

## No Sleep Till Paris: Bowling Targets 2024 Summer Olympic Games

by **Gianmarc Manzione** ⌚ February 4, 2019 7:25 pm

**T**wo days before she died, Chris Viale made his mother Carol a promise — that he would do everything he could to try to get bowling into the Olympics.

"She was an avid bowler herself, and I grew up in Larkfield Lanes [in Long Island, N.Y.] in the nursery five days a week," Viale says. "I started to bowl once I was strong enough to roll the ball down the lane."

At the time, Viale had just returned from competing in the Bowling Promotion Cup in September at Sphere Bowling in Fontaine Le Comte, France, at the invitation of tournament organizer Bruno Bidone.

"When we went to travel for that tournament, my mother was gravely ill," Viale adds. "She had been battling cancer for the past six years. We were going to cancel the trip, and she demanded that we go there. She was really sick; at one time we were ready to fly home in the middle of the event. But some family back home said there was nothing more we could do; just finish what you're doing there and come back home. When I got home, I spent a day or two with her, and then she finally passed. I don't like to talk about this part of it, but that sort of pushed me to say, 'Okay, who do I have to contact to really move this along now?'"



Chris Viale's quest to get bowling into the 2024 Summer Olympic Games in Paris became a very personal one when he made his mother a promise days before she died.

"[Bidone has] been running that tournament for the past several years with the intention of using the event to help get bowling into the [2024 Summer Olympic Games in Paris]," Viale explains. "When he asked my wife [Amy] and I to come out and bowl it this past September, that was an opportunity for us to sit down and discuss first-hand what kind of leverage he actually had in France to be able to get the French Federation selection committee to put the sport of bowling forward. It became pretty clear to me that his passion and his wife's passion were aligned with the way I and my wife were thinking about the sport. That sort of was the catalyst."

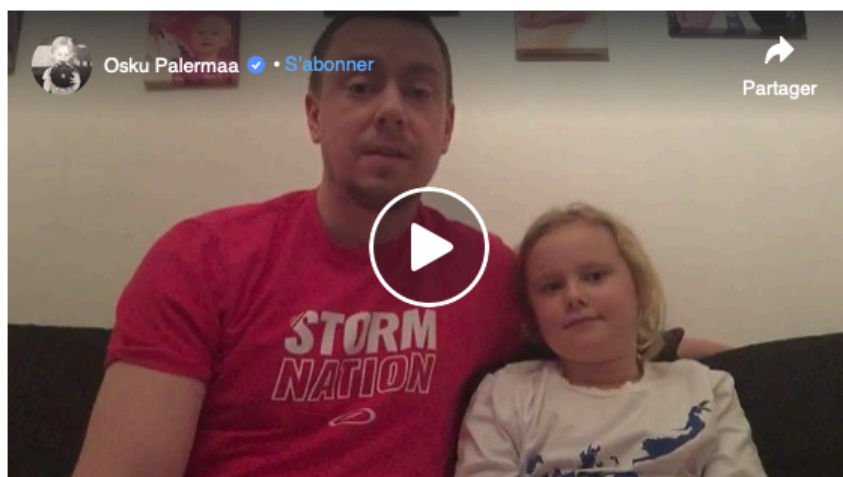
Viale, a New England Bowling Association champion who was a three-time first-team All-American in the William Paterson University bowling program between 1987 and 1992, shows no signs of letting up on his promise to his mother. He is posting videos on a regular basis on his personal Facebook page as well as on the **Facebook page** for the website he started, **BowlingForGold.com**, to update followers on the progress of his efforts. The goal, in part, is to generate 5,000,000 petition signatures and at least as many responses to the 14-question survey the site includes.

"We've got to be able to get the data that we need in order to provide it to the folks that make these decisions," Viale says. "We're trying to get demographics from that, and we're also trying to understand who would actually pay to watch. The response has got to be worldwide; it can't just be the United States. If we get traction on that website — and the data validated through some third party, which we have hired to validate the data so it's not just me self-reporting it — they can't ignore it."

"And if they ignore it in France, there's no way they're going to be able to ignore it in L.A. in 2028. I firmly believe, based on everything I am hearing from people on the ground in France, that we will be put forward. It's just a matter of whether there are multiple sports that force the organizers to have to dwindle down the list; that's where the game starts. That's where we have to have our information."

As of this writing, respondents from more than 130 countries had signed the petition. Five-time PBA Tour champion Osku Palermaa is one of numerous pro bowling stars helping Viale spread the word about BowlingForGold.com:

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In addition to bowling, World Bowling CEO Kevin Dornberger told BJI that sports likely to be considered for inclusion in the 2024 Games include surfing, bocce ball, squash, wind tunnel flights, water skiing, billiards and orientation race.

