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THE PRO APPROACH

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Sometimes Gain Comes Without Pain

ALL PRO ATHLETES overcome hurdles over the course of their careers. The hurdle that six-time PBA Tour champion Rhino Page overcame was one that nearly ended his career — a wrist injury he sustained during the World Series of Bowling in 2012.

Page had been bowling well, but his hand started swelling up more than normal by the end of the week. The swelling caused him to lock up in the ball on the final day of qualifying, when the lanes were hooking and he had to throw the ball very hard. When the ball locked up in his hand on one particular shot,

he heard a pop. It was like nothing he had ever experienced before. Later that night, his wrist was very swollen and causing him excruciating pain. Though he made the World Championship show that year, he proceeded to bowl his lowest game ever on TV.

Page was used to the pain. For years,

he had been bowling with a ripped-up thumb and fingers that resulted from a poor fit and not knowing that he should not have to bowl in a lot of pain. Eventually, he went to see a doctor and learned he had a torn tendon on the pinky finger side of his wrist. The doctor recommended surgery, which was scary because Page did not know if it would end his career. The doctor told him that, on a scale of one to 10, with 10 being the end of his career, Page was about a six or seven. Not the kind of information you want to hear when the only thing you ever wanted to do since age 4 was



Old School: Page uses an old-school position at the release (left), with his shoulders behind the knees and very little forward spine tilt. This position normally is good for using loft and hitting up on the ball. In Page's case, however, he has the touch to let the ball roll off his fingers and not grab it. He keeps his armswing long and straight through to the finish (right). This long extension, coupled with letting the ball roll off of his fingers instead of unloading it, keeps him from hitting up on the ball. This old-school release, follow-through and finish is something more bowlers should work on to get a more constant release and finish — especially with today's bowling ball technology.

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be a professional bowler. But he had to get the operation and take a chance. Fortunately, his doctor told him after the operation that it wasn't as bad as he thought it was going to be.

Page was always a very physical player — so much so that his left forearm was significantly larger than his right because of how much he cupped the ball and muscled it throughout the swing and release. After the operation, he started rehab and it wasn't long before he started bowling with an 8-pound ball. He gradually worked his way up to 14 pounds and went back on tour bowling with that weight. He actually was doing OK until one tournament during which Jason Belmonte beat him by 900 pins. Because of that, and some teasing by his friends about being beaten by so much, he went up to 15 pounds and saw an immediate increase in his carry.

I asked him if he ever used 16s. He said that when he first signed with Storm he was using 15s, but the Storm equipment was more reactive than his previous equipment, so he ended up going to 16 to help slow down his reaction. Though the weight blocks in 15s and 16s are the same weight most of the time, the lighter outer core in the 15s means the heavy inner core doesn't slow down as fast as the 16s. Not being able to get his ball to slow down at the right time created that over-under reaction for him at the end of the pattern, a problem the 16s resolved. Now he uses 15s all the time because of the injury and the changes he has made in his game.

When he started back after his injury, he thought it was time to make changes to try to extend his longevity, a tough decision for a player that had so much success. At first, he used a stretched-out grip, which was common in the '90s. One of the country's best ball drillers, Chris Forry of Buddies Pro Shop, reached out to Page about problems he saw in his grip while watching him on TV. Forry showed Page that his fingertips were barely halfway into the holes. He then totally redid Page's grip, which took the stress off his wrist and allowed Page to bowl pain-free for the first time in many years.

Next, Page went back to Ron Hatfield, a Gold coach who formerly was a member of the Team USA coaching staff. Page, a Team USA veteran himself, sought a very hard look at his game and thoughts about adjusting it to make it more stress-free. Page also was getting more involved teaching at the time, and as he reviewed his own videos he saw that he wasn't practicing what he preached.

A career four-step player with a big, over-the-bar pushaway and a very high, late swing, Page switched to five steps under Hatfield's guidance, lowering the ball in his stance with his forearm parallel to the floor instead of holding the ball face-high. Then he changed his pushaway to more of an unhinge start rather than the big pushaway. This change keeps the ball closer to his body during the pushaway, which enables him to be in better balance at the beginning of his approach and have a slower backswing. In fact, he reduced the height of his backswing by about two ball widths.

He now has a 180-degree swing; his old backswing was about 220 degrees, which requires more muscle to get the ball to the release zone from the top. His old swing was bowl-shaped while his newer swing is more of a saucer shape, which is a flatter swing that travels more horizontally than vertically on the back and forward swing. The last thing they changed was to use the legs more to create more momentum to the line. The shorter swing allows his feet to move naturally faster because he doesn't have to wait as long for the swing to complete its cycle.

Rhino has always had an exceptionally simple yet powerful release. He uses a lot of cup, which has withstood the changes he made. The interesting thing about his cupped wrist is that he never un-cups it at release and he doesn't loft the ball. Many of today's releases feature an uncupping/unloading of the wrist at the release to create revs and get the ball on the lane smoothly. I like the simplicity of not uncupping at release because it has fewer moving parts and makes it easier to keep everything in time and more consistent.

Another notable thing about his re-

LESSON PLAN

PAGE WAS SMART enough to eventually get help to make his already solid physical game better. He hit a wall with his game, endured an injury and, at times, did not hold up under pressure. He says no matter how good you think you are, you need trained eyes to help you with your game if you really want to get better. Page did, and it has already paid big dividends. Simplifying his form has made him a better player on tougher conditions, as evidenced by his win in the U.S. Open and, more recently, his appearance on the 2018 USBC Masters show — two of the most difficult contests in our sport.

— *Bill Spigner*

lease is that he has a very long flat spot. His ball is at its lowest point before it gets to his ankle, and his arm is on the upswing as he releases the ball. It may seem impossible to not hit up and loft the ball from that position, but Page doesn't. There are two big reasons for this: The way he lets his fingers totally relax to keep from grabbing the ball, and his long arm extension through the finish. His arm is as straight as a pole through the release, which helps ensure consistency and accuracy.

Rhino had instant success with the start of his refinement, winning the grueling U.S. Open last year. It's going to be fun to follow his progress as he continues to refine his game. Like any top player who lasts a long time, it's vital to always be ready to adjust your game without losing the core elements of it. For Page, bowling without pain is so nice, he no longer subscribes to the "No Pain No Gain" theory — and neither should you. If something you are doing is very painful, you need to fix it.

Bill Spigner is a Gold-certified coach and member of the Team USA coaching team. Archived "Pro Approach" columns may be accessed at billspigner.com.