

Knocking Down Pins, Knocking Down Doubts

by Rick Bowers

"Bowling is fun," says Martin Frost, a left above-knee and right hip-disarticulation amputee. "If I couldn't have fun, I wouldn't do it. It gives me the opportunity to meet a lot of other amputees and others with disabilities."

Frost, now 67, lost his legs to a 40mm antitank shell in July 1984 during a play-day weekend in Southern California, about 20 miles from a Marine base.

"One of my friends was shooting at cans, and there was an old live antitank round out there that we didn't know about," Frost explains. "It was approximately a foot underground where it couldn't be seen and about 125 feet away from me. When my friend accidentally hit it, it exploded, and I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Frost had first started bowling in 1960, and it was something that he enjoyed and wanted to return to when he left the hospital in October 1984. He has come a long way since then.

At the time of his injury, he had a 190 average as a standing bowler, and just a few years ago, he was able to achieve the same average bowling from a wheelchair.

Frost, who is now on the board of directors of the American Wheelchair Bowling Association (AWBA, www.awba.org), bowls several days a week and goes to about six to 10 tournaments a year around the country.

"We have about 400 active members in the AWBA," Frost says. "If you enjoyed bowling



Martin Frost

before you became an amputee or if you saw other amputees bowl and were interested at all, you can get hooked on it real easy."

Don McElroy, a left hip-level amputee and a standing bowler, can vouch for that.

He got involved in bowling for fun when he was just a child, but he didn't really become "addicted" to it until he was out of high school.

From early on, he played in leagues with everybody, not only bowlers with disabilities. He still does today. This choice, the 47-year-old explains, has a lot to do with some of the things that happened to him as a child with an artificial leg.

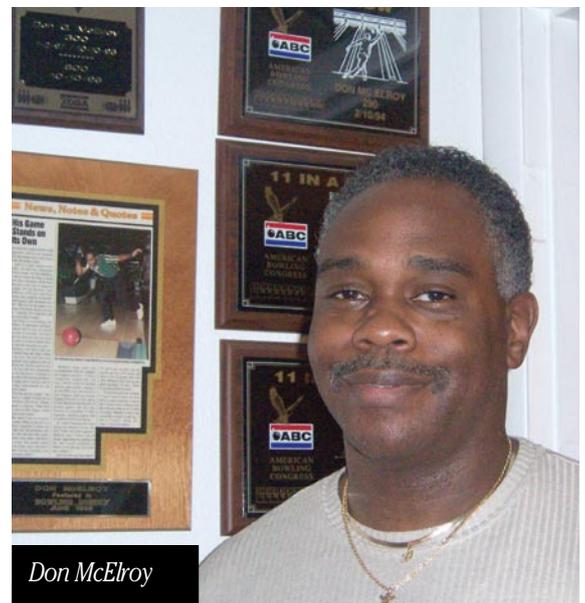
When he was 7, his mother got him involved in the YMCA so that he could learn to swim, but the experience actually taught him some more important lessons.

"When I got out there in the pool area, all eyes were staring at me because of my missing leg. Then, this one kid just blatantly hollers out, 'What is this cripple doing here?'"

It was devastating to McElroy, and he hopped out of the pool area in tears and called his mother to come and get him. The director, however, convinced the youngster and his mother to stay and try again.

"I don't know what made me go back up there and try it again," he says, "but I did."

Though McElroy didn't learn to swim that day, he didn't give up. Later, while he was at camp, one of his friends jumped into the pool,



Don McElroy

and, McElroy, not knowing what the numbers painted on the side of the pool meant, followed him into the 5-foot-deep water and almost drowned. The lifeguard who saved his life also offered to teach the devastated youngster how to swim.

“By the time I left camp, I could swim across the shallow end of the pool, and when I got back to the Y, I took swimming lessons and then junior lifesaving a few years later. Now, I’m just like a fish in the water.”

Like learning to swim, bowling was more difficult for McElroy than it is for most people. He’s right-handed, and right-handed bowlers usually slide on their left foot when releasing the ball. Because McElroy’s left leg is artificial, however, he had to adapt to the unusual and awkward technique of sliding on his right foot. Still, he refused to give up and continued trying.

“If you want to do something, you’re always going to figure out a way to do it, depending on the drive within you,” he says. The solution, he says, is “simple”: Adapt and practice.

Obviously, he’s figured out what it takes to excel. This bowler, who always draws stares from others for his unusual technique, now bowls some amazing games. He’s bowled 24 perfect 300 games, seven 299 games, and he’s cracked the desired 800 score in series play on five occasions with an 837, 826, 832, 847 and 877 out of a perfect score of 900. In fact, in the series game where he scored 877, he bowled 35 strikes out of a perfect series of 36 strikes.

“When I got 35 strikes,” he says, “everybody else stopped bowling to watch me. On the 10th frame of the last game, you could have heard a pin drop. I was so nervous. You wouldn’t believe the pressure that you feel, not knowing if you’ll ever get such a chance again.”

He recalls years ago when he watched other bowlers who knew what they were doing, and thinking, “One of these days I’m going

to be able to bowl like that.” He had a dream and achieved it.

“I have the determination in me to try to do whatever I do well,” he says, recalling his efforts to learn to swim and to perhaps show others and himself what he was capable of. “It’s always in the back of my mind to try to do things better than any able-bodied person.”

Still, if he hadn’t returned to the pool that day back when he was 7, McElroy feels that his

life might be dramatically different today.

“Eventually, that day made me stronger,” he explains. “There have been plenty of times I came home upset and

“If you want to do something, you’re always going to figure out a way to do it, depending on the drive within you.”

thought, ‘Why me? Why couldn’t it have been somebody else?’ But I don’t think I would change anything even if I could. Sure, I often wonder how good I could be if I had both legs, but, who knows, maybe I wouldn’t be that good because maybe I wouldn’t have the same determination.”

Whenever he bowls, he knows that people stare at him because his technique appears strange and awkward. It was perhaps especially noticeable about six years ago when he found a sponsor for the Professional Bowlers Association (PBA) tour and competed against other professionals.

“I was out there with all of the big boys,” he says.

Though he was nervous and people were staring at him, once they saw that he knew what he was doing, they started taking him seriously.

“When you start knocking down more wood than they do,” he explains humbly, “they start paying attention!” ■