

INCREASING BOWLS MEMBERSHIP.

There has been much discussion recently on how to increase bowls membership generally. Falling numbers is not a problem unique to Wales.

The main influence on young people taking up the sport is, without doubt, having a family connection to bowls. This hasn't changed in generations, It was the natural choice to follow fathers and grandfathers into the same club, remaining with that club all their lives. Notice the gender bias here. At one time, women were only allowed in to make refreshments and the exclusivity of bowls as a senior male activity is still a view held by many and something the media does little to dispel. Juniors, whilst encouraged to 'come and watch' were also confined to playing on the green only when accompanied by a senior member. Those accessing bowls in recent years, both in gender and age has changed dramatically and the average age of those bowling is 35 -40 rather than the expected 60 or 70 year olds. Few players are 'one club' members too. Bowls is high on the list of sports for those seeking a retirement activity for health and social reasons, but we mustn't lose sight of the need to 'spread the word' to all potential newcomers out there.

In this respect, today, bowls is neither defined nor confined by age or gender.

So where do we start?

We need to address the future on two levels. Recruitment and retention. It is not enough to get people to join, we also need to keep those we already have.

There are a great many distractions and limitations for people today. Work commitments, study away from home, other sports, television, social media, computer games and family commitments are just some of the issues to contend with.

The demise of sport centres and the difficulty for youngsters to enter or aspire to the elite sports at a high level (football, tennis, cycling, gymnastics etc) makes bowling an ideal activity in which to participate. It is one of the few sports that you can return to at any stage of your life. The cost of equipment is not prohibitive to the sport and club membership fees are very low. This is another area of the future in need of a rethink. Any increase in club fees needs to be carefully planned with projects and outcomes for extra money transparent as to its eventual use and must benefit everyone. I am aware that a number of bowling clubs have folded when support from the local authority has been withdrawn due to funding problems. This is a great shame. By taking over the running of a club and maintenance of the green, club members can make it truly their own.

A successful bowling club needs to be all things to all members. You need to identify your core membership and what it is they expect from involvement in your club, and to remind everyone that all members are equal. Is there access at all times? Do new recruits feel motivated to get involved? Are they concerned about the image of bowls? Social members are as vital to a club and its finances as are competitive members. Over competitiveness can put less confident people off from joining. You don't have to compete in a league to enjoy the game. It can be enough to stretch and challenge yourself on a pleasurable afternoon, going solo at your local club, but if you like the stimulus and focus of competition then go for it.

For those outside the game, the benefits of bowling may not seem obvious. It is an ideal activity for all ages and is recommended by health bodies such as the NHS and British Heart Foundation as a good all round fitness sport, and with personal health and well being a currently potent issue bowls scores particularly high in the positive stakes. You can become so involved in your game that you are unaware of the range of bending, stretching, balance and co ordination required to say nothing of the miles you walk.

You want those killer legs for the summer? Start bowling. Stamina and strength are built slowly but

surely. Stability and balance practised and perfected on the green will go a long way in reducing the risk of falls in later life, whilst mental agility through planning, scoring and judgement are all win-win situations from a game of bowls. It also builds a network of support with like minded people, who often become lifelong friends.

There **are** clubs who will have genuine concerns about expanding their numbers. Making the green available to more players could lead to time limitations on other users. For some they fear that the club will change beyond recognition. We should be more adult and honest with ourselves. We need to help the sport to grow and to stay relevant to all ages and abilities. It **DOES** matter what happens at all levels, and we should not be afraid of change. Most club members work tirelessly and selflessly to keep the game alive and accessible and they should be loudly applauded.

There is also a feeling that too much emphasis is placed on young people and junior players, but they **are** the future of bowls. Whilst it may not seem important now that the sport be around in 50 or 100 years time, it would be nice to think you will have made a valuable contribution to reinvigorate the sport and pass on a love of the game to generations of the future.

There is also a misconception that those playing at County level are, somehow, the 'elite' and command most of any funding available. There is no 'them and us' in the sport, merely those who have gone beyond the club gate to try their hand further afield and at a higher level. Why wouldn't you want to be the best you can be, bring a pride to your club and, maybe, inspire some new members?

So what can we do?

There are, already a number of clubs involved in undertaking some excellent and exciting work promoting and widening access to bowls by holding sessions with schools, scout and disability groups, beginners leagues, WI's or village 'Come and try it' events regularly. It would be nice to see more clubs taking up these ideas. If you know of any initiatives near you, ask them how they got started and how they organise things. I am sure they would be only too happy to help. Open days are a clever way to connect with the community and to showcase what the club is or has been involved in.

Some sports have introduced a 'buddy' scheme to help boost members and get more people involved in sport. Here a seasoned player can 'adopt' and mentor a newcomer, helping to encourage them to improve their skills and confidence. This is particularly helpful in recruiting younger members, but is not exclusively for this age group. You can help friends of any age to access sport with the opportunity to get fit and have fun. Why not challenge your members to get a non-bowling friend, young or not-so-young, along for an afternoon? You may even recruit some.

Make it fun. Try barefoot bowls. Playing bowls without footwear. This was tried in 'flat green' country last year and proved both novel and successful. Get together with your local schools too. Hold taster sessions and mini competitions for the children at the school or between a number of schools. Award everyone who takes part with a medal to take home.

Fundraising events could be arranged jointly with other local organisations to everyone's benefit. Consider events such as coaching sessions, target bowls, mini round robin competitions, spot prizes, or an exhibition match by some leading County bowlers from Wales or beyond. Invite two local businesses to use the green for in house, team building events and to play against one another.

Of course activities such as these will involve organisation and costs. All too often the planning and running of such an initiative is left to a handful of people within a club. Try to see this as a means to increase revenue from renting use of the green or the sale of refreshments. Call local businesses (pubs, post offices, shops) and tell them what you are doing to get more people involved in sport. Ask them if they would like to be a part of it by sponsoring medals or a small trophy.

Nothing is achieved by waiting for someone else to get the job done. Adding to any membership takes time, effort and resources and it can be a challenge to attract new members and to organise fun promotional events. From some of the ideas listed above, you can see there is a whole range of activities you can try to increase membership and finances. Take a look at the BCGBA website where you will find an excellent document called ' A Manual For Club Open days'. It is full of suggestions for hosting events safely and successfully.

With another season almost over, it is a good time to make plans for next year. Try to include initiatives that will increase club membership.

Make the time. Expend the effort. Seek the resources. Make the sport what we all want it to be – accessible, affordable, exciting and special. Tomorrow is ours. Let's go out and make it happen.