer assistance in organising and running the various tournaments over the 50 years. Some of these volunteers have given what can only be described as extraordinary service to the Centre and this is properly recognised by the granting of a Life Membership. The first recipients of this prestigious award were declared in 1967, namely, George Frampton and Mrs Eileen Parsons. Henry Williams (1979), Jack Boniface (1981), Len Clearwater (1985), Mrs Nola Sinclair (1988), Jim Boniface (1989), Walter Jack (1991), Mervyn Ryder (1992), Brian Wilson (1997) and Alister Dawson (1998) have subsequently joined this elite group.

Championships and Representative Fixtures

A perusal of the championship records shows that in 1954 Pairs and Fours were contested with a combination from the Hawthorndale club winning the Fours and a team from the Police winning the Pairs. The first Singles were conducted in 1955 with a member of the St Marys club taking out the title. A Police club team again won the Pairs and a Georgetown team the Fours. In 1960, when the number of players enjoying indoor bowls was at an all-time high, the Singles championship attracted a field of 365 bowlers and two venues, the YMCA Stadium and RSA Hall, were used with three sessions of qualifying at each location – 8:30, 11:30, and 2:15. 126 players qualified for post section and applauded by a crowd of over 200 the winner was decided after 18 ends in the final. Check it out on our history boards to see who the eventual winner was! Did you know that back then, if the

result at the completion of 18 ends in a final was a drawn game, that a further game of 18 ends was required to decide the winner?

In 2002 championship titles were awarded for competition in Singles, Pairs, Triples, Fours and Champion of Champions Singles events. Gold stars are awarded to bowlers who have been successful in achieving five Southland, South Island or New Zealand titles. Sixteen players have accomplished this feat – Stan Johnstone, Norman Le Lievre, Alan Georgel, Bill Kane, Rema Georgel, Stan Withington, Mark Keen, Brian Hotton, Graham Low, Grant Fortune, Bill Pascoe, Elaine Carnie, Peter Carnie, Gary Low, Jan Low and Clare Stronach. Two of these players, Mark Keen and Graham Low, have gone further, and been presented with gold bars to their gold stars, for winning ten titles. The first representative fixture was contested in 1955 when Otago travelled to Invercargill, to challenge the locals. Southland was the winner on this occasion. In 1957 the first representative game against South Otago was played and Southland was again victorious in this encounter.

Representative fixtures are now held annually against Otago (A and B divisions) on a home and away basis, South Otago and a Triangular competition against Central Otago and South Otago.

In 1992 an invitation was extended to Southland to send a team of juniors (under 18) to compete for the Publicity Trophy. This contest was an existing event for other associations within the Southern Zone, and since joining this competition Southland Juniors have established an outstanding record by winning the trophy every year since, bar one. In 1998 the combined Southern Zone districts (South Canterbury, North Otago, Otago, Central Otago, South Otago and Southland) introduced a competition exclusively for ladies to be played along similar lines to the Paterson Trophy event. Although this is an extremely popular event, the overall title has eluded, albeit narrowly, Southland teams since its inclusion on the bowling calendar.

The ultimate in team competitions is undoubtedly the AS Paterson Trophy event. The format for this event has been subject to numerous changes over the years, including challenge systems within the South Island, a four-team round-robin competition (one game a month), to the present round-robin series between the six Southern Zone districts played over one weekend. Remember the year Southland travelled to Hinds to challenge Canterbury and the opposition was so confident they would win they left the trophy in Christchurch? Canterbury lost! Southland teams have remained competitive and been successful in going forward to compete in the Welch Trophy (on display this weekend) competition on six previous occasions – 1965, 1966, 1967, 1969, 1970 and 1983. It is appropriate that our seventh such attendance at this event will occur this year, our 50th Jubilee year, after defeating the current titleholders Otago, in July.

Venues

In the early days the Southland Centre used several venues for championship and representative fixtures including the YMCA Stadium, RSA Hall, Kew Bowl and Georgetown Hall. Depending on its availability the Council owned Centennial Hall was to be the predominant facility in use during later years.

In a bold move, the bowlers of Southland decided in 1980 to buy their own headquarters. With a membership of 1,700 bowlers Southland wide, the costs of funding and purchasing a suitable building were high. The building eventually purchased was the former Glace Ice Rink in Onslow

Street at a cost of \$194,000. The expenses did not stop here however, as a concrete floor was laid at a further cost of \$24,000 and a kitchen established with the skilled labour from within the constituent clubs, thus saving valuable financial resources.

Bowls started on schedule in the new facility in April 1980 with makeshift heating arrangements and many who remember those early days in the present Centre will recall the first season of cold nights where everyone froze – some bowlers even resorting to playing in overcoats. In 1981 however, the bowlers ungrudgingly parted with a further \$18,000 to install a new heating system, which incidentally, is still in use today. Since then there have been many upgrades to the facility, which caters for around 64 mats, including toilet facilities, upstairs kitchen and social area, upgrading the foyer and entrance, new enlarged storage facility for mats and bowls and most recently a major upgrade of the external walls and roof. A large number of bowlers contributed directly in the purchase of this complex by taking out debentures at the time. It is pleasing to note that the Centre Hall is now totally debt free with the final mortgage payments made in 2000. While all of the sub-centres have contributed significantly to the enduring financial commitments with the purchase of our own hall the on-going efforts of the Invercargill Sub-Centre conducting weekly housie nights cannot be ignored and warrants special recognition.