One aspect of bowling that may give the sport an upper-hand in Paris is its adaptability, as lanes can be installed quickly in either an indoor or outdoor setting. That matters because Paris officials hope to include sports in the 2024 Games that can help highlight its tourist attractions and landmarks at a time when tourism is down there in response to **terrorist attacks** and the so-called "**yellow vest**" protests that at times have turned violent and even deadly.

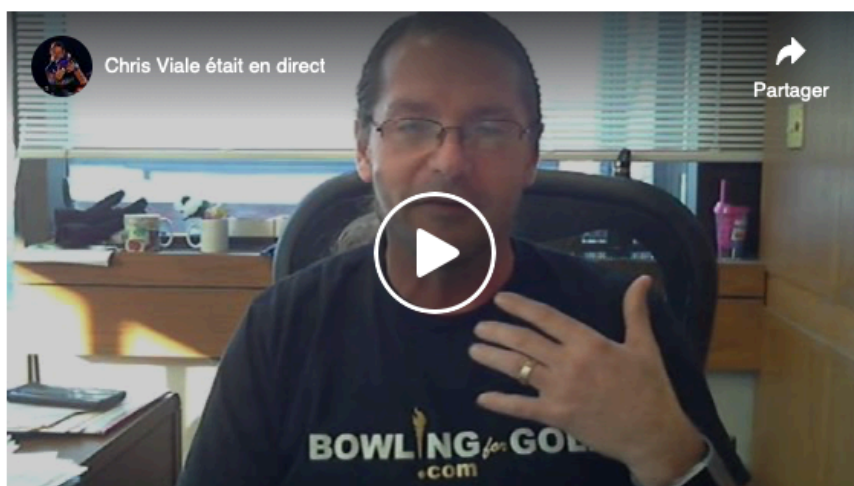
Should bowling gain inclusion in the 2024 Games, could we see lanes installed for competition under such landmarks as the Arc de Triomphe, for instance?

"Yes, we could," Dornberger said. "How many sports could do that?"

If indeed Paris 2024 officials wish to highlight competitions that will be held within Paris city limits rather than at off-site locations, it is possible that sports such as surfing and water skiing may not fit that bill as they would struggle to promote Paris tourism given their dependence on waterways hundreds of miles from the City of Lights such as, potentially, the English Channel.

Both Viale and Dornberger will attend the World Bowling Junior Championships near Paris next month at Bowling Saint Maximin in Saint Maximin, France, the finals of which will be held March 23 on lanes specially installed inside the Judo Auditorium in Paris "to showcase the sport in an environment that sports officials are not familiar with," Dornberger wrote in a bulletin to World Bowling member federations last month. (Read the full bulletin [here](#).) Paris 2024 officials have been invited to attend.

"We want to have our data ready by then," says Viale, who adds that, should Paris 2024 officials show up, "it is going to be critical that we do our best. It is expected that they will be there and we will have the opportunity to present them with more information." On February 1, he posted the following video updating followers on his progress:



The timing of that event is critical, as an announcement by the Paris 2024 organizing committee is expected in late March that will reveal which sports have been selected for inclusion in the Games.

"The sports announced will be final, pending International Olympic Committee approval," Dornberger says. "Timing-wise, if they're still deliberating on March 23, yes, I would expect to see some people there. If we're out, I would expect to not see people there."

Aside from emphasizing that the sport is flexible enough to be contested in any venue, indoors or outdoors, other points of emphasis Viale underscores include demonstrating bowling's appeal to young people as well as its ability to generate subscription revenue for Eurosport, the online sports streaming platform contracted to broadcast the 2024 Games.

"One of the questions our survey asks is whether you would subscribe to watch the Olympics, and only 8.4% are answering 'No' to that question," Viale says. "Eurosport are trying to put together what a subscription model could look like and the revenue it could generate, so that in and of itself will be very appealing compared to what other sports can do."

As for that youth appeal Olympic officials want to see in sports they consider for inclusion, Viale says that, "We are going to present two videos, one that shows the expansion of youth tournaments that we have here in the states like Teen Masters and Junior Gold, and then another video showcasing our elite athletes around the world to demonstrate that this is a very athletic sport, that it is a very technical sport. That hopefully will put down the notion that we are old, fat and not athletic."



World Bowling CEO Kevin Dornberger said bowling officials enjoyed a "cordial" meeting with Paris 2024 officials who "clearly had done some research."

Dornberger reported in his January bulletin that a delegation including himself, World Bowling President Sheikh Talal M Al Sabah, Megan Tidbury of Lausanne, Switzerland, where International Olympic Committee headquarters are located, Danny Santos of Kuwait, French federation president Daniel Grandin, French national team member Solene Goron, and Bowling Saint Maximin proprietor Henri Valcke, had enjoyed a "cordial" meeting with Paris 2024 organizers.

"Our presentation was fairly short," Dornberger told BJI, adding that Paris 2024 officials "asked a variety of questions that clearly indicated they had done some research. We came away feeling that we were given a fair shot."

