

# Dartball's Bob Leskovar and pals

Question one: What is Dartball?

Dartball is an exciting, demanding sport that's been around for nearly a century and is more popular here in Wisconsin than it is in any other state. Question two: Who is Bob Leskovar? Bob Leskovar is undoubtedly the game's most successful player, having led his teams to an amazing ten state championships.

"Well, I still don't know what Dartball is," you might reply, as would probably 90 percent of the populace. This is understandable considering the paucity of coverage about the sport in the media. "Ah, I know what it is," pipes up one of the remaining 10 percent. "It's that game they play down at the corner tavern."

Nice try, but wrong, sorry. That's not Dartball. It's a game called "English Darts," and although it's also played with darts, it's quite different. In English Darts, the targets are round, about a foot and a half across with a red and black circular design.



By Jack Pearson

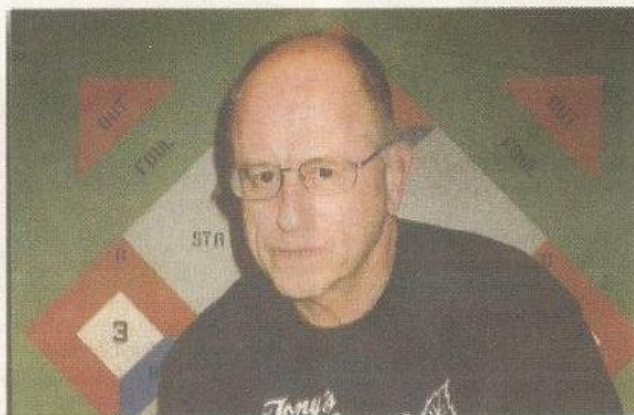
Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan and Ohio. Coincidentally, those are the same states where Universities of the Big Ten Athletic Conference are located.

An official of the Apex Company, still the main supplier of darts and dartboards, recently said more darts and boards are sold and shipped every

state to set up an operating organization, called the Wisconsin State Dartball Committee. It's headquartered in Kewaskum and Harry Roecker is Chairman. The WSDC is one of the few such Dartball organizations to publish its own rule book. It's 44 pages long and is updated regularly.

You wouldn't think there were that many rules that had to be covered to fill a book of that size, but there is. There's even a section on behavior. Some of the conduct that is prohibited includes: Use of profane or personal remarks; stomping feet, clapping hands or whistling while an opponent is shooting; doing imitations of birds or animals, also while the opponent is shooting; and violence with opposing players, officials, referees, spectators or teammates. (Violence against teammates? Now that's a dandy.)

The game has been played in Wisconsin almost since it originated in the '20s, but it was not until 1939

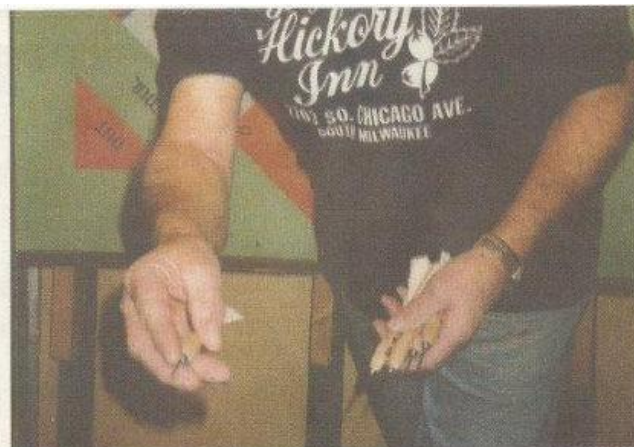


The darts are metal or plastic and are thrown overhand, from eight feet way.

Dartball is actually a form of baseball, played with darts instead of bats and balls. The targets are four feet square and have a multi-colored, baseball diamond design. The darts are made of wood with turkey feathers and are thrown underhand, from 20 feet away (It's surprising how much more difficult it is to hit a spot on a target from 20 feet away than it is from only eight feet.) Dartball, like English Darts, is also played in bars, but it is also conducted in recreation halls and church basements.

Dartball dates back to the years immediately following the conclusion of the first World War. American soldiers who had been stationed in Great Britain brought back home dart games they had seen and played there. No one seems to know who it was, but supposedly someone in the Philadelphia area, took one of those boards and redesigned it with an American theme, using baseball rules.

The new game was later introduced to the general public in 1923 by the Apex Company of Norristown, Pennsylvania, a suburb of



Bob Leskovar, taking aim. Leskovar has captained 10 Wisconsin State Dartball Championship teams, more than any other in the history of the game.

Philadelphia. Apex was a manufacturer of darts and dartboards.

Dartball quickly caught on throughout the area and spread into the Midwest, oddly, not into other Eastern states, the South or the West. Even today, more than eight decades later, it's still found primarily in the states of Pennsylvania, where it was born,

year to Wisconsin than to any other state, by far. Life Magazine several years ago ran a feature on the sport and noted that the two "hotbeds" of Dartball in America were Philadelphia and Milwaukee.

The sport is also very well organized here. Wisconsin was the first

that a State Championship Tournament was held. In the early years the tourney was always held in the Milwaukee area, but now it is conducted at different locations throughout the state every year.

There have been dynasties in many sports, such as the New York Yankees in baseball and the Boston Celtics in basketball. In Wisconsin Dartball, the first dynasty of sorts was that of the McFadden Trucking Company of Eau Claire. Captained by George McFadden, they won seven Championships between 1963 and 1980. Then there was the Sauve Auto Service team from Two Rivers, captained by Al Komoroski. They also won seven titles, theirs from 1991 to 2002.

