

THE PRO APPROACH

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How Tom Baker Developed a Style That Has Endured for 35 Years

PBA HALL OF FAMER TOM BAKER has a game that has lasted a lifetime. The 55-year-old Senior Tour super star has been on the lanes bowling professionally for 35 years.

This season, he was the oldest Lumber Liquidators PBA Tour exempt player, in the fifth year of a five-year exemption that he was granted for winning the 2005 PBA World Championship — a career extender that couldn't have happened to a nicer guy or at a better time in his life. Winning that event turned his career around and set him up for the record-setting Senior Tour run that was about to start.

In 2005, his first senior season, Baker won the Senior Rookie of the Year and Senior Player of the Year honors. He'd go on to add three more Senior Player of the Year awards, thanks to his eight titles — including four majors — on that circuit.

But his victory in the 2005 World ranks as my all-time favorite for a PBA player. At age 50, Tom was facing the end of his touring career. He drew on a lifetime of preparation in winning that event. For Tom, winning was an occasional thing, but surviving on tour was a daily job.

He survived as long as he did because he has always been one of the most physically prepared athletes on tour. Tom has been working out religiously ever since I first met him at the Landgraf Classic tournament in New York City in 1971.

I asked him about his current routine. During the off-season, he uses the Stairmaster for 40 minutes every other day. On other days, he alternates working on different body parts — arms one day, chest another, back and legs another, etc. He lifted heavy weights for a lot of years, and recently has gone lighter but with more reps.

This type of strength and cardio training kept him ready for an opportunity to win. He has never had to look back and say, "If I was in better shape, I might have done better."

Tom has always had a very simple five-step approach. I would call him a "control stroker." He has used a variety of set-ups during his career, and these days in his stance, his right shoulder is much lower than his left. His feet are staggered — the right foot back, with the big toe of the right foot next to the heel of his left foot, and the right foot pointed out to about 2 o'clock. This opens his hips and shoulders slightly in the stance.

What he's doing is stacking his head, shoulder, arm and ball over and slightly outside his right foot. This helps establish enough side spine tilt so the arm and ball can swing under the shoulder and head in the backswing.

Tom has a late ball placement, and his truly is a ball *placement*. He moves the ball on his third step, with his arm unfolding the ball into the swing — no

push-away motion at all.

Like Steve Jaros, Tom places his hand on the side of the ball (Jaros also has late ball placement). Tom takes a long first step but a very short



Tom Baker has the latest ball placement of any player on the Lumber Liquidators PBA Tour. He doesn't move the ball until the third step of his five-step approach.

second step, which serves to keep his ball placement late.

His third step is longer, but not as long as the first. The fourth step is a little shorter than the third, and he ends with a long slide.

For the first four steps, Tom walks straight. He then slides a little left, which actually complements his swing path; it helps him clear out his right side so the swing can stay inside long enough. If he were to slide inward to the center of his body, it would push his swing out, he would not be able to accelerate through the release zone, and his shots would be very inconsistent.

Tom has a short, flat swing

with his arm at the top of the swing merely parallel to the floor — very short in today's game. His backswing gets behind him a little early because his hand goes from a closed position in his stance to open when it passes his body on the backswing. The weight of the ball rotating to the outside of his hand on the backswing pushes the swing behind him a bit because he has a controlled swing, not the big, free swing that a lot of the younger players have.

With this short, flat swing, Tom can't generate the speed and revs that those young Tour players do. But his game matches

up well on the Senior Tour, where the lanes break down much differently because of the seniors' slower ball speeds and lower rev rates.

To compensate for his softer speed, Tom has always put a lot of turn on the ball, and the spin he gets from the turn keeps the ball from hooking early. With that spin, he can project the ball down the lane to his desired break point.

On the Senior Tour, he hooks the ball more than a lot of the players. On the "junior tour," he can hook it, but the speed and revs keep him from striking as often as the kids.

Tom's precision shotmaking helps him match up his ball

to a lot of the conditions. He uses equipment very wisely and can alter his launch angle, rev rate and ball speed to play the lane that's in front of him. That makes him very versatile as he crosses pairs.

Tom has a very solid finishing position. His body weight is over his left leg, with his right foot cleared out to the left and the big toe on the floor. His follow-through is a straight arm that extends in the direction he wants his ball to travel.

Tom has had trouble with his grip for as long as I've known him. For the longest time, he couldn't get his hand set in the ball, and you'd never know when he was going to start his approach. His current grip is very short — almost one-half-inch shorter than he would be measured. He has a quarter-inch forward pitch in his thumb, a quarter-inch forward in his ring finger, and three-eighths reverse pitch in his middle finger.

He says that this grip was developed to have his ring finger and thumb pointing at each other and, coupled with the short span, to relieve pressure on his wrist, which was constantly sore. These pitches make him use his ring finger more, and it has eliminated the wrist problem.

As the 2008-09 season was winding down, Tom was thinking about changing his grip. But it was difficult to do because he was bowling every week and, very close to the cut line for a 2009-10 exemption, couldn't afford the learning curve involved.

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Baker's finishing position and follow-through are solid, as his arm extends in the direction that he wants the ball to travel.