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Rockin' lawn star grabs life by the bowls

He's 20, loves Led Zeppelin and lawn bowling.
Bester breaks the stereotype

JENNIFER QUINN
SPORTS REPORTER

It was kind of like a rock star was coming to visit. And while the people at the Lawrence Park Lawn Bowling and Croquet Club aren't quite ready for the season — the planters need flowers and the plumber was required — when a world champion asks if he can use your green, you make do.

When Ryan Bester ambled up to the clubhouse, he shattered the stereotype of the staid, conservative and, it must be said, elderly lawn bowler. He's just 20. His hair is shaggy. He is a hard-rock enthusiast. And despite the image, he's the current world lawn bowling champion.

So while the Lawrence Park members, who were all slightly older than Bester, gathered to ooh and aah at his skills on the green, the attention — particularly from his friends — hasn't always been so appreciative.

"When I started out, they laughed a bit, and said, 'Why don't you play a real sport, like hockey,'" Bester said, taking refuge in the Lawrence Park clubhouse from a chilly wind.

"But for the last five years, I've been travelling all over the world. And they take it a little more seriously now."

Bester first made his mark on the world lawn bowling scene — there is one, and it's thriving, despite the fact the sport is all but ignored in Canada — at the 2002 Commonwealth Games in Manchester. Then just 17, Bester was the youngest bowls player at the competition and finished 12th overall.

In 2004, with his partner Keith Roney, he won the pairs event at the world bowls championships in Scotland. That led his hometown of Hanover, Ont.,



BERNARD WEIL/TORONTO STAR
Lawn bowling champion Ryan Bester, 20, throws a drive during workout at the Lawrence Park Lawn Bowling Club yesterday.

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to name the street where the lawn bowling club sits Ryan Bester Way.

And yesterday, he was named to the Commonwealth Games squad, which will compete next year in Melbourne. The announcement coincided with a visit to Toronto to help promote *National Lampoon's Blackball*, a movie that's based around the apparently hilarious world of lawn bowling.

The film is based on the true story of Griff Sanders, an English bowler who was thrown out of a staid club for inappropriate behaviour. The reason Bester was brought in? Because his look, if not his laid-back personality, fits the irreverent image the producers are trying to bestow on the sport.

For example, Bester likes to wear shirts featuring Pink Floyd or Led Zeppelin while competing, which isn't the usual bowling attire. And it has caused problems, he admitted. In a recent tournament, playing with his dad, Robert Bester, he chose a white shirt adorned with the bricks that serve as the logo for Pink Floyd's seminal album, *The Wall*.

It drew a dress code complaint, because his father's shirt was plain white. They didn't match, and that was bad.

"So I got a marker and drew bricks all over his shirt," Bester recalled, "and then we matched."

"And we had a lot of fun doing it," Robert Bester added.

Robert Bester says his son cuts a different figure on the green, especially when playing against more conservatively attired bowlers: "We don't think of him as a rock-and-roll bowler," he said yesterday, taking in his son's baggy trousers and baseball cap. "It's just since his hair has grown longer."

But it's also his aggressive play that sets him apart. His drive — one of the more spectacular shots in bowls — has been clocked at more than 40 miles an hour, which is considered lightning fast for the sometimes-gentle game.

It was his father's enthusiasm for the game that drew Bester to the sport at age 10. Yesterday, Robert Bester had to deal with the fact his youngest son made the Commonwealth Games team and he didn't, but he can console himself with knowing that together, they're the reigning Canadian pairs champs.

So while Bester loves that he can play with his father — and his two older brothers, in the fours events — he also sings the praises of the game, which he says requires athletic skill and the ability to strategize. And he knows he's found a sport he can play for decades to come.

"When Wayne Gretzky is 60, he won't be able to play against 20-year-olds," Bester said. "But in 40 years, I hope I can still be winning."

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