

My first real experience in doing hard time came at the age of 17. I had been arrested for an Armed Robbery of a gas station. I was guilty of it of course. I was housed in the maximum-security floor of the Vermillion County Jail in Illinois. As a skinny, white teenager, I would be lying if I said I wasn't nervous. I was in a gang yes, but this was different than the juvenile jails I had been raised in. The cell block I was assigned to was J-Block. It held 18 guys awaiting trial on various charges, from murder to drug-related offenses. I was surprised at how boring county jail time was. It was what the old heads called "dead time." All you do is sit around and wait on your next court date. Or you play on the phone trying to get people to help you post bail. There were no school or work programs. No outdoor exercise. No cable television. The highlight of the day was the daily episode of Jerry Springer. The only thing to occupy your time were some old playing cards, a game of UNO[®], and a chess and checkers set. There were a handful of tattered, dog-eared novels being passed around. That was it. Those get old for a teenager with ADD and Impulse Control. Fortunately for me, there was another guy on the cell block with me who I had went to school with. His name was Mike. We hung together, played chess and cards against each other, stayed out of everyone's way, and watched each other's back.

One day the boredom became too much. Mike and I decided we had to find an alternative to the cards, chess, and books. In

the corner of Mike's cell was ball we used to toss back and forth in a light game of catch. We made the ball by taking old wadded up newspapers shaped into a ball then wrapping them in two heavy duty socks. I asked Mike if he wanted to go bowling? He started laughing and made a crack about the county sheriff letting us go to the local bowling alley. I showed him the ball and said we could bring the alley to us. He said he was willing to try anything to break up the monotony.

Our next step was to try and find some pins. At first we tried using the individually wrapped bars of Ivory[®] soap that the jail passed out. But the soap would break up after a couple of times by being hit by the ball. We had to find something that wouldn't break up. After looking around each other's cells we found a suitable pin. The jail sold roll-on deodorant. The bottles were about 6 inches tall and plastic, and they looked like a miniature bowling pin. They stood up perfectly and were light enough to fall over when hit by our ball. Perfect.

The cell block was built in an L-shaped way. The cells were built around a common dayroom with a large steel picnic table in the middle of it. We set up our alley on the longest part of the L. First, we placed strips of white paper along the sides of our makeshift alley. Those would be our gutters. If the ball hit the paper it was a "gutter ball." The pins were set up

against the back end of the L. This allowed us to keep them together, and easily set them back up after each roll. The only problem we had was that the falling pins (deodorant bottles) would make a lot of noise when hit. Also, we would be bowling across the doorways to all but a few of the cells. But enthusiasm, youthful zeal, and laughter are the universal cure-alls for any illness in the world. It was game on.

One of the guys who we called "the cellblock boss" was Ace. He was a muscle-bound African prisoner who had been to prison 3 or 4 times. He was funny and always had a quip for every moment. But he could turn nasty at the drop of a dime if he felt his status was challenged. He came over to see what we were doing and asked if he could try? Sure, we said and handed him the ball. His first roll was a gutter ball and we started laughing. "Come on youngster, let me get another try, I know how to bowl, man," Ace said with a smile. So I handed him the ball. This time he took a slow wind up and rolled the ball down the lane for a strike. He hooted and hollered, and told us he could bowl a strike a dozen times in a row. We were not about to argue with him.

Because Ace was the most vocal guy on our block a lot of guys came over to see what he was singing and clanging about. One of Ace's cronies said that his strike was

beginner's luck. "Let's see you try" Ace challenged him, and tossed him the ball. He stepped up to the line, and rolled the ball. It went straight down the lane, but at the last second, veered off, and only hit three pins. Everyone laughed and Ace told him he sucked. "Hey man, don't I get a chance to try and pick that up? It's called a spare, right?" he asked. Yes I told him and handed him the ball back. Before he rolled, Ace challenged him. "I bet you 2 oatmeal pies you can't pick that up." Two oatmeal pies cost 60¢ and ~~were~~ the money of choice that everyone use to barter with. "You on bro" he said. then with a flourish Pete Weber would have been proud of he laid the ball down and picked up his spare. "Aw shit" Ace said. Then he reluctantly handed over his two oatmeal pies.

