

THE HISTORY OF BUNDY BIG BINGO....THROUGH THE MEMORIES OF DANNY CARSWELL

Bundy Big Bingo started in the Civic Centre in August 1974 under the name of 'Lifesavers Bingo' with a first night crowd of 102 players. Bundaberg Surf Lifesaving Club, Life Member Des Dahl enlisted the services of Dennis Carswell and the help of a number of new junior members joining the Club, to conduct weekly bingo game as a fundraiser for the Club. The support for the game soon grew with regular crowds of over 200 players within 12 months. Selling loose tickets for each game and using a bingo barrel and numbered balls to draw the lucky numbers were features of the early days of bingo. Dan Mahony and Tony Sullivan were the main callers in the early years.

I was a ticket seller at the first night of Lifesavers Bingo walking behind my row of bingo players during each game and collecting their money and leaving their tickets for the next game. I was then 'promoted' to turning the bingo barrel and drawing the numbers for the caller and sometimes running across the hall to collect a bingo ball that had been dropped from the barrel. I have been calling bingo games for about 46 years and for many of those nights for the first 20 years I shared that role with my club mate Peter Byrne. When I started helping at bingo I was not even dating my wife Lori and now we have six grandchildren... so many things have changed. I remember very clearly dropping into the Civic Centre to tell the bingo players I was a Dad for the first time and I can remember Peter knowing he was in trouble for calling bingo instead of taking his wife out for dinner for a Wedding Anniversary. *It was a special bingo night with a big crowd and I think he was somewhat forgiven..... I think.*

By 1977 Bundaberg had three major bingo games each week in the Civic Centre. Ambulance Bingo on a Monday night, Lifesavers Bingo on a Wednesday night and Endeavour Foundation Bingo on a Thursday night. Crowds of over 1,000 players were drawn with a chance at winning the big \$1,000 Jackpots on offer.

At the end of 1984 Shalom College joined with Bundaberg Surf Lifesaving Club to form **Bundy Big Bingo**. Regular crowds of over 500 players were still the norm, but by 1987 the introduction of Instant Scratch tickets and Gold Lotto and an increase in the running costs were affecting the fundraising value of a weekly bingo game. The introduction of free taxi and bus services helped for a period of time, but the introduction of Poker Machines and Non Smoking in venues decreased the popularity of bingo and many bingo games moved to licensed clubs. Peter Byrne, Damien Breen and Danny Carswell were the callers and were joined by Summer Surf Girl Mum, Sue Allen.

In 1996 Bundy Big Bingo moved to Across the Waves but returned to the Civic Centre six months later and remained there until it found its new home at the Bundaberg RSL in 2004. The Manager of the RSL had worked previously at Wests Leagues Club and saw the value to Club activity to have regular bingo games. The year 1997/98 was our least successful year with a surplus of only \$4,300... so things had to change.

In the period 2001 to 2005 the average crowd at our weekly bingo game dropped from 250 in the Civic Centre to just over 120 in what was our new home by then at the RSL. Over 500 people play bingo each week at the 4 sessions conducted by the Bundaberg Bingo Centre Association in the air conditioned, smoke and alcohol free comfort of the Coral Sea function room at the RSL. In the 1990s we played with a 2nd bingo session on a Sunday. It was successful but it was challenging to find a workforce. The move to the RSL and formation of the Bundaberg Bingo Centre allowed the Association to soon conduct bingo three times a week and this soon grew to 4 sessions when Wests Leagues Club closed and the Mater Hospital bingo moved to the RSL and began to be operated by the Bingo Association. The Bingo Association now conducts five bingo sessions each week with us still conducting our session on a Wednesday evening. The Bingo Association has been able to distribute over \$100,000 each year for the past few years to local community groups which is impressive.

A change in legislation in early 2003 saw the introduction of a monthly \$3,000 Jackpot and the crowds grew again to over 500 on these special nights including a bus from Hervey Bay and North Burnett and players travelling from Gladstone and Rockhampton to play bingo in Bundaberg. These crowds however dropped back to around 200 players on the other nights

and even a crowd of 500 players made it very difficult to cover the cost of a \$3,000 Jackpot and the prizes for the other games played during the evening.

The use of modern technology saw the introduction of Bingo Link in 2003 which started with 3 venues playing the one game and soon grew to 10 venues, twice a week. By 2005 this game had grown to over 20 venues across Queensland, Victoria and the ACT and a prize of \$30,000. During this time Bundy Big Bingo had 2 players each win a \$20,000 prize. The further enhancement of technology resulted in the introduction of Big Bucks Bingo in 2010 which is now played in over 200 venues each week and offers a weekly Jackpot prize of up to \$100,000.

