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MONEY THROUGH VENDING?**

**10 MUST-SEE TRADE SHOWS
OUTSIDE OF BOWLING**

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BOWLING INDUSTRY

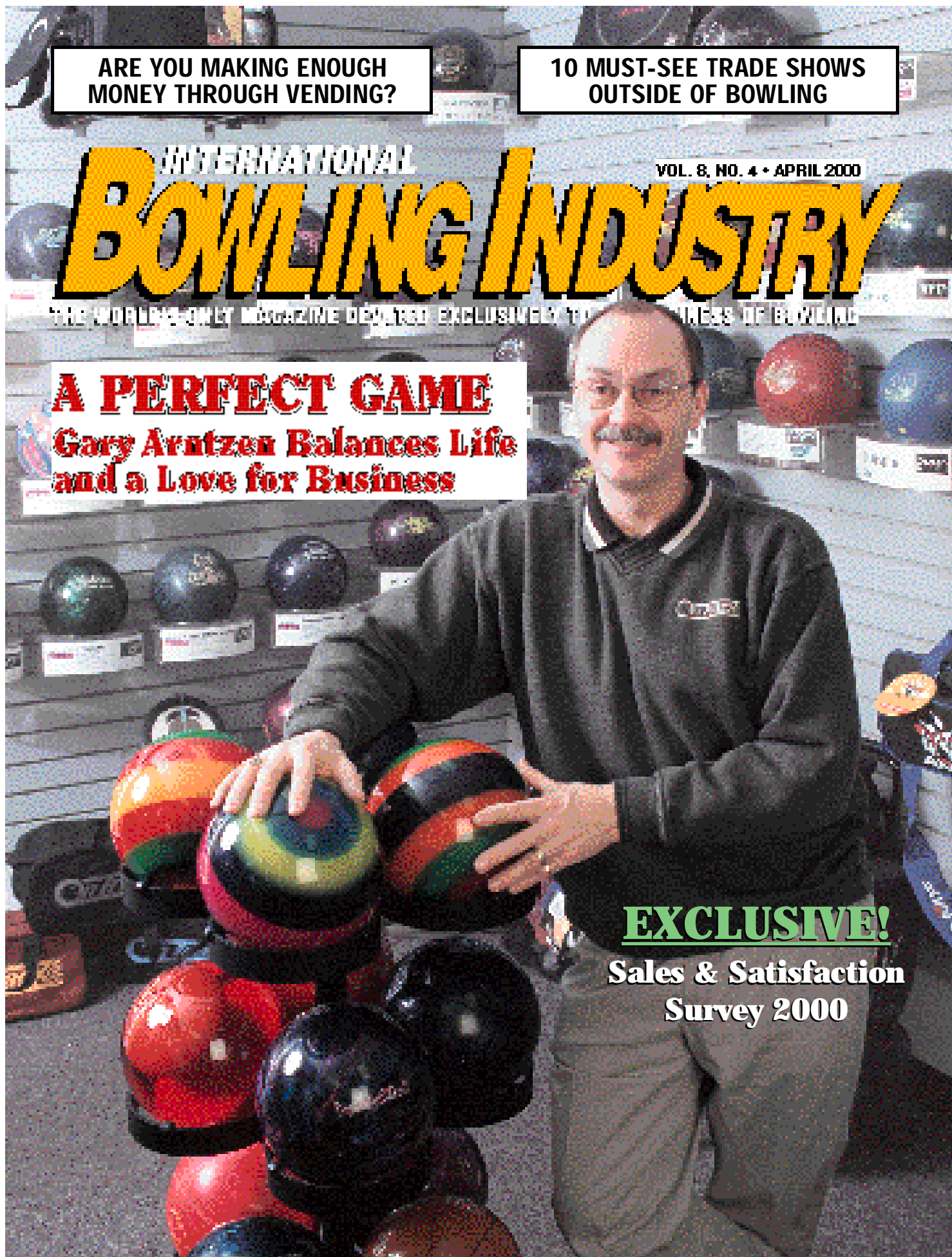
THE WORLD'S ONLY MAGAZINE DEDICATED EXCLUSIVELY TO THE BUSINESS OF BOWLING

A PERFECT GAME

**Gary Arntzen Balances Life
and a Love for Business**

EXCLUSIVE!

**Sales & Satisfaction
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A Perfect Game

■ Gary Arntzen Balances Life, Career and a Love for the Pro Shop Business

BY JOHN MORELL

The business philosophy of Gary Arntzen can be summed up with one simple phrase: Don't take yourself too seriously. "It's easy to get caught up in trying to make sure everything is perfect all the time," he says. "But life and work are never perfect, and you'll end up with a lot of bad days if you live that way. We have to realize that worse things can happen than drilling a ball wrong."

Arntzen, 48, has built a chain of six pro shops in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area on that philosophy, which came to him soon after opening his first shop in 1990.

"I was a month into getting the business started and working hard on the merchandising, the marketing and everything else you need to do when you open a pro shop," he says. "Then I came home one afternoon and found my wife unconscious in the back yard."

His wife, Jan, had suffered a heart attack and wasn't breathing. He quickly called paramedics and called upon CPR skills he'd learned from watching television. Jan made it to the hospital alive, and although she spent several days in a coma, she fully recovered from the incident.

"The doctors said that I had saved her life, which made me think about what's really important to me. We often take our loved ones for granted and put our businesses ahead of them. I don't want to have that attitude. I mean, come on, we're not finding a cure for heart disease, we're drilling holes in bowling balls."

