

Inside Line

News, Notes And Perspective

"HE'S AN INDIVIDUAL
in a nation of conformists,
a no-man in a chain gang of
yes-men."

—Byron Schoeman, "The Fabulous
Varipapa"

Locals who saw a 16-year-old Andy Varipapa skidding chunks of ice in the streets of Brooklyn probably dismissed the sight as just another street kid with nothing to do.

But Varipapa noticed something. He already was the kind of guy who noticed things.

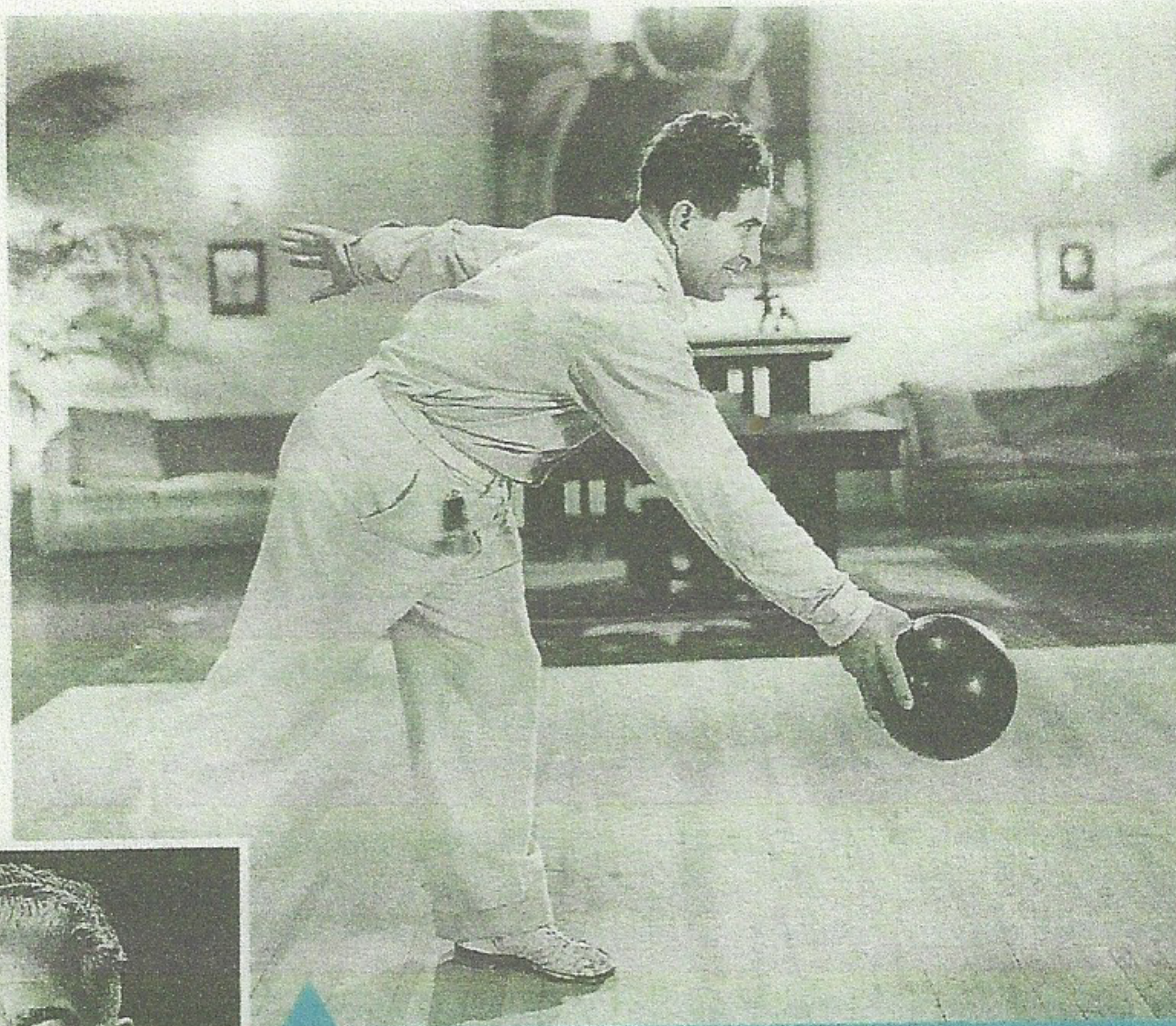
"I could skid a block of ice the entire length of the street," he told a writer named Bob Cherin, at age 90, more than 70 years removed from those days roaming the frozen Brooklyn streets.