But the biggest winner of all has to be the aforementioned Bob Leskovar. He won his first Wisconsin Dartball Championship in 1977 with the AMC Pacers; took another with the Pleasant View Builders of Germantown in 1981; took four more with the Cruz Trucking team from Racine, from 1981 to 1987; and more recently, four more crowns with the Hickory Inn team from South Milwaukee, in 1997,

1998, 2006 and 2007. Ten total championships, and he's still going strong.

"You'd have to say I'm nuts about the game," Leskovar said with a chuckle. "Or, as my wife Lucille would say, just nuts, period. I'm 66 now, and have been involved in Dartball for 50 of those years. And I'm as good now at the game as I ever was." Advancing age isn't all that much of a factor, he explained. "Most of the players (they are usually called shooters) in the league are in their 30s and 40s, but there are many in their 50s, 60s and 70s. We even have some in their 80s. I guess you could play until you were 100, if you could still swing your arm."

Leskovar has a room in his basement set up specifically for Dartball, with a regulation board at one end, and exactly 20 feet away, a line marking the tossing area. An adjacent recreation room is filled with Dartball trophies and other memorabilia.

It intrigued me that in a state with hundreds of teams and 30,000 or more players, that Leskovar has been able to put together State Champions ten times. How do you go out and find

some fun and recreation for participants."

The sport also provides its participants with months of pleasure and competition, for a surprisingly small outlay. In Dartball, a player can compete all season long, a time span of about a half a year, pay for all his regular weekly fees, as well as tournament entry fees, pay for his share of the darts and other things, all after payouts for less than \$50.

So why, I asked Leskovar, is Wisconsin the place where more Dartball is played than anywhere else? "Well, who knows," he said. "Wisconsin is probably the only state where they play sheephead in cards, too, or eat things called pasties and kringles. I guess it's because it gets us in out of the cold. And it's a place where we can all laugh at ourselves and each other. It's a form of baseball, where we all can be stars."

Bob competes every Tuesday night in the Hickory Inn League in South Milwaukee. The league was started back in 1980 by



Four of the more active players in the Hickory Inn Dartball League in South Milwaukee, from the left, Bob Leskovar, Vern Kappes, Martin Gaudin and Archie Dadian.

and 40s? Not too bad, thank you. At the time of this writing Archie's was in second place in the eight team league.

eral decades, however a State Championship Tournament for women was not started until 1988. In 1995 the men's tournament was divided into Class A and Class B, essential-

and sign up players that are so good, I asked him. "They're just my pals," he said. I continued to probe. "Well, what if someone came up to you who was a tremendous shooter, better than anyone you'd ever seen, and asked if he could play on your team? Of course if you took him on, you'd have to get rid of one of your existing players. Would you do that?" He looked at me like I was crazy. "Of course not. We've never do that. That's not what the game is all about." Leskovar is not the only one in Dartball who thinks that way. What he said is the essence of the sport.

In major sports today, such as football, baseball or basketball, even in golf, winning and the almighty dollar rule supreme. It's so refreshing to find a sport like Dartball, where that has never been the case. Everyone tries to win, of course, but it's not all-consuming. What is important are sportsmanship and camaraderie. In fact if you examine the Wisconsin dartball Committee Rule Book (which is a model for many other states, by the way), the very first rule states: "The purpose of a dartball league is to promote good fellowship among the players and to provide some whole-

Wisconsin golfing great Archie Dadian. He and most of the players in the Hickory Inn league had originally competed in the old West Allis Recreation Department league. But when the city folded it in 1979 because of costs, Dadian got many of the players together, and a few from elsewhere, to form the new league. (Dadian, who was featured in this column in July, 2006, at 75 is still a great golfer. His handicap is now a 2, which makes him one of the very few in the world to have a handicap that low at that age. And he's still winning tournaments in senior golf.) Talking about seniority, his team, called simply "Archie's," is composed of everyone as old or older than he is; Vern Kappes, 75; Bud Bolling, 79; Erv Fielder, 75; and Martin Gaudain, who is 86, the oldest player in the league. How can a bunch of old geezers like that compete against teams with players in their 20s, 30s

kappes, by the way, is a former world champion on senior speed skater. Bolling and Fielder are on the State Dartball Committee, as is Leskovar. "We've got a few miles on," Dadian said with a laugh. "But Leskovar and his teams are something else. The league is 28 years old, and his teams have won its Championship 26 times. My team has won it only once, by way of comparison. If ever the Wisconsin Dartball Committee formed a Hall of Fame, Bob would have to be one of the first to be inducted."

Mark Drow, one of Leskovar's teammates, agreed. "Bob is not only one of the best shooters in Wisconsin Dartball history, he's a tremendous leader as well. He inspires all the rest of us on his teams to be better than we really are."

There have been women's teams in church leagues and elsewhere for sev-

eral decades, however a State Championship Tournament for women was not started until 1988. In 1995 the men's tournament was divided into Class A and Class B, essential-

chance also to win a title. Last year's mens Class A Champ was the Yahr Oil Co. of West Bend, Curt Yahr, captain. The Class B champ was Bunkelmann Builders of Kewaskum, Lowell Bunkelmann, captain. The Women's Champion was LR Trophy of Kewaskum (who have won it six years in a row), Lori Roecker, captain.

Leskovar and his team will be leaving soon for Wisconsin Dells, where at the Ho-Chunk Casino the 70th Annual Wisconsin State Dartball Tournament will take place. The dates are Saturday and Sunday, March 28 and 29. Bob and his team may not win that record 11th Championship, but you can be sure they'll have a terrific time. As will everyone there. It's part of the game.

"There are all kinds of great sports out there that are available to people of all ages, and are fun and inexpensive," said senior sports enthusiast Pancho Palesse, who suggested this story to us. "Dartball is surely one of them." If you'd like more information or to join a team, call the Wisconsin State Dartball Committee at 262-626-8094.