Arntzen has been involved in bowling since he was a small child, carefully pushing balls down the middle of non-bumpered lanes to knock down a pin or two. He worked in several centers as a young adult, as a center manager and, after learning how to drill balls, pro shop manager.

After working on both the center and the pro shop side, Arntzen decided that he wanted to work in pro shops. "When I began drilling balls, people would come up to me and say, 'Thanks, I had my best game with that new ball. I really like the fit.' When I was managing a center people would tell me about a broken mirror in the bathroom, sticking approaches, that sort of thing. I just liked the fact that bowlers seem to appreciate the pro shop people more."

He got involved in a Minnesota bowling supply company briefly, and when the company folded Arntzen decided to pool his money, buy some equipment and start his own pro shop at a St. Paul bowling center and called it On Track. "My original idea was to open several pro shops in a lot of small centers that didn't have them and have myself and an employee or two travel around and service them."

He quickly opened four of these "part time" shops, but found that the concept didn't work. "We'd be at one center on Mondays and Tuesdays, but then the bowlers there would complain and want us to come on Wednesdays. Then we'd go there on a Wednesday we'd have no customers."

His solution was to hire full-timers to man three of the shops, while he watched

over the business from his pro shop at Midway Pro Bowl in St. Paul. Arntzen opened two other shops and has 15 full- and part-time staffers to man his six On Track locations.

Like other business people, Arntzen finds it difficult to find and keep good employees. "I basically want people who have fun and love bowling, and either know the equipment we sell or they're willing to learn."

His staff includes two former Team USA bowlers, Carl Fietek and Scott Pohl. "These guys are very good bowlers and very well-known in the area and they help drive busi-



Serving novice bowlers is a priority for Gary Arntzen and staff.

ness into my shop and the center. It helps to have visible people in the sport working for you."

Attracting as many bowlers as he can through his doors is Arntzen's first goal, whether they're long-time league bowlers or novices. "I've been in pro shops where a casual bowler is helped by the employee adequately, but if a league customer walks in, the employee's attention is turned away from the new customer toward the old one. That's not the way to be. Maybe that casual bowler will buy just one ball in his lifetime. But if he has a good experience in buying it, he's sure to tell his family and friends."

Although he believes in giving a 100 percent effort to all of his customers, he's especially careful with beginning bowlers. "How many bowlers buy a ball, and because of a bad fit or drilling, they develop a blister and don't want to play anymore? One bad experience can turn off a bowler, and your customer, and we need to be aware of that."

When a new bowler walks into one of Arntzen's shops to browse, he works on getting that person to become his customer. "I'll ask if they need any help and they'll often say, 'No thanks, I'm just looking around.' At many pro shops, the interaction ends right there. But I'll ask the person how often they bowl, what their best score is, have they ever tried a wristband support, that kind of thing. If you show some interest in the customer, they're more likely to buy equipment."

Arntzen maintains a customer database and uses direct mail to reach out to his "regulars." However, he feels his best promotion has been the On Track Challenge, an annual tournament that attracts more than 100 entrants. "Basically, it's open to anyone who spends at least \$300 during the previous year in any of our shops. If you spend at least \$500, you get to participate in both the early and late-shift portions of the tournament, which doubles your chances of winning."

First place bowlers get \$3,000 cash, while second- and third-place get \$1,500 and \$750. The next seven bowlers below the leaders get \$300. "It's a lot of money to give away, but our customers love it. If they're close to the \$300 requirement before the tournament, they're sure to come in and buy something to make sure they get in."

The format has the bowlers playing a 10-game tournament at five of the centers where his shops are located. "It's really kind of a rush to walk into a center and seeing all these people around you with balls and bags and other equipment that you sold them. And the center pro-

prietors love it too because of the business these customers bring in."

Establishing a good relationship with the centers where his shops are located has been essential to his success, he believes. "We're fortunate in that the owners of the centers we're in realize the value of a good pro shop to their business. There are many proprietors who lease out their pro shop in the same way they lease out their bar or restaurant. They don't care what you do as long as you're making the lease payment.

"They think they're doing you a favor by feeding customers from the bowling center into your shop. But I think a well-run pro shop should be attracting customers on its own who then become customers of the bowling center."

The design of a pro shop is critical to its success, Arntzen believes, and he's had two shops redesigned with the help of Ebonite's Striking Effects and another two with assistance from Brunswick's Prosource.

However, he says even the best-looking pro shop will likely fail unless the location in the center is right, which is why he stresses building up a good proprietor/pro shop operator relationship. "Unfortunately, many older centers don't have room for a decent pro shop. Rather than building the center with the pro shop in mind, the architect leaves you with a broom closet, and I just don't drill in broom closets."

At his Midway Pro Bowl location, he survived his first five years in a 200-square-foot room, then during a center remodel he proposed moving his shop to the space

occupied by a little-used locker room. The proprietor agreed and the result: "We had another 150-square-feet of display space. I found that my accessory sales jumped 20 percent after the move, because we were able to display more merchandise."

Arntzen maintains a website, www.ontrackproshop.com, but he mainly uses it for informational purposes, letting customers know about events and specials at his shops. He hasn't seen an adverse effect from customers choosing Internet suppliers rather than his shop for balls and equipment.

Besides not getting too serious about what he does, Arntzen believes that the second key to success is not to stand still too long. "I was thinking the other day about how lucky I am having six successful pro shops and a solid base of customers. Then I went to a local tournament and I didn't recognize any of the bowlers. My first thought was, 'None of these people are my customers, look at how much more work I have to do!'"



Arntzen believes in building good relationships with center proprietors.