The title of Cherin's 1981 story, "Varipapa the Magnificent", comprised the last in a line of sobriquets writers applied to Varipapa. They called him "Handy Andy"; "Andy the Great"; "The Fabulous Varipapa" and "The Greatest One-Man Bowling Show on Earth."

His tale of the things he learned from days spent skidding ice up the length of a Brooklyn street was the sort of story that got a good writer's pen going. And he knew it. According to Varipapa, his manager, Max Grossman, carried "a stack of clippings a foot thick from large and small newspapers to prove all his claims."

Cherin described the ice-skidding story as one "version" of how the legend first noticed what the world would notice soon: This stocky Italian from Carfizzi, a town in the toe of Italy, had a bull's legs, a boxer's wrists, and a champion's heart.

Even a bull's legs can break, though.



Dandy Andy: Varipapa shot to fame when MGM produced the 1934 film, "Strikes and Spares".



Of Clowns and Kings: Varipapa was known more as a clown in the movies than a king on the lanes before winning the vaunted All-Star tournament to become National Match Game Champion.

Varipapa broke his while indulging his first love, baseball. He put those boxer's wrists to work instead, and tried his luck as a pugilist before he noticed something else: Hurting pins on a bowling lane feels a lot better than getting hurt in a boxing ring.

He remembered "the boys in the neighborhood"

who invited him "to accompany them to the alleys," as bowling writer, Pat Moore, documented in a 1938 story.

"When I realized my dream of decorating a major league baseball diamond was not to be, I concentrated

on becoming an expert bowler, and in 1925 I began to compete with the best in Brooklyn," Varipapa told Moore.

