

Burnie Gill

Feb. 6, 1954 -

Like many elite athletes, Burnie Gill started in his sport at a young age. He was seven years old when he began bowling at the Preston Lawn Bowling Club, a club that celebrated its 110th anniversary in 2025. At first, he just tagged along with his parents, who were members of the club.

"Instead of getting a babysitter, they took me along. I didn't play in the competitions, or jitneys, as they called them...I was over at what they called the Bullpen, a Green separated from the main greens. I was seven years old, and I could only roll them halfway up the Green."

Eventually, when there weren't enough players, they would ask Burnie to play. "I just kept practicing and practicing. But I didn't win anything until I moved to Port Elgin, when I was 13."

Although he played baseball and hockey, he excelled at lawn bowling. He was the youngest child, but his older siblings got into the sport once they saw how well he was doing at it.

Over the next few decades, thanks to his steady progress and subsequent achievements, the sport led him to distant parts of the world. In 1978, he was named the youngest member of the Canadian National Team which competed in the Commonwealth Games in Edmonton, Alberta. That was one of his all-time highlights.



"You're marching into Commonwealth Stadium in front of 50,000 people." Among them were Queen Elizabeth and Prince Phillip. He finished 13th in the Fours.

"It was the same thing at the Commonwealth Games in Brisbane, Australia in 1982. "I played singles, and won seven games, and lost six. Not enough to get a medal but it was great competition."

In 1990 he once again represented Canada at the Commonwealth Games, in Auckland, New Zealand.

CBC's Colleen Jones interviewed Gill at those Games after he started the competition going 4-0. "Unfortunately I lost the next three and didn't win a medal."

Born in Galt, where he lived until age five, Gill spent his formative years in Preston, before the family moved to Port Elgin in 1967, when he was 13. Work took the Gill family there. He's lived there ever since.

Burnie first made the national team before turning 20, and was a member of the team for nearly two decades (1972 to 1990). Players from across Canada would be selected for the national teams at week-long training camps.

"They selected players who played the best and who got along together," recalled Gill. "That's important, too."

The sport resembles curling in some ways, with Fours, Pairs and Singles.

In 1979, he was named to the National Lawn Bowling Team that represented Canada at the Classics Pairs Invitational Tournament in Newcastle, Australia. He always liked playing Down Under. "Australia has the best greens in the world," he said.

Team Canada went to Australia a week early to get used to the time change and the Greens. He and his pairs partner won four and lost three.

"They treat you like kings," he said of the Australians.

His accomplishments include skipping Colts Triples in Ontario (1972); finishing third at the Ontario Singles Championships (1974); skipping Pairs in the Ontario Championships (1975). He was also skip at the Canadian Championships (1975) and won Singles at the 1976 Ontario Championships. That same year he was runner-up in Singles in the Canadian Championships (1976), and runner-up in Singles at the 1977 Ontario Championships. By then he was a seasoned veteran of the Port Elgin Lawn Bowling Club.

Little did he know in 1978, when he was named the youngest member of the Canadian National Team, what the next few decades would hold.

In 1982 he finished second in the Paris at the World Bowls. "In the Fours, we were down five on the end, and the Jack was in the middle of the Green, and we had five bowls at the back and our skip picked the Jack right off, to go to the ditch, but it hit the backboard, then went up in the air and came right back down where the Jack was originally. Instead of us getting five or six, they got five. I had never seen that before. He hit it so hard that it bounced off the backboard and went up in the air and bounced right back."

In 1983 he took second in the Singles at the World Indoor Bowls, and was second in Pairs at the 1987 Pacific Bowls. In 1988 at the Bi-Centennial International Tournament, he finished third in Singles, and in 1989, was second at the Canadian Championships in Singles.

In May 2000 he was elected into the Saugeen Shores Sports Hall of Fame, and in 2019, he was elected to the Ontario Lawn Bowling Hall of Fame.



Photograph of Burnie Gill, taken in London, Ontario by the London Free Press, about 1976. Top left: Burnie Gill (front left) and the 1978 Commonwealth Games team in Edmonton.

Inducted 2026