In 1993 the floor had deteriorated to such an extent that funding was sourced, and thanks to the Lotteries Commission and Invercargill Licencing Trust, work started on a \$71,000 resurfacing to fix undulations, which were long overdue for correcting, and in preparation for the 1994 New Zealand Championships. The total floor area was laid in slabs that provided variations across the whole area of not more than 1.5 mm. A normal concrete floor would vary by as much as two or three times this allowance.

The Southland Centre facility is the envy of indoor bowling associations New Zealand wide and is commonly regarded as the best playing surface available in the country.

New Zealand Championships and Representatives

Southland has conducted many national events over the 50-year history and produced a number of champions at this level. New Zealand Championships have been conducted in Invercargill in 1957, 1966, 1972, and 1994. In 2002 for the first time ever we will be holding the New Zealand Henselite Champion of Champions Singles final.

Southlanders who have been honoured by winning a New Zealand championship title include – Stan Johnstone (Singles, 1966); Bill Kane (Singles, 1985); Norman Le Lievre and John Campion (Pairs, 1972); Eric Blackmore, M Harvey, EE Boyd and Mrs L Harvey (Fours, 1961); and Mark Keen, Louis Spencer, Janet Spencer and Myrtle Kelly (Mixed Fours, 1998). Others to achieve notable performances include Pearl Thompson (1969) and Mavis Jackson (1972) who were awarded the Truth Cup for the lady going furthest in the New Zealand Singles championship and Gary Low (1994) the Cliff Thompson Trophy for the Junior (under 18) bowler going furthest in the same event. Southland has also won the Patrons Trophy for the best-performed province at the New Zealand Championships in 1984.

The first New Zealand representative team was chosen in 1975 and Norman Lelievre was selected as a member of that team. This inaugural international event was significant for Southland in that the

first ever tour game was held in Invercargill. In 1983 Bill Kane and Shirley Gray followed in Lelievre's footsteps as Southland representatives in the New Zealand team. Gray and Kane both represented New Zealand on more than one occasion. Bill Kane was named as Southland's Sportsman of the year in 1985.

South Island Championships and Representatives

South Island Championships have been a regular fixture in Invercargill – 1962, 1968, 1971, 1979, 1983, 1990, 1998 and 2001. There have been numerous titleholders to wear the Southland uniform on the victory dais at these events including seven Pairs, four Fours and one Triple. On the representative scene a number of Southland bowlers have played for the South Island in the annual Henry-Eddy inter-island test matches. Those players include – Bill Kane, Mark Keen, Suzanne Mackie, Daphne Murray, Norman Lelievre, Bill Pascoe, Shane Hamilton, Grant Fortune, Gary Low, Graham Low, Jan Low, Janet Spencer, Louis Spencer and Ann Mackie.

Weather Disruptions

As 'indoor' bowlers you would not expect our sport to be disrupted too often even with regard to the vagaries of the weather here in the south! There will be many other stories told this weekend we feel sure, but were you there in 1972 when the New Zealand Fours final was being played in the Centennial Hall and play was interrupted when hail began falling through the roof and on to the finals mat? What about the occasion when mats had been laid in that same venue for a competition the next day but play was abandoned when the combination of heavy rain and a blocked drain resulted in floodwaters inundating the area and many of the mats were found floating? Do you remember the sight of the Rugby Park grandstand covered in a myriad of shades of green mats in a futile (many of them shrunk and had to be replaced) attempt to dry them? And how often have you heard, where ice-covered roads have delayed bowlers or prevented them from making their destination due to snow conditions?

The Future

In 2000 the Centre with the support of WestpacTrust launched a new event for competition among intermediate and secondary schools. As a direct result of the introduction of this tournament a new club, the Young Spirits, was formed in 2002 with the aim of encouraging and fostering players under the age of 20. The momentum gained from this, and other factors such as the increase in affiliations and the return of a regular column on the main sports page of the Southland Times, are all encouraging indications for a renaissance of indoor bowls in the south. While we cannot realistically expect to achieve the levels of playing numbers of the early 1960's, it is important that the Centre does not become complacent, and continues to build on these factors and promote and market our sport for the next 50 years.

Thanks

A special thank-you to all of you, bowlers both past and present, who have contributed to the history of our sport through your participation during the last 50 years. We must also thank most sincerely the large number of sponsors who have supported our sport financially over this period. Without their contribution the Centre would not be enjoying the benefits we share today. In particular, we must honour the support and dedication of the Invercargill Licensing Trust, our major sponsor.

Thank you to the Jubilee Organising Committee who have made this weekend possible and to all those bowlers who have provided photographs, media clippings, scrapbooks and other material that is on display. We trust you will take away many fond memories and relive some of those forgotten experiences from the vast array of stories, as recalled from our proud history.

Congratulations Southland Indoor Bowls Centre on your 50th Jubilee!