

## Rock 'n' bowl

**With his youth and his colourful Led Zeppelin and Pink Floyd T-shirts, world champion Ryan Bester goes against all the clichés in lawn bowling, JAMES CHRISTIE writes**

**BY JAMES CHRISTIE**

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Canada's kid is breaking the mould of the oldies in lawn bowling.

"The clichés are what most people know about this sport," says Ryan Bester, who at 20 is the world's youngest player to hold a world championship in lawn bowls. He won the pairs title with 56-year-old Keith Roney of Regina in Ayr, Scotland, last summer.

Clichés? How about the Willowdale Lawn Bowling Club, a peaceful swatch of green in the leafy Toronto community of North York. A lot of seniors play the game there, on lawns leased from the property next door -- the York Cemetery. So the jokes go on about lawn bowling as a way to fill the time while waiting for your ride next door.

Enter Bester, from Hanover, Ont., where there's even a street named for him, with his long hair and colourful Led Zeppelin and Pink Floyd T-shirts. He's highly regarded by the world bowling fraternity -- for both his talent and his breakout style -- so much so that fellow bowlers from the 24 countries at the worlds chose him as the tournament's most valuable player. He is their new face on the old game.

"I just like those bands," said Bester, who is in Toronto today promoting a comedy movie about the sport, National Lampoon's *Blackball*. "But, also, everyone says you walk by a lawn bowling club and just see old people in their whites. I try to wear the colours to break down the clichés.

"It's based on a true story about the badass of bowls in England, a guy who broke all the rules and was banned for life . . . until England needed him for an important match and called him back, pairing him with the same man who banned him," Bester said.

Bester will preside over a lunchtime tournament at the Yonge-Eglinton Centre aimed at identifying Canada's most outrageous male and female bowlers.

"Being named the world MVP was a very special honour, as much as the gold medal, because those guys make a living playing bowls, and they were saying I was the best," he said.

"It was great that I won pairs with Keith, while a 66-year-old, Willie Wood of Scotland, won the singles."

Canadian officials paired the youngster with Roney because of his experience in international play. "It figured he'd be a good lead and I'm be a good skip," said Bester, who is known for his fast ball and ability to scatter opponents' bowls.

On the international scene, his youth is less remarkable than in Canada, he said. "The average age out there in world play and in the professional league in Britain is around 32," he said. "That's not far off what you'd find in professional sports like baseball and hockey."

Canada's last Commonwealth Games team included Bester, then 17, three 20-something players and no one over the age of 40.

"The difference is this: I can play my sport into my 60s and even get better," Bester said. "A player would be looking at retiring at 40 in other pro sports. Also, growing up, I was able to play in the same competitions with my brothers or father. You can't do that in other sports, where there are age groups that separate you.

"If I'd played hockey, I'd probably be just another 20-year-old playing the game locally. In lawn bowling, I've been to the Commonwealth Games in Manchester in 2002, the worlds in Scotland last year, and I've just been named for the 2006 Commonwealth Games team for Melbourne next March.

"What I wish for my sport is that it gets some exposure. Exposure is what made curling one of the biggest sports in Canada, and our strategy is not so different. But nobody will understand if all they see is the stereotypes."

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