The period from 2008 to 2010 presented some challenges to our bingo operation and also some exciting changes. The operation of the RSL building was moved to a new organization Bundaberg Services Club and with this change significant renovations were done to the function room which required our bingo operation to move to the nearby bowls club... which was challenging, but the new facilities were rewarding. Bingo moved to new technology with the introduction of PETs (Personal Electronic Ticket). These PETs allowed players to play up to 8 sets of tickets and that excited a few players. We also started to play Super7s games in the half hour before each bingo session and this was an excellent way to increase revenue. It produced a little over \$4,000 and quickly built to \$6,000 and by 2020 this had grown to \$7,000/year.

Bundy Big Bingo was a passion for Dennis Carswell and in the first 26 years he missed a total of only 7 nights. Dennis enjoyed the social aspect of the weekly bingo game. The chance to catch up with people and resolve many of the problems of the world. Encouraging the younger members of the Bundaberg Surf Lifesaving Club to be involved in the management of the Bundy Big Bingo was always a special interest for Dennis. Denis passed away in August 2011 after some significant ill health over 10 months. He did however still work at bingo until 7 days before his death. This was a very difficult time but with the support of my daughter Steffi we decided that we should continue the family involvement. I had been taking on a growing leadership role during the period of Dennis's illness and my method of running bingo is very similar to my grass roots business management knowledge. Very soon we had varied the weekly programme, reducing the costs of playing and reducing the length of the programme, offering a more concentrated set of games and offering a varied programme which involved trying many new formats of games. The success was seen in our end of year financial result with a surplus of \$36,500 our best result since 2002/03. Another significant change was to introduce some young staff on a regular basis. Steffi of course supported this but it was not universal in initial acceptance but the major reason is still the same today. Both the surf club and Shalom College have the youth of our communities as a central theme and we are only too keen to support this. Encouraging young people to really understand how bingo works and trusting young people to play an important role does not go unnoticed and is a real point of difference. Amy Lester a 15 year old member soon joined our regular staff and over the years we have had Tyniah Thompson, Olivia Zunker, Hayley Bowman, Erin Gardner, Ariana Ulbl, Summer Morris, Liz Pascoe and Harriet Mullins.

The success of our Super 7s games involved a considerable amount of organizing each week to ensure club members attended. Senior members like Jocelyn Bowman, John McGregor, Donna Cummins, Amanda Gardner and currently Di Collins have been great support in organizing our members and this has not always been easy. A similar theme has always been that during the season we are too busy...in the off season we have other things on. During the school year we are just so busy and during the holidays we have other things to do. A good friend of mine many years ago said if you want a job done... ask a busy person they can always find a way to organize their lives.

Steffi had developed an SMS promotion for our players, the only one in the area. Our bingo game was the first to have a Facebook page in 2014 and PETs had developed to the use of a small tablet with over 70% of the crowd using the electronic ticket option. Steffi stepped back in her role of assisting in the organization of our weekly games in 2016 with the birth of her daughter and a move to Gin Gin. Steffi still supports many of the promotional ideas.

Club member and Life Member Rod MacAlpine started helping at bingo when he retired from full time work at the News Mail in 1986 and he attended bingo most weeks after that supporting Dennis and he still helped every week until he was over 90 years of age. How many sporting clubs have a 90 year old helping...a true life member. He helped with the tickets

and money and supported my daughter Steffi when she began to look after the back office functions. Rod passed away in April 2015 and had worked at bingo each week until poor health stopped him in January 2015.

2015/16 was our best financial year result for 14 years and this was achieved on the back of our 40th birthday celebrations and changing with the times. In the same year four long time bingo games folded in our region. In September 2015 we played our first, two city LINK Showdowns, with a fellow long term bingo game, St Pat's Bingo Toowoomba. By 2023 we have now played 21 BINGO LINK nights with our biggest crowd over 170 players in 2017.

2016/17 saw a still better surplus of over \$5,000 more...growth on top of growth, the best result for any successful event or business. The involvement of surf club members had also grown and each year we had several groups of members join us to play and this presented to the public a game that was well attended and had the support of its members who were involved themselves.

2017/18 saw a period of increased growth with larger crowds, more spending/player and the best surplus three years in a row for the first time in 15 years. We were no longer part of the SCREAMER bingo game offered by the Bundaberg Bingo Association which was a disappointing decision by the group, since the concept came from us, but such is life and the people we must live with. Bob Cremer joined our workforce replacing Rod and Steffi and providing the very valuable back office support to me. By the end of 2018 only four 1 night/week bingo games were still operating in Queensland.