By that time the whole cellblock was watching. An older crackhead named Casper said "Why don't we have a tournament?" Someone followed that up with, "Yeah, we could all put up 60¢ and have a prize for 1st place and a lesser one for 2nd place." "Yeah man, let's do it." Then Mike said, "Who's in?" We ended up having 14 guys in the tournament. Everyone put up either oatmeal pies or nutty bars. They were stacked up on the end of the table like they stack up the money at the final table of The World Series of Poker. ®

We drew names out of a t-shirt to see who would bowl against each other. Casper was designated the official scorekeeper. And I drew up a bracket on paper for what we were by then calling "The Convict Bowling League" or CBL. First place would win the grand prize of 20 pies. Second place would win 8 of them. We decided that the league would start after dinner that night.

All during the shift-change lockdown and during the dinner meal guys were talking shit and making side bets on their matches. Finally, it was time to bowl. Every guy who wasn't bowling was either sitting on the picnic table, or standing behind it watching every roll. Every roll was another chance to bet and there would be a flurry of merchandise exchanging hands. I got knocked out by Ace in the third round. It was a miraculous strike. The ball literally jumped over the front three pins and landed in the middle, knocking them all over. I joined the other guys on the picnic table.

It came down to Ace and Mike. Of course I was rooting for Mike, since he was my boy and co-creator of the CBL. We flipped a checker piece to see who would bowl first. Mike won and deferred to Ace by saying "Let the boss block go first." Everyone laughed as Ace stepped to the line. With the usual gusto of a man who doesn't do anything quietly,

Ace said, "I'm playing for bread and meat, if I don't win I don't eat." "Don't get beat by the kid" one of Ace's cronies told him and the match was on. The catcalls were loud and boisterous for both sides. After alternating spares and strikes for most of the match, it came down to the final frame for the both of them.

Ace stepped to the line and said his now familiar mantra, "I play for bread and meat, if I don't win I don't eat." Then he let his first ball go. It rolled in what seemed like slow motion. As I watched it roll, I noticed every jump of the ball, and every crack in the floor as it rolled by. Amazingly, the cell block was dead silent as everyone watched the same thing I was. The ball hit the front pin and knocked over 8 pins. "Aagghh, dammit," Ace moaned. Then he looked at Casper and asked, "I got to pick that up right?" Casper told him that if he didn't all Mike would have to do is bowl a 9 and he would win. Ace stepped back up to the line for his last roll. With a concentrated look on his face, he bent low, and let the ball go. Then something went wrong. The ball came off his fingers askew. It rolled straight to the left, bounced over the gutter line, and rolled into a vacant cell. "Shit" was all Ace said. Laughter exploded from the table. Someone yelled "choke Artist." Then it was Mike's turn.

Ace grabbed the ball out of the cell and tossed it to Mike. "It's up to you kid, are you going to be the man or the mouse?" Ace asked Mike tauntingly. "We'll see" Mike replied. Then just as Mike was about to bowl, Ace stepped into the middle of the lane. In an attempt to freeze Mike he pretended to be a broadcaster with a microphone. "Today we are gathered here at the first ever Convict Bowling League Tournament, where young Mike has the opportunity to win the grand prize of 20 fat and juicy oatmeal pies with his next roll. But gentlemen, this kid would mess up a wet dream." Laughter ensued until someone said, "Man, let the kid roll."

Ace got on his hands and knees next to the lane, and watched as Mike stepped up to the line. As soon as he rolled the ball I knew it was a strike. If the ball doesn't jump or hop on the floor as it rolls, it means it's rolling flat. Normally that means it will hit the pins perfect as long as it's a straight ball. It did and was. Ace collapsed on the floor as all the pins fell down. Someone yelled "strike" and pandemonium erupted. I never thought ~~everyone~~ everyone in the cell block could be having so much, but we were. Mike ended up on top of someone's shoulders with a laundry bag filled with 20 oatmeal pies. While Ace was laying on the ground eating his nutty bars. "Who's the man now Ace?" everyone was asking? He couldn't do anything but shake his head.

Later on that night, after everyone locked up for the night, it was decided that the CBL would be permanent. Every Saturday night from then on we would hold our tourney. Throughout the following weeks, the bowling kept being brought up by all of us. There were constant jokes and wisecracks. I remember Casper made up a whole song about it. The chorus went something like this:

Keep your crappy food and silly games,
Just give me a strike, a spare, and another frame.
There are no visits today, and that's a shame,
But it's okay, I'll just bowl another frame.

In retrospect, I'm glad that Mike and I invented the Convict Bowling League. We brought comradery, and unity, to what could have been a volatile situation. One day I hope to bowl on a real lane again. But for now, just give me a strike, a spare, and another frame.