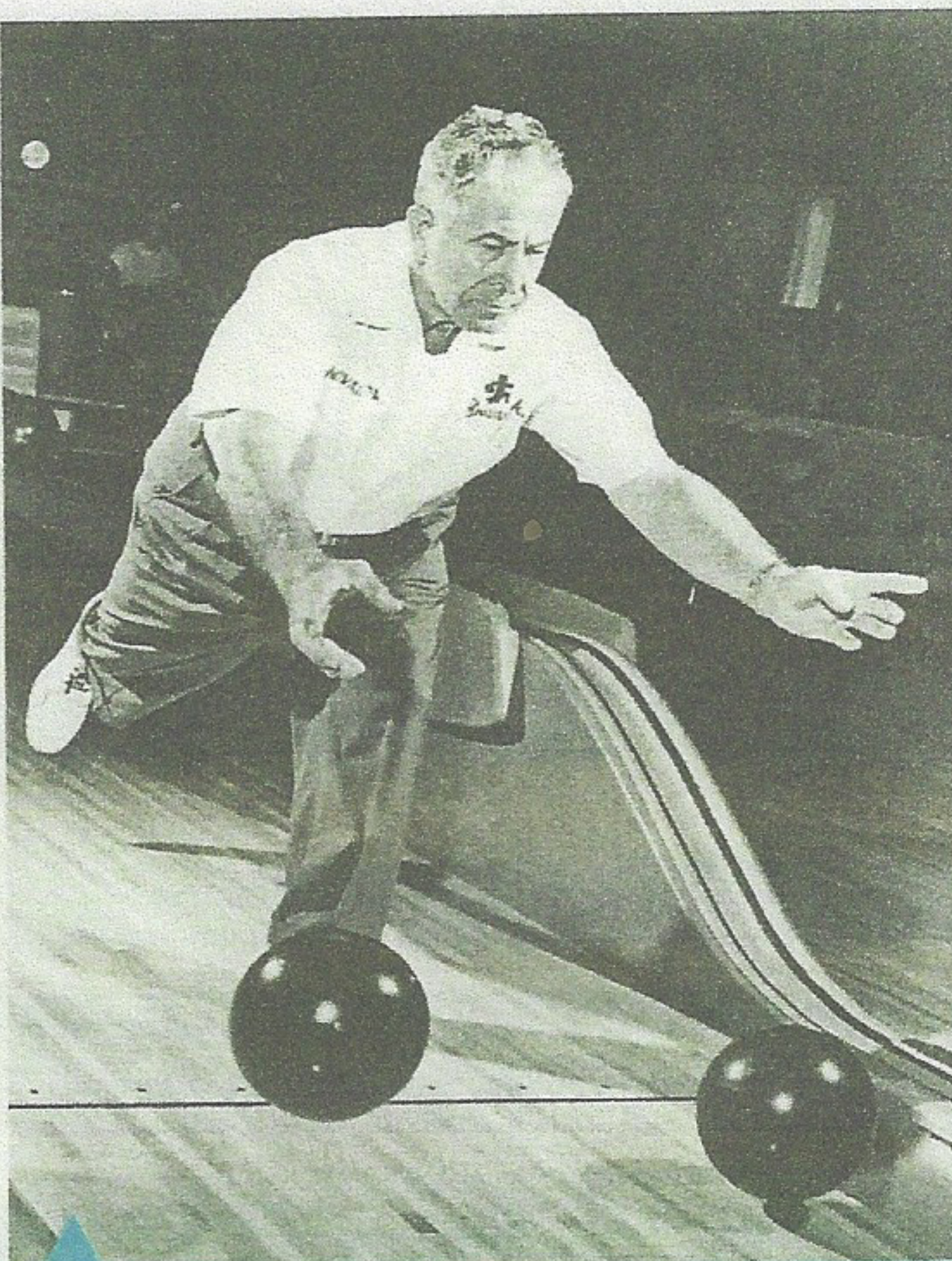
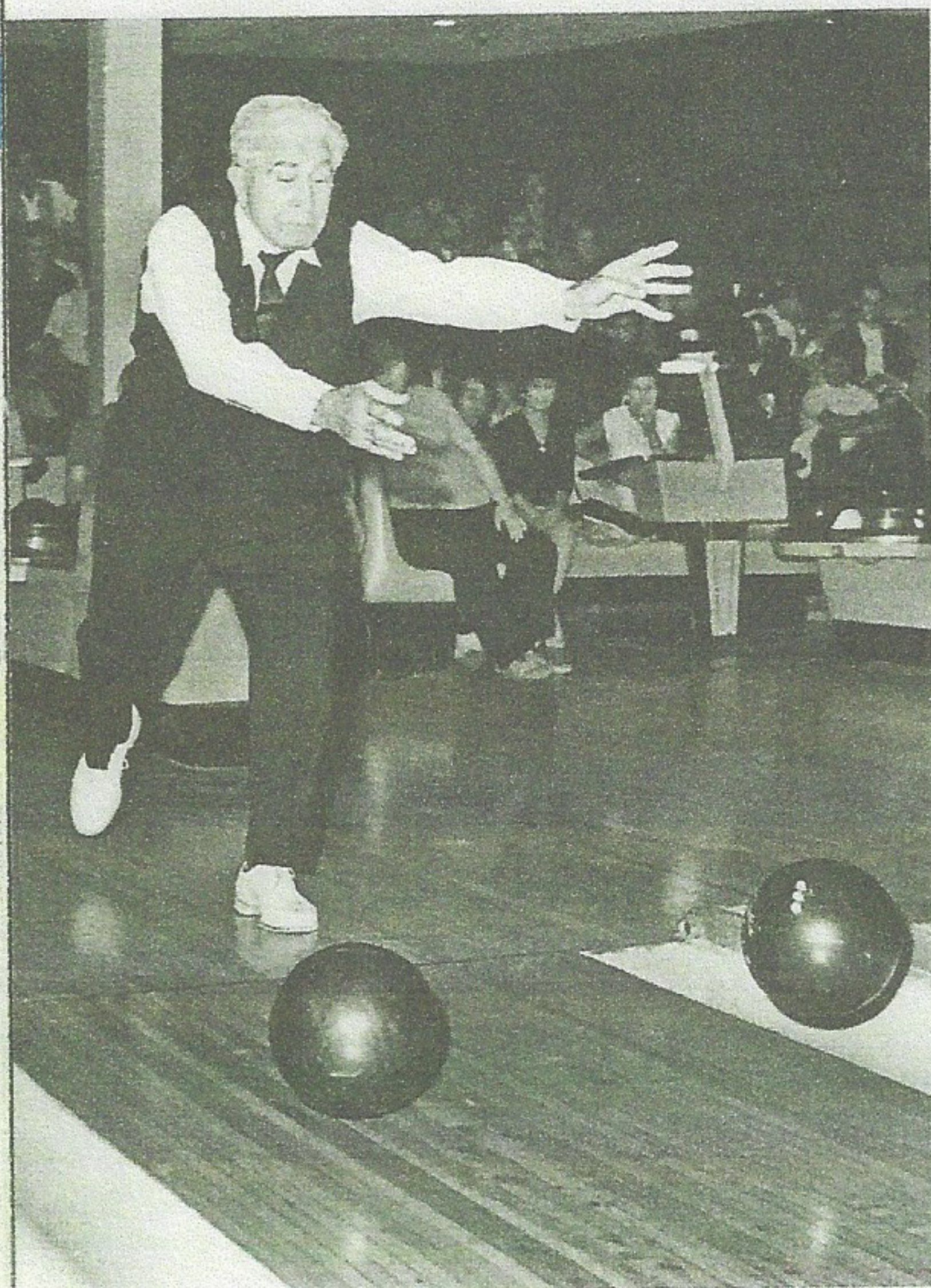
Today, so-called "purists" deride the Professional Bowlers Association's efforts to energize its shows with props such as vuvuzelas or guys in bear suits. But back in the 1920s, something dawned on Varipapa: A good sport first must be a good show.