By the 2018/19 year we had started to see a significant downturn in crowd numbers and also the average spend/player. During this year 35% of our weekly crowd numbers were down on the same week the previous year. The 2019/20 year was looking good. We found a new avenue with an annual Bubbles Brie and Bingo afternoon at the Club a great way to show people how bingo can be part of many fund raising events.... this was until March 2020 arrived and so did COVID. In the period March to July 2020 no bingo games were allowed and then restrictions were in place until early 2022. We did participate in an on line Big Break bingo game the only bingo game outside south east Queensland to participate. When we returned with restrictions crowds of 40-60 players were the norm with some FEATURE nights drawing 90 players but for most of that time 100 players was the maximum allowed. We reduced our prices as well to \$18 for a set of six tickets. As a comparison a set of six tickets in 2010 cost players \$28. The closure of the News Mail saved us advertising costs but introduced a new problem on how to communicate with our players. Shalom College also struggled with a drop of helpers from around 30 to less than five. The result was an increase in wages. Bob Cremer suffered a significant health scare but has returned to continue his support. Our pre- COVID crowds averaged just fewer than 100 players and the last 12 months drew crowds of just over 70 players. We have not been able to look at increasing the cost of playing because our community continues to really struggle. Many of our players are on fixed income and the huge leap in cost of living expenses has seen many of our players struggle to find the funds to enjoy a night of bingo. We have not been exempt from these leaps in cost of living with many costs rising by over 40% in the past 2 years. During this time our cost for playing has remained at \$18 for a set on a regular night and \$20 for a FEATURE night .

As I write this recollection of our 50 year journey the future looks OK. The year 2000/21 delivered a surplus of \$58,000 and allowed \$32,000 to be directed to the Bundaberg Surf Lifesaving Club. This was a significant amount because we cracked \$1 Million in funds returned to the Club. We have continued to allow the Club to draw about \$33,000/year for the past two seasons as well. The end of the 2023/24 shows the total surplus from bingo as a fund raising event has resulted in a combined surplus of \$1,590,000 over the 50 year span.

The main reason that many people find playing bingo is so much fun is that it is a very social game. When you play you find you are spending a lot of your time talking to the people around you. This could be about how much you have won, how close you have been to winning, will the caller ever call my numbers, but maybe it is about how life in Bundy could be so much better. Many people come to bingo and play with family members or friends, but it is also a venue to make friends while you play.

The very nature of a bingo game has everyone playing at the same time and playing for the same purpose. Things can get very competitive but in a friendly way. New players are often surprised with the mental skills required to listen to the numbers being called and marking them on your ticket but still being alert for the pattern on your ticket that will win you the game. A number of young players play bingo, often with parents or grandparents and many of them struggle with the speed of the game and sit and watch their older family member in cruise mode. Many people see bingo as an old school method of fundraising but it is a game that has evolved.

Bingo players are a very resilient group of people. The floods in 2010 knocked many of our players with many forced to find new accommodation and the floods struck in very difficult economic conditions. During the 2013 floods a number of players lost their homes and belongings but within a couple of weeks they were back mixing with their friends and trying to get life back to the norm. We have continued however to feel the effects with many people needing to leave town and the cost to rebuild lives leaving many people with a significant amount of less money to spend on leisure.

The ticket buying habits of bingo players has also changed significantly over the years. When bingo first started most players purchased two or four tickets in each game but within 10 years the average player was playing six tickets in each game. Now with the advantage of modern technology some players are playing up to 40 tickets in some of the bigger jackpot games. The price of bingo tickets has not changed very much with the price of each ticket in the range of 5 cents to 20 cents in 1974 and by 2014; 40 years later most tickets at Bundy Big Bingo were in the 15 cents to 30 cents range. Playing the Big Bucks Bingo High Roller game is a little different with these tickets \$1 each but the major jackpot is between \$10,000 and \$200,000.

Our biggest single winner was a \$30,000 Big Bucks Bingo Jackpot winner in May 2011 but we have also had two \$20,000 Jackpot winners with the Bingo Link games and a further 34 wins of \$10,000 or more. It would be very rare for a month to pass without at least one player winning between \$1,000 and \$3,000.

Our 40th birthday night was a special celebration on Wednesday 6th August 2014 with several players from our first night joining our celebrations and over 30 club members attending and us packing the Services club. We shared the celebrations and gave our players the chance of winning 6 X \$500 games that must be won and the normal chance at the major jackpots of up to \$100,000, special prizes on all games during the night and extra raffle prizes.

Bundy Big Bingo has always been very lucky to receive support from a very special workforce. Many members of the Bundaberg Surf Lifesaving Club have helped at a bingo game, with most of these the cadet and junior members and many parents of Shalom College have also helped. A special feature of the Shalom Parents has been the number of parents who kept on helping for many years after their children have finished their time at Shalom. The current format of parents from the rowing group of Shalom College has worked well for the past 2 years resolving a significant problem following COVID.

Bundy Big Bingo has always been a fundraising activity and it has been very successful in supporting both the Bundaberg Surf Lifesaving Club and Shalom College. The Club has benefited from over \$1,070,000 in funds in the forty-nine years that bingo has been operating, which has been used for purposes to support the activities of the Club and is now focused on the major renovations to the Club House. **Shalom College has received over \$484,000 in the thirty-nine years they have part of Bundy Big Bingo.**