

# NZ'S YOUNGEST UMPIRE

## BRIDGING THE GENERATION GAP

By Crispin Anderlini

*One of the unique things about bowls is that it's become almost commonplace to find a senior citizen and a minor rolling up together, or against each other, on greens around the country. But what about those that officiate the games? Teenager Michael Johnson donned the official outfit and took the lead in this area five years ago, and at 19 is still the youngest International Technical Official (ITO) in NZ.*

It was his grandad Keith Johnson (a former member of the NZ Umpires Committee) that introduced the young Wellington bowler to the game, and like so many others thriving in the sport it was that first roll up with him that got 14-year-old Johnson hooked.

"My grandad got me into bowls, and after going to the club with him when I was in year nine I got interested in playing," Johnson explains. "I joined the bowling group at Tawa College and then joined the Tawa Bowling Club – my granddad still plays at the club and umpires. He fostered the umpire aspect of my interest in bowls."

In fact, Johnson was so interested in this aspect that he also became an umpire (one of the youngest in NZ) the same year, at age 14. Despite some "strange looks" from older players not used to the sight of a teenaged umpire, he persevered and went on to pass his ITO exam in 2006 – making him the youngest ITO in New Zealand at 15-years-old. With this new title came new responsibilities and

challenges for the youthful umpire, who faced initial uncertainty from older markers uncomfortable with being told the rules by a teenager.

"I was uncertain when I first started to go in and brief markers, and they were asking "who is this kid telling us what to do?" I was even tested by some greenkeepers, who moved markers and things to see if I would notice. But my confidence was boosted by the experience, and now it's not an issue at all," the Victoria University student of Criminology says with a confident smile.

No stranger to the other side of bowls, Johnson has played his fair share of competitions and earned honours for his efforts. The most important of these accolades is a national title in the Pairs at the 2006 National Secondary School Championships with Nathanael Lucas, but one which he expresses some surprise about receiving.

"It was unbelievable that we won. Our naivete may have helped because we went in not knowing who the big-name bowlers were to watch out for. We didn't know anyone's reputation and we just decided we didn't want to come last."

Although he still bowls most weekends, the experienced umpire's bowling plans are aimed squarely at the official side of the game. "You start enjoying the game once you start playing, that's why you keep on playing. I play centre and club matches these days but umpiring at World Bowls and the Commonwealth Games are my two main goals."

