

Bowlers Journal

INTERNATIONAL



BREAKDOWN

REVVED UP

SPIGNER ANALYZES
AJ JOHNSON'S
POWER GAME

SIMONSEN BAGS
ANOTHER MAJOR
WITH MASTERS WIN
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Breakdown

'GREATEST NON-CHAMPION'



Gimme a Break
Johnson's years-long
pursuit of his first
PBA Tour title has
been dogged by
lousy breaks.

The moniker's neither fair nor lost on AJ Johnson, a dazzling talent in the midst of a career year.

by **BILL SPIGNER**

AJ Johnson has been one of the most promising players on tour for years now. I first saw him as high-school player. It is not often that a player strikes a coach the way Johnson quickly struck me: As a can't-miss prospect destined to become a successful professional. But there always are the intangibles one cannot quantify. Many players may have the skills to play professionally, but far fewer have that 'it' factor. Just having a hall-of-fame physical game does not translate to a hall-of-fame career.

The stocky, athletically-built Johnson grew up wanting to be a professional athlete. When he was in Junior at Oswego High School, about 40 minutes outside Chicago, one teacher asked a question: "Where do you see yourself in 10 years?" Each student got up to reveal their answer to the class. Johnson's answer? He was going to be a professional athlete. He did not say that he "would like to be" a pro athlete; he said he "was going to be" one. Even back then, Johnson was unequivocal about his dreams.

The teacher laughed. That didn't sit well with Johnson, and, as it has turned out, Johnson has indeed had the last laugh. Today, he is a successful pro athlete on the PBA Tour, and one who has made multiple major telecasts this season alone — the U.S. Open and the USBC Masters, finishing fourth in each.

But at the time Johnson announced his ambitions to his class back in high school, bowling wasn't event on his radar. As a freshman, he played football, basketball and baseball. He did bowl, but his school didn't have a bowling team. There were some that were trying to get one started, but that did not happen until the wife of his football coach successfully petitioned

the school to add bowling, telling the school they would win their conference and make it to state. Fortunately, because of title IX, the school had one spot open to add a boys' sport. The bowling team went undefeated their first two years and made it to state both seasons, finishing seventh and third, respectively, out of approximately 240 teams. Think about it this way: Without that program starting, we might not have AJ Johnson on the pro tour.

Regardless of the sport — be it football, bowling, or something else — he was all in during the season, totally dedicated to playing and training to get better. His physical training off the playing field helped him develop into an excellent athlete that has him physically prepared for the long haul pro bowling often requires. In the other three sports he played, athletes have a limited shelf life, but in bowling, you can play at the top for many years provided you do have the physical talent and the willingness to continually refine your physical and mental game. Johnson has all of that in spades.

'Why Haven't You Won Yet?'

Johnson also wears a title borne by many a talented PBA Tour player before him: The best competitor on tour without a national title. Some feel he has a physical game that could carry him to a hall-of-fame career, but they worry that he just might be another one of a long line of players who never live up to their obvious talent. I understand what it is like for Johnson to bear such criticism, as I myself was the brunt of it for a moment early in my own tour career when Carmen Salvino asked me, "How come you haven't won yet?" My answer was that I haven't bowled



Set Up for Success

This set up is as good as it gets. The feet staggered to help lower the bowling shoulder, the elbow under the shoulder, forearm parallel to the floor, and body stacked up over the middle of the feet.

well enough yet. But Johnson has actually bowled well enough to win.

He led the 2015 Masters as a senior in college, ultimately losing the title to Jason Belmonte. In the tournament's double-elimination format, both Johnson and Belmonte ended up with one loss each. Accordingly, there were times in the tournament's history when the top seed had to be defeated twice. There would have been a second game, but the tournament's modern format did not allow Johnson that chance. True, even if he had won, he still wouldn't have been credited with a PBA Tour title because he was a non-member at the time. But he would have won a major, possibly softening the blow of those doubters who remind him of his status as a so-called non-champion. He later led qualifying for a couple

of non-televised PBA Tour title events and lost both. So, as a member, he actually was the leader twice, but because of the need for TV, he lost both times. There are many professional bowlers who have a title but never have led a tournament to be the top seed as Johnson has.