Dornberger **participated in a similar presentation** to Tokyo 2020 officials along with superstar Jason Belmonte, among other figures, in August 2015. Bowling was one of eight shortlisted sports that year for the 2020 Games but ultimately lost out to baseball/softball, karate, skateboard, sports climbing and surfing. While Dornberger remains hopeful despite those results in Tokyo, he also is not naive about the more formidable challenges ahead.

"It's funny sometimes when I discuss other sports, some Olympic, with people and their reaction is, 'How can they be in the Olympics when we are not?' When you tell them that curling drew 60,000+ to the Toronto arena, and team handball drew several hundred thousand over a course of a week, they don't know what to say," Dornberger said. "Many of these sports have far fewer 'fans' than we do, but their fans are all passionate."

Asked how, if at all, bowling's presentation to Paris 2024 officials differed from the one made in Tokyo in 2015, Dornberger said, "We spent more time emphasizing the athletic side of the sport, and the flexibility we have in installing lanes virtually anywhere."

Dornberger also told BJI that the ability to simplify the sport's scoring system for outside spectators remains an urgent priority.

"We're going to showcase the Current Frame Scoring System," Dornberger said of the World Bowling Junior Championships in Paris next month.

That system, which World Bowling rolled out in 2016, awards 30 pins for a strike and 10 pins for a spare plus the pinfall of the first shot in the frame and actual pinfall after two shots in an open frame. A perfect game is 10 consecutive strikes to maintain 300 as the pinnacle score in the sport.

"So, if they do show up, I don't want to be sitting next to somebody there from the Paris Ministry of Sports and have them say halfway through, 'What's going on?'" Dornberger said. "That can't happen anymore."

Viale suggests a scoring system that awards 25 pins per strike to ensure a perfect game still requires 12 consecutive strikes.

"A spare is 10 and whatever you got on the first ball is the first ball count for that frame," Viale explained. "So if someone goes 9-spare it's 19 for that frame. Someone goes 9-out, it's 9 for that frame. There are still 12 balls, 12 frames [maximum], so still an opportunity to have three strikes in the 10th. I would say that's probably the easiest way to simplify the scoring system for the casual viewer."

Formats also are a concern, as long qualifying blocks potentially risk turning the portions of a tournament leading up to the finals into a tedious bore to those casual viewers. Viale concedes that is a "complicated" issue, but says, "I am not sure that is a blocker for us. If we truly have the worldwide following that we do, and we can keep the formats somewhat shorter and more concise and just showcase the finals aspect of the competition, we could generate the kind of viewership across the various media platforms out there that Olympic officials want to see and, hopefully, the sponsorship dollars they want to see."



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For Viale, the push to get bowling into the 2024 Games marks the culmination of a lifelong passion that began in those long-ago days in the Larkfield Lanes nursery and has continued for decades since.

"Through the company I work for, we've sponsored bowling at every level — high school, collegiate bowling, the PBA at one time — so I've always had a passion for the sport," says Viale, who is President and CEO of Cambridge Credit Counseling. "I come from a poor family, and bowling was what allowed me to have an opportunity to go to college at William Paterson. I always love to give back to the sport.

"Only a handful of people from my era have made a living in this sport at the competitive level," he continued. "Why should it be that way? If we truly are the second or third most played sport on the planet, why should our young athletes who aspire to be the next Jason Belmonte have to think about whether they can make any money at this?"

Viale hopes that changes come late March.

"We hadn't been at the table since the 1980s; this is the first time we will be at the table twice in back-to-back Summer Games," he said. "So, where we are is unprecedented. There is some momentum."

In the face of the disappointment that befell the bowling industry following a Tokyo process that again saw bowling left outside the Olympic fold, Viale sees too much potential in the prospect of Olympic inclusion to give up now.

"Everyone talks about who would benefit the most from Olympic inclusion, and lots of people turn to the ball manufacturers," he says. "But I think it's our athletes who would stand to gain the most. If we get into France and then we will be in L.A. [in 2028], we will have back-to-back Games and we should be able to get big sponsors back on board like we had in the '80s, maybe even bigger.

"All I am trying to do with this is find out if a worldwide movement can make a difference. Why not try? There is no harm in trying, and there is no backend agenda here except trying to push participation on BowlingForGold.com. That really is the goal, to blow this thing out and have a viral movement so we can say, 'Okay, this is what our sport really looks like.'"

In the meantime, he, Dornberger, and the rest of the bowling world await the Paris 2024 organizing committee's late March announcement with eager — and cautious — anticipation.

You never know. By then, maybe Chris Viale will be able to say, "Mom, I did it."

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In August 2015, pro bowling superstar Jason Belmonte was among officials who presented to the Tokyo 2020 organizing committee on behalf of the sport. Bowling made the shortlist but ultimately lost out to baseball/softball, karate, skateboard, sports climbing and surfing.