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Shark Attack At The Riviera

A hustler since he was 10, Mike Berlin had what it took to win the Firestone

Herman Weiskopf

Most pro bowlers refuse to step onto a lane unless they are equipped with a wrist strap, special shoes, a scientifically fitted ball and all the latest theories about hand releases, angles of delivery, ball rotation, wind direction and pin deflection. Not Mike Berlin. When Berlin won the \$125,000 Firestone Tournament of Champions two weeks ago at Akron, his "secret" was the only thing that had not been patented, marketed, laminated or sold—a hustler's heart.

While Berlin actually didn't hustle the other 51 contestants rolling for the \$25,000 payoff, biggest of the year on the Professional Bowlers Association tour, he agreed that he probably would have succumbed to the intense pressure if it had not been for the imperturbability he acquired during his hustling days.

The 33-year-old Berlin started hustling when he was a 10-year-old newspaperboy in Muscatine, Iowa. Having delivered his papers, Berlin would take the earnings and roll with the other newsboys for nickels and dimes, and he usually would convert his change into bills.

With this kind of background, Berlin was well prepared for his first all-out invasion of big-time bowling, from which he came away with the \$35,000 winner's check in the 1968 Petersen Classic in Chicago. Berlin vividly recalls some of the potentially shattering things that happened to him during the Petersen, bowling's zaniest event.

"Pins were dropped on the lanes next to me," he says. "Once, they kept my ball from returning for five minutes. In the end I needed strike-spare to win. So they shut down the machines on my lanes for 20 minutes. They waited until all the other bowlers were done so they could all watch me. When my ball finally came back, I grabbed it and threw probably my best shot of the tournament. I got a strike, finished with a turkey [three straight strikes] and won."

Two years later, Berlin took the most prestigious title in bowling—the all-events crown at the American Bowling Congress tournament in Knoxville, Tenn.

Despite his frequent successes, Berlin didn't rush out to join the PBA circuit. Instead, he was content to win between \$15,000 and \$20,000 a year as an amateur bowler. Bowling amateurs are simon-pures in the sense that, say, Soviet hockey players are amateurs. In bowling, only those men who belong to the PBA and those women affiliated with one of the two pro circuits are officially classified as pros. All other bowlers are amateurs, no matter how much money they earn at the scores of amateur tournaments conducted each year. Some 50,000 bowlers compete in these amateur events, rolling for almost \$750,000 in the Petersen and for some \$1 million at both the ABC and the nine-month-long Hoinke Classic in Cincinnati.

Last year, however, Berlin decided to join the PBA. "One reason I came on the tour was because I was cheated out of winning two amateur tournaments," he says. "I lost one when another bowler turned in a phony score sheet. Another time I lost because a guy used a fake average and beat me with his bigger handicap. I just couldn't fight all that anymore."

Still, Berlin is thankful for the amateur experience. "It has really helped me on the tour," he says. "I bowled lots of times for \$100 a game and never got blasted out. One time I bowled badly, gambled away all my money and was at the door, ready to leave for home, when a friend told me he had \$20. That got us into some games against a couple of pros. I rolled five 240s in a row, took my winnings and bet like crazy on the side, and at the end of the night I had \$500. The next day I bowled the guys who finished first and third in the tournament, and I wound up with the one guy's first-place check and the other guy's third-place check—\$800 altogether."

Last season Berlin earned \$20,558 and was named rookie of the year. He also acquired a reputation as a "brickyard" bowler, a grind-it-out

competitor who is at his best when lane conditions are less than ideal. Most important, Berlin won the PBA tournament in [Minot, N.D.](#), and thus gained a berth in the champions-only field at the [Firestone](#).

Berlin led the pack throughout most of the qualifying rounds at the Riviera lanes, but in the 48th and last game Mike Durbin of [Chagrin Falls, Ohio](#) tied him for first place. Durbin then outrolled Berlin 232-203 to gain the No. 1 seed in the five-bowler roll-off for the \$25,000 first-place check.

In the opening match of the stepladder-style windup, fifth-place Larry Laub beat fourth-place Sam Flanagan, and then he upset third-place Wayne Zahn. But Berlin eliminated Laub 213-200, setting up a rematch against Durbin. Like the true hustler, Berlin saved his best bowling for last.

He started with four strikes, marked in every frame—picking off the 3-6-10 split for a spare in the fifth and the 2-4-5 for another spare in the ninth—and whipped Durbin 221-205. Nothing to it. Nobody dropped a pin on an adjacent lane.

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