Moore attributed Varipapa's rise as bowling's preeminent trickster to the same curiosity that struck him while skidding those chunks of ice up the street. Once again, Varipapa noticed something.

"He experimented from time to time, and his unusual strength and ability combined to cause the ball to make some spectacular hooks," Moore wrote. "Once a wide pitch disclosed the possibility of an unusual shot, Andy tried it over and over. It was fun, and an outlet

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Rust Never Sleeps: Varipapa embodied Neil Young's adage that "it's better to burn out than to fade away," performing tricks well into his later years that still captivate audiences long after his death.

for his boundless energy."

He did a trick for friends now and then. Then he learned that the show was as much an outlet for others as it was for him.

"Soon he was getting requests," Moore explained. "His fame spread and the little boy who came from Calabria [the region in which Carfizzi is located] was established as the greatest exhibitionist in bowling."

By 1934, those requests from friends became requests from Hollywood. MGM wanted to produce a short featuring Varipapa performing his tricks. In the midst of the Great Depression, they offered him \$500, no small change in 1934, merely to come do for a camera in

Hollywood what he already did for fun back in Brooklyn.

And how did he respond to such an opportunity?

In Andy Varipapa style.

"I asked for more money," he told Cherin. "I thought I'd never hear from them again, but they wired me and said I could include all my expenses. So California, here I come."

That first Varipapa film became "Strikes and Spares", featuring Pete Smith, legendary narrator for many film shorts, voicing the script while Varipapa did his thing. A *New York Times* obituary that ran on August 27, 1984, two days after Varipapa's death at age 93, credited him with 17 films in all.

In one scene of *Strikes and Spares*, he kicks a ball down the right side of the lane, then watches it wander toward the pocket for a flush strike.

In another, the 10-pin is standing and two balls are sitting still on the lane, one before the arrows and another well beyond them. Varipapa slow-curves a third ball that loops to the right around the first, then to the left around the second, then back to the right to convert the 10-pin — "One of the greatest shots ever made on an alley," Smith says.

Varipapa saved his most spectacular shots for last.

One, a "20-pin tunnel shot" in which two rows of 10 pins each are lined diagonally along the lane, only for the pins