In my view, Johnson actually has two wins and the Masters was never really completed. Topping it off is this: Johnson also was on the winning team in the PBA League one year, but no title is awarded for that even though peers EJ Tackett, Marshall Kent, Rhino Page, Chris Loschetter and Ronnie Russell each were awarded a PBA Tour title for winning the 2016 PBA Team Challenge in Las Vegas.

Johnson fully feels the pressure to get that first official PBA Tour title. It is

something that mentally has been difficult for him. But he stays aware of all the success he has had, from those high-school triumphs to National Bowler of the Year honors in college to qualifying for Team USA and winning many things along the way in those arenas. The mental side of the sport is so difficult to handle; it can really affect one's performance.

More recently, during a league session back home last December, Johnson found himself getting very angry while bowling. He felt he couldn't do anything right and didn't know how to throw a ball. He decided to take a week off. His frustration was very evident to those around him. So much so, in fact, that Johnson's dad called his coach Mark Baker about it without AJ knowing to try and get him some help.

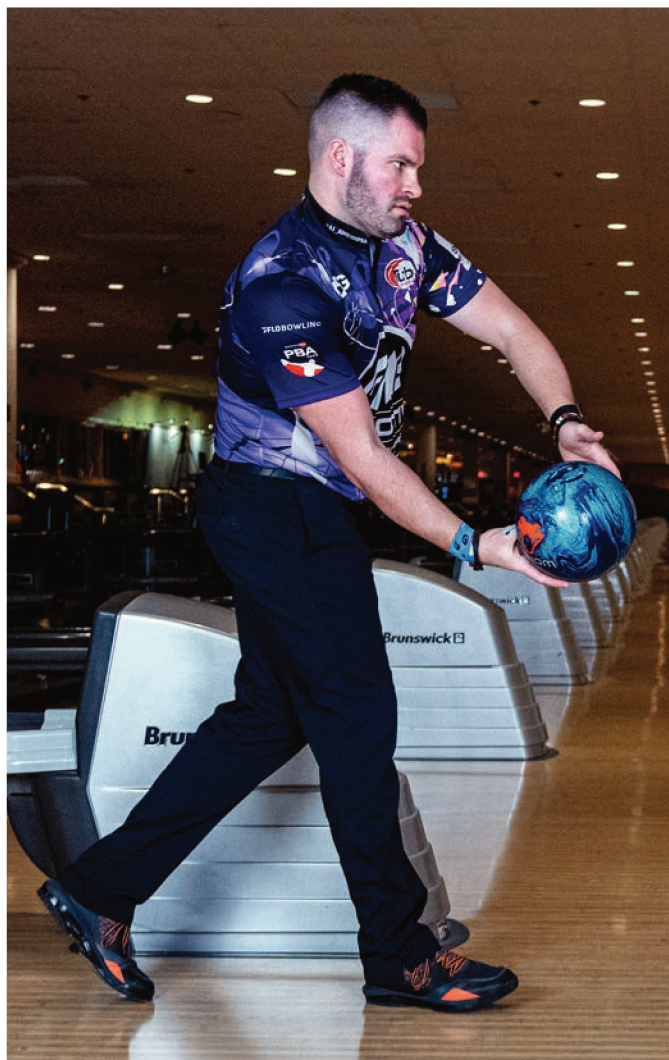
Solid Start

Early on in Johnson's approach, he has slightly moved the ball, which will complement his swing height. His head is directly over his left foot, and his foot is straight but not locked at the knee, which is the way it should be.



Step Right Up

Johnson's second step completes the ball placement; it's not a push away. This type of ball movement keeps the ball close to the body so you can stay tall and walk past the ball. Now the right leg is straight and directly between the left foot and ball.





The Release Zone

Going into the release area, Johnson has just incorporated a bend in the elbow. All players with high rev rates do this, as it allows his fingers to get more under the ball without cupping the wrist. His wrist is very slightly flexed and his right shoulder has lowered. As the right shoulder lowers and goes forward, it turns the arm, which then turns the hand.

Picture Perfect

As Johnson completes his release, the ball is out in front of him onto the lane. It doesn't get better than this. The right shoulder has lowered and moved forward, and the elbow has straightened out. He's applying no resistance with the wrist and fingers; he's basically rolling the ball off his hand. The loading up of the elbow, then relaxing the shoulder through the hand to roll the ball off the hand, makes the release look effortless. The shoulder is now over the sliding foot with his head out over his toe.

step is to get in motion — whereas the majority of PBA Tour players take five steps. With the five-step approach, the first step gets you in motion and makes it easier to move the ball with the second step. With six steps, you need two steps before moving the ball, which can make the timing of the ball movement harder to repeat.

