

Bowlers Journal

JULY 2017 • \$5 • www.bowlersjournal.com

INTERNATIONAL

PIN UP

Diana Zavjalova's Second
Queens Title is a Tale of
Guts and Glamour

THE PRO APPROACH

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An Educated Approach to Success

TEAM CANADA'S Francois Lavoie had one of the best rookie seasons in the history of the Professional Bowlers Association in 2016. Fresh out of Wichita State's elite bowling program, he made four TV shows and won two titles, including the U.S. Open — in which he bowled the first-ever 300 during a live TV finals of that event.

I talked to Lavoie about his college choice and experience. The only college he looked at attending was Wichita State; he never applied anywhere else or even considered another school. Wichita was recommended to him by alumni and fellow Canadians, George Lambert and Frank Buffa. Both were stars there and remain very involved in the bowling world today.

Lavoie met with coach Gordon Vadakin, who stressed to him that he would be a student

first and an athlete second. Gordon's emphasis on education sealed the deal for Francois, who bought into that great philosophy and ultimately graduated with a B.A. in Economics.

He fully understands the value of money, and how hard it is to earn on

the PBA Tour today. Being grounded like that will definitely help him have an organized future. He doesn't like the



Loading Up: Lavoie arches back his wrist, then uses his legs to support the bending of his elbow and for leverage at release, helping him generate revs.

uncertainty of bowling on tour, but is committed to doing it for as long as he is successful.

When Francois enrolled at Wichita State, he was a straight player who was good at playing on freshly oiled lanes, using straighter lines and targeting more

to the outside of the lane. During his freshman year, he made the eight-player A team and traveled with it the whole season. He would mostly keep score and occasionally get a nod to start, but when the shot moved inside, he would not be in the lineup. He said that season was a great learning experience.

The Wichita State coaches gave him the resources to get better, and it was up to him to utilize those resources. Fran-

cois said there is no "magic" for getting really good, nor are there shortcuts; anyone who wants to be good has to put the work in.

He said he also bought into the theory that it takes 10,000 repetitions for the brain to be retrained so the body can carry out the change and it becomes permanent. He got that from coach Fred Borden, who makes trips to the school to talk to the athletes. With

thinking like that, Francois expanded his lane play skills by learning to stand in front of the ball return and hook the ball to complement his straight game. Now he can effectively play anywhere on the lane.

That skill came in handy during his

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Lavoie's Layouts: Balls with specialty drillings tend to be very condition-specific; Lavoie prefers drillings that allow his equipment to perform on a wider variety of conditions. Left is a pin-down 60 x 5 x 70, while right is a pin-up 5- x 5 x 35, both featuring the pin five inches from his axis (PAP). These layouts allow Lavoie to make adjustments with hand position rather than with equipment.

U.S. Open triumph. In that tournament, in which there were three qualifying squads daily with no re-oiling, the shot would start near the gutter and transition through the day to the point that many of the right-handers were lofting the ball over the left gutter cap. You needed to have, as Francois would say, “a big tool box” to play effectively that week — and thanks to his training at Wichita State, he has one.

For the most part during the week, he used two symmetrical-core balls, one a pin up with a 50x5x35 drilling, and the other a pin down with a 60x5x70 drilling. On the show, he used a much stronger asymmetric ball with a pin-down 60x5x70 drilling that would provide smoother transition downlane because he was going to play out.

The balls he used during the week gave him more shape downlane, which he needed because of the amount of play and how the shot moved inside; he basically needed balls that would recover better going away from the pocket. Francois uses these two drillings almost exclusively, and likes to change surfaces instead of drillings to get the ball motion needed on any particular lane pattern.

As for his grip, Francois's is unique because his ring finger is ¼-inch longer than his middle finger. Most people would be measured to have a longer span in their ring finger, but not that much. In fact, it's not uncommon for pros to have a more relaxed ring finger span, which is commonly called a dropped ring finger.

Francois said his measurements don't call for that ring-finger length, but he has been using it for a long time and is comfortable with it. He feels it helps him rotate the ball better. He has a high track,

as his PAP is 5½ over by a ½ up, very little (if any) tilt, and about 30 degrees of axis rotation.

Francois said his RPMs are about 390 to 400, and he is a speed-dominant player. Having more speed relative to his medium rev rate (we're talking about PBA Tour-level player rev rates, as 400 would be a lot for a league bowler), he can get away with a lower tilt and less side roll. The speed helps his ball maintain a lot of energy downlane, even with the low tilt.

His physical game ranks right up there with the best stylists of today. He has a five-step approach with a high backswing, and I would classify him as a power stroker like Pete Weber and Dom Barrett.

Francois has a fundamentally sound setup, which is a great start to his fundamentally sound game. His feet face straight ahead with the knees flexed, and he holds the ball about waist-high to the right side of his body, in front of his bowling shoulder. That shoulder is low enough so his head is over the right side of his body, with the ball below his head.

From this setup, he starts moving the ball just before step one is done, which gives him an early ball placement on step two — but it's perfect for the height of his backswing. His pushaway is a little right, and his second step crosses over in front of his left foot. His swing goes straight back, with a slight tuck on the downswing.

Francois is not as inside-out with his downswing as a lot of the high-rev guys. That's a product of once being a much straighter player. Being so straight, this swing path holds up well under pressure, evidenced by his TV 300.

During his swing, his wrist position is slightly arched back, with no cup. This position makes the ball feel light and greatly contributes to his free swing. On the downswing, just as his ball falls below waist-high, Francois starts to bend his elbow. By the time the ball is ready to be released, Francois has a fairly significant degree of elbow bend. This helps get his fingers below the equator of the ball without cupping his wrist. From there, the elbow straightens out just as the ball is passing his ankle, putting the revs and speed on the ball. Getting the fingers lower on the ball in this manner utilizes the bigger muscles in the arm and takes the stress off the wrist.

With the game he has built and his very calm demeanor, Francois Lavoie will be around for a long time — or, thanks to his education, for as long as he wants. If you want to be a world-class player, try to emulate his focus on education, his determination and his work ethic.

Bill Spigner is a Gold-level coach and a Team USA assistant coach. Archived “Pro Approach” columns can be viewed at billspigner.com.

LESSON PLAN

WITH A pin-down drilling, the finger and thumb holes are drilled on the top of the weight block, which shortens the core. This lowers the differential and raises the RG, which will make the ball flare less, rev up slower and transition (hook) slower off the spot.

With a pin-up drilling, the holes are drilled more on the side of the core, which will make the core thinner. As a result, the differential will go up and the RG will be lowered, making the ball rev up faster, flare more, and transition (hook) off the spot faster.

To keep it simple, pin-down balls will be weaker and pin-up balls stronger. For most bowlers, I would suggest doing what Francois Lavoie does with his drillings — use two different ones and adjust the surfaces, rather than dealing with additional drillings.

— Bill Spigner