I am not saying this is a liability to Johnson, but many who take the extra steps, like Duke or Pete Weber, do so to get their feet moving faster to generate more speed. But Johnson doesn't need the extra speed. One observation that commentators have made about Johnson throughout his telecast appearances over the years is that, when he gets in a must-mark situation, he gets too fast.

Ball speed merely is one dimension of Johnson's power. He also has one of the highest rev rates on tour. It's in the 500s, which rivals the two handers. He develops his high rev rate with his high back swing, shoulder rotation, and flexing the elbow and wrist at the perfect time in his down-

swing. His finish position is one of the best on tour, rock solid and very low. This position looks like an old-school player's position, kind of like a David Ozio.

A more modern comparison might be Tommy Jones, as both Jones and Johnson have fluid, fast games featuring similar swing lengths, timing, foot work and hand position. Jones, however, does do some things differently in ways that are common among the tour's most elite players. Johnson's swing at the top is further inside than Jones's. The center of the ball is directly behind Johnson's left ear, whereas Jones's is directly behind his right ear. On Johnson's downswing, when the ball gets waist-high, it's a little behind his hip and he has to get his leg out of the way. Jones, by contrast, is clear of it.

Jones is able to have the ball fall in a straight line all the way through the release. Johnson, because the swing is more inside-out, actually has to realign the hand slightly to get the ball to go in the right direction. So instead of a straight

line through the release, it is changing direction, so speeding up makes it more difficult to be as consistent as Johnson could be under pressure. His misses when speeding up are both left and right. Normally, when throwing the ball too fast with the hand coming through the release in a straight line, the miss will be online but the ball will go long. The question becomes: What's the correction?

There are a couple of things I would look at doing. Johnson used to take five steps and had a longer last step, but his last step now is shorter than the elite players. He can either move back to allow for a naturally longer last step or go back to five. With a short slide step, Johnson's downswing gets a little steep and he goes from a tall position to a low position in a very short space of time. His forward spine tilt changes about 30 degrees in the short space of his slide step. A more gradual change of his forward spine tilt starting earlier in the approach would be better.



Textbook Finish

The finish position is textbook; Johnson can sit there and watch the ball roll down the lane and evaluate its performance. Posting the finish also gives him time to reflect on the feeling of the shot.

Additionally, I would keep his hips and shoulders from opening up as much in the middle of his approach, which will get his ball more to the right side of his head at the top of his swing. With the ball in a better spot at the top when loading up his arm for the release, it will not go as far inside, which will enable his hand to travel in a straighter line from the hip through the release and reduce the dispersion of his misses. Both of these adjustments are really pretty simple. He's already a top-20 player on tour and certainly possesses the physical skills to do the very small things.

Even though he doesn't have an official title yet, AJ Johnson is a champion in many ways with a great game. You can't make the stepladder finals in two of the most brutal tournaments back-to-back without serious talent. As hard as it is, he's just got to put the disappointments behind him and start fresh each event. He has a lot to be proud of, and more will come.

Turn Your Limitations into Your Strengths



Gold coach Bill Spigner is a USBC Hall of Famer with three PBA Tour titles who serves as an assistant coach for Team USA.

Every bowler has limitations. The fewer limitations a player has, physically and mentally the better they can be. Learning about what you struggle to do, and why, is very important. Once you learn that, you can work around your limitations by getting better at surviving it when you are faced with it.

One such limitation has been this: On tour, many of the big-hand guys were struggling on fresh oil, Johnson included. They had to find a way to survive on the fresh by going straighter. The rediscovery of urethane balls was a key answer to this need, as urethane allows the players to play the patterns more in the heads and midlane where the blend of the oil resides on fresh conditions.

Before players rediscovered urethane, they were hooking the ball a lot more; going straighter wasn't doable with resin on fresh.

Now, Johnson and the other big-hand guys start out playing farther outside on top of the blend in the oil in the front half of the lane, which is the only place you can create a little area. Playing the backend where there is no help on fresh was a struggle at best. Johnson is learning to master the straight game; he already has one of the best hook games.

It's all about making your liabilities an asset.

— Bill Spigner